

E. J. Edmunds, School Integration, and White Supremacist Backlash in Reconstruction New Orleans

Sian Zelbo

When the New Orleans school board appointed E. J. Edmunds, a light-skinned Afro-Creole man, the mathematics teacher for the city's best high school in 1875, the senior students walked out rather than have a "negro" as a teacher of "white youths." Edmunds's appointment was a final, bold act by the city's mixed-race intellectual elite in exercising the political power they held under Radical Reconstruction to strip racial designations from public schools. White supremacist Redeemers responded with a vicious propaganda campaign to define, differentiate, and diminish the "negro race." Edmunds navigated the shifting landscape of race in the New Orleans public schools first as a student and then as a teacher, and the details of his life show the impact on ordinary Afro-Creoles as the city's warring politicians used the public schools both to undermine and reinforce the racial order.

Key Words: African American education, Redeemers, school desegregation, Southern schools, urban schools, civil rights movements

On September 11, 1875, the New Orleans school board voted to appoint a New Orleans-born, Paris-educated man named E. J. Edmunds as the mathematics teacher for the city's best public high school. When school started two days later, the seniors discovered that their new teacher appeared to be "a very slightly tinged, colored man"¹ and walked out in an act of protest at having a "negro" as a teacher of "white youths."² Edmunds's appointment to an all-white

Sian Zelbo is a teacher at the Brearley School in New York and a PhD candidate at Columbia University Teachers College. She would like to thank Alexander Karp of Teachers College for his guidance and support. Thank you also to Carol Mills for her expertise on New Orleans history and to Olivier Azzola of the Centre de Ressources Historiques at the École Polytechnique for his generous help with the school's archives. She is grateful also to the *History of Education Quarterly's* anonymous readers whose feedback helped develop the ideas for this article.

¹"Our Public Schools," *Weekly Louisianan* (New Orleans), Sept. 18, 1875, 2.

²"The Boys' Central High School," *New Orleans Bulletin*, Sept. 14, 1875, 1.

school and its aftermath were the dramatic culmination of years of clashes over the status of New Orleans's citizens of African descent during Reconstruction and what their place was, if any, in New Orleans's public schools.

The struggles of Reconstruction were, in a general sense, a struggle over what form black citizenship would take. While black leaders and their Radical Republican allies fought to create a "homogenous citizenry of rights-bearing individuals, all identical in the eyes of a newly powerful federal government,"³ the Southern white⁴ planter class and its Democratic allies fought to preserve the prewar social and economic hierarchy by ensuring that newly freed people and their descendants would remain part of a separate, second-class citizenry. Both sides recognized that shaping the country's developing public education systems was central to their goal. Black leaders throughout the South pushed for universal schooling as a path to democratic citizenship, while those who saw black literacy as a threat to the existing order sought ways to limit, contain, and control the education of black children.

With slavery abolished, maintaining a caste system would be impossible without a clear, binary conception of race. As the Creole poet Alice Dunbar-Nelson wrote about prewar free people of color, "It is difficult to enforce laws against a race when you cannot find that race."⁵ This conception of a white-black divide was always fictional and problematic, but nowhere more so than in New Orleans, with its long history of immigration, racial mixing, and racial tolerance. The range and variation of human color were peculiarly broad in New Orleans—"as varied in color as a street of Cairo."⁶ Nineteenth-century New Orleans recognized distinctions of privilege based on fraction of African ancestry, but there were few absolutes.⁷ Light-skinned people

³Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1868–1896* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 56.

⁴A word about racial terminology: Modern scholars find race to be a cultural construct, and in fact this paper helps to show how the meanings of terms like "black" and "white" are constructed and used to oppress. This paper uses these terms to describe people who would have likely been identified that way by their contemporaries, even though they may have been of mixed European and African heritage.

⁵Alice Dunbar-Nelson, "People of Color in Louisiana," in *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*, ed. Sybil Kein (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017), 29.

⁶Dunbar-Nelson, "People of Color in Louisiana," 20.

⁷Anthony G. Barthelemy, "Light, Bright, Damn Near White: Race, the Politics of Genealogy, and the Strange Case of Susie Guillory," in Kein, *Creole*, 256–57. Amy Sumpter argues that racial categories were fluid during colonial times and grew more

of African descent moved in and out of white circles, and the ruling caste tolerated this blurring of lines because inquiring into the backgrounds of prominent families was deemed delicate and impolite.⁸ In prewar New Orleans, the wall that separated “white” from “black” was porous, and the ruling class accepted this de facto “open border” policy even as it held onto its ideology of white supremacy. With the freeing of the slaves, however, there was a new urgency to shore up the border and ensure that individuals were clearly and permanently on one side or the other of the racial line.

Because of the city’s unique history, the fight over black schooling and black citizenship in New Orleans took a different form than elsewhere in the South, where formerly enslaved people forged a path of independence and self-determination by starting their own schools. In New Orleans, black leaders—including Afro-Creoles, other free blacks, and newly freed people—joined together to push back against racial categories and instead embraced a universal form of citizenship. Crucial to this view of citizenship was a public school system free of racial designations. In advancing this radical vision of equality, the campaign for black education in New Orleans did not merely go further than elsewhere, it followed a different playbook.

The story of E. J. Edmunds shows the impact of the white supremacist backlash on the lives of ordinary Afro-Creoles and offers new evidence of how the mixed-race Afro-Creole community—people in the front lines of the fight over what was meant by the “black race”—took cues from the leading voices of their community. Edmunds navigated the shifting landscape of race in New Orleans schools first as a student and then as a teacher. As he did, he worked in coordination with other community members and with allies to undermine racial categories, years before it was official school board policy to integrate schools. Edmunds’s story, in particular the circumstances of his controversial appointment as mathematics teacher at Boys’ Central High, also provides new details about how the white ruling class responded to the threat of a newly blurred social hierarchy.

rigid and binary starting in the 1830s. See Amy R. Sumpter, “Segregation of the Free People of Color and the Construction of Race in Antebellum New Orleans,” *Southeastern Geographer* 48, no. 1 (May 2008), 19–37.

⁸ See “Board of School Directors,” *New Orleans Republican*, May 28, 1868, 1 (questioning a family to determine if the child is white is “delicate” and “quite ridiculous”); “Our Public Schools,” *Weekly Louisianan* (New Orleans), Sept. 18, 1875, 2 (implying that, given New Orleans’s history, “a large proportion” of the city’s old families have, but do not acknowledge, African heritage); and David C. Rankin, “The Origins of Black Leadership in New Orleans during Reconstruction,” *Journal of Southern History* 40, no. 3 (Aug. 1974), 428 (giving examples of prominent nineteenth-century New Orleans men unsure about their own race).

White supremacists initiated a powerful war of propaganda and violence to construct a new, postemancipation social order by delineating and defining the “black race.”⁹

The Postwar Debate about Black Education

One theme in any scholarly treatment of black education in the post-war South is that the fight over black education was at the heart of the struggle over the status of newly emancipated people generally. As W. E. B. Du Bois detailed in *Black Reconstruction*, newly freed people throughout the South sought to elevate their place in society by establishing their own schools and by leading the campaign for universal, state-mandated, public-funded education.¹⁰ The white planter class saw public schooling as a threat to the old economic and social hierarchy that they were trying to preserve.¹¹ Some whites saw in public education the possibility of exerting control by using the schools as a substitute “for older and cruder methods of socialization and control.”¹² Some violently opposed black education no matter who was funding it because black education was a “fundamental effrontery” to the social order.¹³ Throughout most of the South in the years immediately following the Civil War, these were the battle lines in the fight over black education. The question was whether black children should be educated at all and, if so, who would control the schools and pay for them.

Individual campaigns for black education had their own goals and motivations, depending on local circumstances. James Anderson argued that a desire for self-reliance—“to control and sustain” their own schools—drove newly freed people to establish and fund black schools.¹⁴ Similarly, Christopher Span examined the movement in Mississippi, arguing that the thrust of the drive to educate black children was to establish publicly funded black schools that would remain

⁹Henry Louis Gates Jr. analyzed the campaign to define “who, and what, a black person actually was,” and called it a “brutally effective” form of propaganda. Henry L. Gates Jr., *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), 4–5.

¹⁰W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1935).

¹¹James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1865–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 4.

¹²Anderson, *The Education of Blacks*, 80.

¹³Ronald E. Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861–1876* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 160.

¹⁴Anderson, *The Education of Blacks*, 5.

under black control—achieving equality by erasing racial lines altogether was never seriously considered.¹⁵ The crusade for black education in urban areas with significant prewar free black populations had their own unique character, especially Mobile, Charleston, and New Orleans, which had significant mixed-race populations with reason to be ambivalent about emancipation and the threat to their status.¹⁶ Hilary Green described the situation in Mobile, which had an Afro-Creole population with well-defined rights before the war and a Creole public school. After the war the Afro-Creoles formed an uneasy alliance with freed people to create publicly funded black schools.¹⁷ Charleston was similar to New Orleans in some ways, with a prewar black elite class that became politically involved during Reconstruction and pushed for integrated schools, but the movement there was muted compared to the one in New Orleans, and even after achieving legal equality, schools remained segregated.¹⁸

New Orleans stands out even among these urban areas in the campaign for black education. Louisiana had a robust campaign to establish schools for newly freed people like other states did, including a campaign for funding black public schools,¹⁹ but there was also a parallel campaign by the city's Afro-Creoles and their allies to dismantle the old prewar racial aristocracy by erasing racial designations in public schools altogether. Afro-Creoles and other free blacks “moved to make common cause with the freedmen”²⁰ to push for race-neutral laws that would disrupt and equalize the social order. Scholars have pointed out the backgrounds of these black leaders to explain the intellectual antecedents and the vigor of the movement. The Afro-Creoles were culturally connected to France and its revolutionary, anti-aristocratic ideals²¹ and worldly enough to know that the racist beliefs of the

¹⁵ Christopher M. Span, *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse: African American Education in Mississippi, 1862–1875* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 101.

¹⁶ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 100–1.

¹⁷ Hilary Green, *Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865–1890* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 36–57.

¹⁸ Louis R. Harlan, “Desegregation in New Orleans Public Schools During Reconstruction,” *American Historical Review* 67, no. 3 (April 1962), 673–74.

¹⁹ Butchart, *Schooling the Freed People*, 42–48.

²⁰ Foner, *Reconstruction*, 101. See also Mary Niall Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future After Slavery* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 206–7.

²¹ Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997).

American South were not universal.²² Once the city's black leadership had accomplished race-blind equality under the law, they went one step further, pushing assertively to breathe life into those laws by exploiting whatever levers of power they had to open the city's best schools to children of color. White conservative Redeemers fought back with an all-out assault, using propaganda and violence to create in fact what they would later codify in law—the consolidation of a single black race, relegated to an inferior caste, in separate second-class schools.²³ The appointment of E. J. Edmunds was a pivotal moment in this struggle as the last, bold move of the city's black leaders in leveraging their political power to integrate schools and also a turning point for white supremacists in convincing the public of the righteousness and urgency of their cause.

Afro-Creoles and the Concept of Race in Prewar New Orleans

Edgar Joseph Edmunds was born in New Orleans on January 26, 1851, to the city's community of Afro-Creoles.²⁴ Afro-Creoles were of mixed African, French, Spanish, and Native American ancestry and tended to live among other French speakers in the neighborhoods downriver from Canal Street.²⁵ Because of New Orleans's unique colonial history, and because it was an international port, the culture was one of relative racial openness and racial mixing, a culture that did not exist in the rest of the South, or even in the rest of Louisiana.²⁶ While Afro-Creoles did not have the same social or legal status as whites, they were literate and economically self-sufficient. In spite of

²²Donald E. DeVore and Joseph Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools: Public Education in New Orleans, 1841–1991* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1991), 67. Rebecca Scott and Jean Hébrard tell the story of a New Orleans family of color who raised their sons in France with “the full enjoyment of civil equality” and taught them to detest aristocracy. Two of the brothers later became politically active in the New Orleans movement for black equality. Rebecca J. Scott and Jean M. Hébrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 83–120.

²³This is consistent with Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s argument that propaganda to define and belittle the black race may have been worse in places with large black populations because it shows how the white minority reestablished a clear hierarchy. Gates, *Stony the Road*, 14.

²⁴Birth Record for Edgar Joseph Edmunds, Jan. 26, 1851, filed on May 20, 1868, New Orleans, Louisiana Birth Records Index, 1790–1899, vol. 47, 433, Vital Records Indices, Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge, LA.

²⁵Dunbar-Nelson, “People of Color in Louisiana,” 8–9.

²⁶Harlan, “Desegregation in New Orleans Public Schools,” 673–74.

legal and social obstacles, free blacks “kept on amassing wealth and educating their children.”²⁷

By the time of the Civil War, down-river New Orleans was also full of immigrants. The 1860 census recorded that nine-year-old E. J. Edmunds was then living with his parents, Edgar and Rose, in a racially, culturally, and socially diverse slice of the French Quarter and Faubourg Trémé.²⁸ Of the nearly three hundred individuals recorded in the Edmunds’s neighborhood, approximately 25 percent were immigrants, mostly French, Irish, and German.²⁹ The neighborhood was home to a merchant from Maryland whose property was worth \$45,000 as well as an “oyster saloon” worker with \$500 in personal property and a carpenter with only \$60.³⁰ One black neighbor, Malvina Martin, was a hundred years old, lived in a \$2,100 house that she owned, and rented rooms to two boarders.³¹ About 15 percent of the Edmunds’s neighbors were marked as *M* for “mulatto” or *B* for “black.” The default was to leave the “Color” column blank when taking the census. The census taker left the Edmunds’s race blank, meaning that, at least in that moment and for that purpose, they were deemed “white.” This is consistent with scholars who have pointed out the inconsistencies in counting free people of color because individuals could “slip[] across the racial divide.”³² In the case of the Edmunds, they also slipped back; later, the family would be marked *M* on federal census records.³³

Edmunds’s father, Edgar Ambrose Edmunds, was a hardworking free man of color who worked his way up to the position of director of a dry goods importing company,³⁴ traveled to France multiple times on business,³⁵ and raised a large family in a four-bedroom

²⁷Dunbar-Nelson, “People of Color in Louisiana,” 29.

²⁸US Census Bureau, Eighth Census of the United States: 1860: Population, Louisiana, Orleans Parish, City of New Orleans, Ward 6 (Washington, DC: National Archives Microfilm Publications, n.d.), M653_419, 141–42.

²⁹US Census Bureau, Eighth Census, M653_419, 139–46.

³⁰US Census Bureau, Eighth Census, M653_419, 142–43.

³¹US Census Bureau, Eighth Census, M653_419, 144.

³²Julie Winch, *Between Slavery and Freedom: Free People of Color in America from Settlement to the Civil War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), xiv.

³³The family members are marked as *mulatto*, for example, in the 1870 census. US Census Bureau, Ninth Census of the United States: 1870: Population, Louisiana, Orleans Parish, City of New Orleans, Ward 7 (Washington, DC: National Archives Microfilm Publications, n.d.), M593_522, 540A. They would be deemed white again in later censuses.

³⁴*Soards’ New Orleans City Directory* (New Orleans: Soards Directory Company, 1897), 291.

³⁵Edmunds, Edgar (May, 18, 1858), Passport Applications, 1795–1905 (Washington, DC: National Archives Microfilm Publications, n.d.), M1372_70.

house.³⁶ E. J.'s mother, Rose Euphémie Foy, was a biracial woman whose parents never married but who entered into a long-term liaison—a *plaçage* relationship—in which her white father supported her mother but they lived separately.³⁷ The community tolerated, and even legitimized, these relationships in some respects in early nineteenth-century New Orleans.³⁸ Rose's father, Prosper Foy,³⁹ was a French immigrant from Orléans⁴⁰ who owned plantations run by enslaved laborers, including one plantation in St. James Parish just upriver of New Orleans, on the banks of the Mississippi River.⁴¹ Rose Foy's mother, Zélie Aubry (a "mulatto" in the 1870 census⁴²), remained in New Orleans with the children in her house near Bayou Road⁴³ while Prosper lived a largely separate life at this plantation. Prosper Foy received letters from his family in New Orleans from time to time delivering news—folded and sealed in red wax and addressed simply to "*Monsieur Prosper Foy, Sur Son Habitation a la*

³⁶Succession of Edgar Edmunds (May 4, 1897), Civil District Court (Orleans Parish), Louisiana, docket no. 53348, New Orleans Public Library, Louisiana Division/City Archives.

³⁷Birth Record for Edgar Joseph Edmunds.

³⁸"Reprehensible If True," *Weekly Louisianan* (New Orleans), Sept. 18, 1875, 2 (Presbyterian pastor complaining that the black community recognizes these unions, which he calls criminal). Children of *plaçage* unions, unlike "illegitimate" children, were recognized both legally and by the Church, and they could, and often did, inherit property. Joan M. Martin, "*Plaçage and the Louisiana Gens de Couleur Libre*," in Kein, *Creole*, 68.

³⁹Family relations were not always documented clearly among Afro-Creoles, but various documents tie E. J. Edmunds to Prosper Foy's family through his mother. One is an obituary of his uncle, Florville Foy. "Florville Foy, the Oldest Marble Cutter in Old New Orleans, Dies, in the House He Has Occupied for Sixty Years, Attended by His Former Slaves," *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), March 17, 1903, 10.

⁴⁰Baptismal record of René Prosper Foy (1787). Paroisse Saint-Paul, Baptêmes, Mariages, Sépultures, Archives of the Department of Loiret, France, <https://www.archives-loiret.fr>

⁴¹US Census Bureau, Sixth Census of the United States: 1840: Population, Louisiana, St. James Parish, Right Bank of the Mississippi (Washington, DC: National Archives Microfilm Publications, n.d.), M704_135, 265; US Census Bureau, Seventh Census of the United States: 1850: Population, Louisiana, St. James Parish, Eastern District (Washington, DC: National Archives Microfilm Publications, n.d.), M432_239, 206A.

⁴²US Census Bureau, Ninth Census, M593_522, 541B.

⁴³A study of black slave owners lists Zélie Aubry (here called "Zelia Obyr") as one of New Orleans slave-owning free persons of color. It locates her residence as "Between Bayou Road and L'Amour Street" in Trémé. Carter G. Woodson, ed., *Free Negro Owners of Slaves in the United States in 1830* (Washington, DC: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1924), 9.

P. S. Jacques” (Mister Prosper Foy at his home in St. James Parish).⁴⁴ Papers and letters among Prosper Foy’s archives show that he had a vast library⁴⁵ and that Rose spent at least some time in St. James Parish with her father.⁴⁶

Before the Civil War, the Edmunds were, in some ways, integrated into society as full citizens: they conducted business, purchased property, accumulated wealth, and lived in an integrated neighborhood. But their local legal documents, including court filings and birth certificates,⁴⁷ bore designations such as “f.p.o.c.” (free person of color), placing the Edmunds unmistakably in a lower caste. Louisiana had always had laws on the books regulating free people of color, but it is hard to know just how much the legal status of the Edmunds family interfered with their day-to-day lives. Given their neighborhoods’ cultural and social integration, it is likely that the lines of social status at that time were blurred and that the Afro-Creoles enjoyed a level of freedom that depended both on their wealth and on their fraction of African ancestry.⁴⁸ As the Civil War approached, those in power became more hostile toward free people of color and demanded that the previously “hazy lines”⁴⁹ of race be clarified.

The Education of Afro-Creoles in Prewar New Orleans

In spite of their second-class status, Afro-Creoles tended to be literate, and the prominent members of their community were sophisticated,

⁴⁴See for example, Prosper Foy Papers, 1790–1878, box 1, vol. 1, doc. 19, Manuscripts Collection 443, Louisiana Research Collection, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA (hereafter cited at Foy Papers).

⁴⁵Foy Papers, box 1, vol. 1, docs. 58, 59, 62, 63, 67, 68, 69, 70, 86, 87, 88.

⁴⁶See, for example, Foy Papers, box 1, vol. 1, doc. 18.

⁴⁷See, for example, Birth Record for Olivia Edmunds, April 6, 1859, filed on April 19, 1864, New Orleans, Louisiana Birth Records Index, 1790–1899, vol. 30, 403, Vital Records Indices, Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge, LA; Minors of Zelie Aubry (1868) Orleans Parish, Louisiana, Probate Court, 1805–1846; and Succession of Edgar Edmunds (May 4, 1897).

⁴⁸Dunbar-Nelson, “People of Color in Louisiana,” 21. See also Walter Stern, *Race and Education in New Orleans: Creating the Segregated City, 1764–1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018), 23 (talking about the social and racial “flux” of early New Orleans). This is consistent with the portrait of the Tinchant brothers in New Orleans. They ran businesses and were actively integrated in society, and yet Édouard was expelled from a streetcar because of his color. What is perhaps most interesting about the streetcar incident is that it seems to have been an unexpected humiliation for him to be treated that way. Scott and Hébrard, *Freedom Papers*, 116.

⁴⁹Stern, *Race and Education*, 24.

worldly, and intellectual. E. J. Edmunds's black family members had been well educated for generations. Edgar's position as director of an importing company would have required education beyond basic literacy and arithmetic. Rose and her brother, Florville Foy, both wrote beautifully in French,⁵⁰ and evidence (a receipt for "1 mois de classe de florville" [one month of class for Florville]) shows that Florville received his education in a private school or through a tutor.⁵¹ Florville later became a highly successful artist and businessman⁵² who had sufficient education to manage his many properties.⁵³ E. J.'s grandmother Zélie also must have been educated, as she brought a court case in 1828 seeking a court's permission to sell an enslaved woman that Prosper had "donated" to her minor children.⁵⁴ While it is jarring to learn that Edmunds's black family members kept a woman enslaved, the court case does demonstrate that Zélie was sophisticated enough to use the legal system to manage her financial affairs. The Edmunds and Foy families were typical among the Afro-Creole community in that they had a high level of education, which they received outside of the system that educated white children in New Orleans.

E. J., like many of the children in his neighborhood that the 1860 census recorded, was not in school.⁵⁵ By 1860, New Orleans's public school system, although successful, was still developing, and at this point it was open only to white children.⁵⁶ The city had not yet established separate public schools for black children, something that would not happen until after the war when conservative city officials finally incorporated leftover Freedmen's Bureau schools⁵⁷ into the public

⁵⁰Foy Papers, box 1, vol. 1, docs. 18, 19, 33.

⁵¹Foy Papers, box 1, vol. 1, doc. 2.

⁵²"Florville Foy, the Oldest Marble Cutter in Old New Orleans."

⁵³Record of Tax Assessments in New Orleans (1865–1872), Record of Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Washington, DC: National Archives Microfilm Publications, n.d.), M1026_11.

⁵⁴Minors of Zélie Aubry (1868).

⁵⁵US Census Bureau, Eighth Census, M653_419, 141–142.

⁵⁶It was not yet the norm at this point even for white children to attend school. The state superintendent's 1861 report to the state legislature recorded that among New Orleans's four school districts, a total of 16,862 children attended public schools that year, and 19,452 were "not attending." In the Second District—the school district for the French-speaking part of the city where the Edmunds family lived—less than one third of children attended public schools. Few private schools were reported in any of the districts. Louisiana Department of Education, *Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Education to the Legislature of the State of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, LA: JM Taylor, 1861), 59–63, <http://www2.state.lib.la.us/doeafsr/1861.pdf>.

⁵⁷Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child*, 198; and DeVore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 66 (discussing political measures to starve black schools of funding).

system as a defensive measure to prevent integration.⁵⁸ Under the federal occupation, the military and then the Freedmen's Bureau would establish schools for newly emancipated people in New Orleans, but any schools for the city's Afro-Creoles, who were French-speaking and higher in social status, would have been separate from these schools and would have predated them.⁵⁹

Before the Civil War, many prominent Afro-Creoles likely educated their children with private tutors or in small-scale community schools operated in homes. Given Edmunds's level of mathematical sophistication at the time he tested into college, he must have received his education this way. In her research, Sarah Hyde found a strong culture of home schooling and small, family-run schools for white families in the Gulf South,⁶⁰ and so it should not be surprising that the Afro-Creole community set up schools of its own following this tradition. The Catholic Church also had a long history of educating both free and enslaved blacks in New Orleans.⁶¹ While Catholic schools had been an essential part of the free black community for generations and may have laid the cultural groundwork for the private community schools,⁶² they would not have taught at the same academic level as the best private schools.⁶³ An 1866 *Harper's Magazine* article provides a contemporaneous account of the private community schools and

⁵⁸ DeVore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 66.

⁵⁹ See Foner, *Reconstruction*, 101 (stating that free blacks were reluctant to send their children to Freedmen's schools). James Anderson cites the Pioneer School of Freedom (1860) as an early example of schools started by "slaves and free persons of color." (Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, 7). This particular school educated slaves who had a pass to move around the city on their own for part of the day. "Dispensing and Acquiring Knowledge 'Under Difficulties.' The Pioneer School," *L'Union* (New Orleans, LA), July 12, 1864, 3.

⁶⁰ Sarah L. Hyde, *Schooling in the Antebellum South: The Rise of Public and Private Education in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016), 7–45.

⁶¹ For a discussion of prewar education for the city's free blacks, see Stern, *Race and Education in New Orleans*, 31–39. The one large, well-organized black school at this time and the only one listed in the 1861 city directory was the historically important Couvent School, nominally a school for indigent orphans, in which the Afro-Creole elite taught free black children of all backgrounds.

⁶² Marcus Christian claims that these secular, prewar Afro-Creole schools were the fruit of the Catholic Church's long tradition of black education. Marcus Christian, "The Negro in Louisiana" [unpublished manuscript], Marcus Christian Collection, Louisiana Digital Library, University of New Orleans, Ch. 20, <http://louisianadigitallibrary.org/islandora/object/uno-p15140coll42%3A49>.

⁶³ An article from *Harper's Magazine* from 1866 praised the Couvent School as having some pupils who "have mastered the principal rules in arithmetic, and progressed as far as square and cube roots," an impressive feat but would not have been sufficient to take the test for the École Polytechnique, which required, among

explains how they avoided attracting any attention that might have caused a backlash by operating “in private houses, without any external appearance which would indicate that the building was used for educational purposes.”⁶⁴ The author remarked, “The city government does no more condescend to notice them than it does the colored boot-blacks around Saint Charles Hotel.”⁶⁵ The city’s neglect benefited the black community because in New Orleans “private schools for colored people ... long existed and prospered.”⁶⁶ Scholars have noted that the Afro-Creole community’s most prominent citizens—poets, musicians, and newspaper editors—were teachers in these “colored schools.”⁶⁷ The teachers named were almost uniformly male, perhaps reflecting the importance the community put on education. Ironically, it may have been his exclusion from the city’s white schools that gave E. J. his best opportunity to test into the *École Polytechnique* and study mathematics at such a high level.

Emancipation and the New Urgency to Act

With emancipation, the status of the Edmunds family and other Afro-Creoles became more uncertain. They had always been “above” enslaved blacks by virtue of their freedom, but what now? New Orleans’s black political elite, including the Afro-Creoles, would respond to this issue by embracing the ideal of a homogenous, equal citizenry and seeking to erase racial designations all together in New Orleans public schools.

The campaign for black civil rights in New Orleans is too complex to be treated fully here, but a pivotal moment in that fight came in the spring of 1868. This must have been a time of great energy and optimism. Republicans had won a landslide victory in the 1866 congressional elections, giving them the moral and political authority to reassert federal control over Southern governments, which they did with the Reconstruction Acts of 1867 and 1868. Under this period of “Radical Reconstruction,” Philip Sheridan, the governor of the military district that included Louisiana, removed ex-Confederates from office and set up conditions for many African American men to

other advanced topics, a basic knowledge of calculus. Nathan Willey, “Education of the Colored Population of Louisiana,” *Harper’s Magazine* 33, no. 194 (July 1866), 248.

⁶⁴ Willey, “Education of the Colored Population of Louisiana,” 247.

⁶⁵ Willey, “Education of the Colored Population of Louisiana,” 247.

⁶⁶ Willey, “Education of the Colored Population of Louisiana,” 246.

⁶⁷ Rankin, “The Origins of Black Leadership,” 433; and Christian, “The Negro in Louisiana,” Ch. 20.

move into positions of power.⁶⁸ In this period, the city produced and attracted black leaders from all backgrounds⁶⁹ who worked together for the same cause. They were “vigorous, impatient, and self-assured,” like the young men of the American Revolution.⁷⁰ Ordinary black citizens in New Orleans were also emboldened in these years to challenge discriminatory laws and practices, such as by riding “white” streetcars, daring the police to arrest them,⁷¹ and their actions led to the integration of streetcars⁷² and some juries.⁷³ The *New Orleans Tribune*, the “voice of Louisiana Radicalism and black rights,”⁷⁴ published an editorial in November 1867 that marveled at the “great social and political transformations” that had taken place already, dismissed the possibility of a counterreaction by white supremacists (“fossils who should rather be pitied than condemned”), and predicted that “the new state of things . . . [could] never be undone.”⁷⁵ Feeling the wind at their backs, Louisiana’s black leaders worked with their Republican allies to draft a new state constitution, which was finalized on March 7, 1868. While the Reconstruction Acts required Southern states to adopt new constitutions that would guarantee universal male suffrage,⁷⁶ the Louisiana Constitution of 1868, later ratified by popular vote, went far beyond that and was almost unique⁷⁷ in its sweeping view of human equality.

Louisiana’s Constitution of 1868 adapted language from the Declaration of Independence, stating that “all men are created free and equal,” and this time “all men” would include black men. The new constitution also codified and clarified the ideas behind the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and of the Fourteenth Amendment in guaranteeing the “same civil, political, and public rights and privileges” to

⁶⁸ DeVore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 65.

⁶⁹ A study of black leaders during Reconstruction found that nearly all were free before the war. It included many mixed-race elites from the Afro-Creole community, but a full one-third of the men lived outside the French-speaking neighborhoods, and the movement included men who came to New Orleans from elsewhere in the South. Rankin, “The Origins of Black Leadership.”

⁷⁰ Rankin, “The Origins of Black Leadership,” 428.

⁷¹ “The Star Car Question,” *New Orleans Republican*, May 1, 1867, 1.

⁷² DeVore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 65.

⁷³ Thomas W. Conway, “The School Question,” *New Orleans Tribune*, Dec. 20, 1867, 4.

⁷⁴ White, *The Republic for Which It Stands*, 44.

⁷⁵ “The Convention and the German Gazette,” *New Orleans Tribune*, Nov. 28, 1867, 4.

⁷⁶ First Reconstruction Act of 1867, 14 Stat. 428–430, c. 153 (March 2, 1867), sec. 5.

⁷⁷ In the same spring, South Carolina drafted and later ratified a similar constitution with a school integration clause.

all, without regard to race.⁷⁸ The philosophical underpinning of the new constitution was exactly what Afro-Creole leaders had advocated. The *Tribune* rejected the idea that their movement was about securing rights for one group or another—advocating instead for “equal laws and impartiality.”⁷⁹ The new constitution also contained one specific guarantee of equality that perhaps more than any other threatened the city’s ruling caste. Article 135 required the state to provide a free public education to all children and outlawed racially segregated schools.⁸⁰ School integration was a divisive subject, even among Republicans. School officials would not implement Article 135 until January 1871 and only after a power struggle in which a Radical Republican state legislature wrested control of the schools from the New Orleans City Council in favor of their own appointees.⁸¹

Members of the city’s black community, emboldened by the events of 1868, began to enter historically white public schools around that time, years before the school board implemented the integration policy. E. J. and his younger siblings, Arnold and Olivia, were among these pioneers. Fourteen-year-old Arnold attended the Fillmore School, an all-boys grammar school, in 1867 and 1868, when he graduated as the top student.⁸² Afterward, Arnold entered and then graduated from Boys’ Central High School, which was considered the best school in the city and where his E. J. would later teach.⁸³ E. J.’s younger sister, Olivia, attended the Bayou Road Girls’ School, another “white” public school, in the spring of 1868. Olivia was not alone. She was one of twenty-eight students who were outed as “black” by classmates in May 1868, causing the city school superintendent to initiate an investigation. The school’s principal, Stephanie Bigot, claimed ignorance of the children’s races, and the school board eventually cleared her.⁸⁴

Scholars have used the Bayou Road incident to illustrate initial isolated efforts to begin integration and the school board’s aggressive reaction to maintain segregation,⁸⁵ but details about Olivia’s time at the school complicate the picture. New evidence suggests that

⁷⁸Louisiana Const. of 1868, title II.

⁷⁹“The Great Issue,” *New Orleans Tribune*, Dec. 15, 1867, 4.

⁸⁰Louisiana Const. of 1868, title VII, art. 135.

⁸¹DeVore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 67–70.

⁸²“Public School Examination,” *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), June 20, 1867, 8; and “Public School Examinations,” *New Orleans Republican*, June 25, 1868, 1.

⁸³“The Central High School. Commencement Exercises,” *New Orleans Republican*, Dec. 18, 1872, 1.

⁸⁴“Board of School Directors.”

⁸⁵For example, see Stern, *Race and Education*, 43–44; Mitchell, “Raising Freedom’s Child,” 215–16; and Mishio Yamanaka, “Erasing the Color Line: The Racial Formation of Creoles of Color and the Public School Integration

Olivia Edmunds was part of a more extensive effort in the French-speaking areas at this time in which students of African descent entered schools, aided by officials who were willing to look the other way. Bigot had reason to know that she was admitting students of color. Some of the twenty-eight had “very light complexions,” but others were darker.⁸⁶ Bigot was not naïve; she had been working in the public school system almost since its beginning and was an esteemed principal of a well-run school.⁸⁷ If the students who outed Olivia had reason to know that such a large fraction of the Bayou Road School was of African descent (about 14 percent of the school), then the principal had reason to know too. Local officials from the French-speaking areas also knew. The officials who initially investigated the claims of black enrollment reported back to the city school board that there was no problem, causing the school board to accuse the delegation of “wink[ing] at the fact that colored students had been received in schools in that section of the city.”⁸⁸

In response to the school board’s investigation, the twenty-eight Bayou Road students “charged with being black” were required to produce proof of their all-white lineage to remain at the school. Most eventually did,⁸⁹ including Olivia, whose “proof” was a new birth certificate, refiled with the state in the middle of the investigation, this time with the racial designations missing.⁹⁰ Of course, the refiled of the birth certificate would be possible only with the knowledge and help of a clerk. The clerk who signed Olivia’s new birth certificate was himself, according to real estate records, designated as a free person of color before the war and seems to have slipped over the color line.⁹¹ The new birth certificate must have been questionable on its

Movement in New Orleans, 1867–1880” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2013), 22–24.

⁸⁶“Local intelligence,” *New Orleans Crescent*, May 28, 1868, 1; and “Board of School Directors.”

⁸⁷“Public School Examinations.”

⁸⁸“Board of School Directors.”

⁸⁹“Local intelligence”; and “Board of School Directors.”

⁹⁰The Louisiana Secretary of State has two birth certificates for Olivia Edmunds. The first, when she was five years old, listed her father, Edgar Edmunds, as a “free man of color” and her mother, Rose Euphémie Foy, as a “free woman of color.” Birth Record for Olivia Edmunds. The new certificate, filed four years later, lists Olivia’s parents without the racial designations. Birth Record for Olivia Edmunds, April 6, 1859, filed May 26, 1868, New Orleans, Louisiana Birth Records Index, 1790–1899, vol. 47, 452, Vital Records Indices, Louisiana State Archives, Baton Rouge, LA.

⁹¹Severin Latorre, the “duly commissioned and sworn recorder of births and deaths” who signed Olivia Edmunds’s 1868 birth certificate, was indicated as a “f.m. c.” in several real-estate transfer records from before the war. See Chain of Title for 1227–1231 Burgundy Street (October 2, 1832 and June 1, 1843), *Collins C. Diboll Vieux*

face as evidence of her “whiteness” because the new, more recent filing date is written on the certificate. The board accepted Olivia’s birth certificate, and those of at least several other students, including some with dark complexions.⁹² It seems likely that the board was more interested in drawing a clear line than in ensuring that any particular child was on the “right” side of the line. Perhaps this is also evidence that the line between black and white—when it came to the place of Afro-Creoles—was still blurred at this time.

Two years later, in the 1869–1870 school year, Olivia was still a student at the Bayou Road Girls’ School,⁹³ and Bigot was still the principal.⁹⁴ The *Daily Picayune* (later the *Times-Picayune*) made note of seeing black children at the school again that year: “We must confess that we were greatly astonished in finding these colored children occupying seats alongside of white children. We are, however, informed that they have been attending this school for some time, without meeting opposition from any quarters.”⁹⁵ It is apparent from the quote that multiple children who were visibly of African descent were at the school and that Bigot was attempting to protect her students from nosey reporters. The fact that she was still enrolling black students two years after being made to answer to the city school board for this charge confirms both that it was done purposefully and that she had support in her district for the practice. The evidence of persistent racial integration at the Bayou Road School, all while the school administration and local district officials maintained the façade that it was a “white” school, demonstrates that New Orleans citizens had not yet coalesced around firm racial categories in the first few years after the War. The school board’s actions in investigating the Bayou Road School also show the ruling caste’s early, ineffective attempt to enforce new racial boundaries.

E. J., like his brother, attended the Fillmore School in these years.⁹⁶ E. J.’s parents also filed a birth certificate for him in May 1868 without the racial designations,⁹⁷ likely for the same reason they refiled Olivia’s birth certificate. The Fillmore School was a good school, but it was only a grammar school, and E. J. was already

Carré Digital Survey, The Historic New Orleans Collection, https://www.hnoc.org/vcs/property_info.php?lot=23171.

⁹²“Local Intelligence,” *New Orleans Crescent*, May 28, 1868, 1.

⁹³“Our Public Schools. Examinations Yesterday,” *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), June 23, 1870, 2.

⁹⁴“Our Public Schools. Examinations Yesterday.”

⁹⁵“Our Public Schools. Examinations Yesterday.”

⁹⁶“Public Schools Exhibitions,” *New Orleans Republican*, June 23, 1871, 1.

⁹⁷Birth Record for Edgar Joseph Edmunds.

at least seventeen years old when he entered. E. J. must have been highly educated in private schools because after graduating he passed a rigorous set of oral and written exams in mathematics and science⁹⁸ to enter the École Polytechnique in Paris.⁹⁹ It is unclear why E. J. bothered to attend the Fillmore School at all, except perhaps that it would have allowed him to take the high school entrance exam in the fall if he had stayed in New Orleans.

A newspaper article published after formal integration began in January 1871 gives further evidence that the Edmunds siblings were part of a larger movement in which New Orleans black community began to enter “white” schools even before they gained the support of the school board. Teachers in 1871 confirmed that integration was not new and that by that time the “mixing of the public schools has silently and gradually been going on.”¹⁰⁰ Scholars who have addressed Louisiana’s brief period of school integration have concluded that, other than isolated incidents, meaningful integration did not happen until the school board policy changed and schools were integrated formally.¹⁰¹ The new evidence about the Edmunds siblings and the circumstances of their public schooling suggest that the Afro-Creole community and its allies initiated a quiet movement to undermine racial categories and racial segregation in schools years before it was the official policy of the school board—and that in response, white supremacists began to organize against them.

Formal School Integration Begins

The 1870–1871 school year was significant in the campaign for school integration. An array of political tactics and court battles had prevented integration, but in December 1870 a court decision paved the way for action by handing control of the schools to allies of the integration

⁹⁸“Report on the State of the Polytechnic School in Paris,” *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 4, no. 3 (Oct. 1841), 230.

⁹⁹M. Edmunds (Edgard Joseph), *Concours d'Admission en 1871* [record of admission results], Collections École Polytechnique, Bibliothèque Centrale, Centre de Ressources Historiques (Palaiseau, France), file X2C 3 / 1871.

¹⁰⁰“Mixed Schools,” *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), Jan. 12, 1871, 1.

¹⁰¹DeVore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 69–70; Harlan, “Desegregation in New Orleans Public Schools,” 675; Mitchell, *Raising Freedom’s Child*, 216; Stern, *Race and Education*, 44; William P. Vaughn, *Schools for All: The Blacks and Public Education in the South, 1865–1877* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), 89; and Yamanaka, “Erasing the Color Line,” 22–24. Stern, Mitchell, and Yamanaka all refine earlier accounts by describing isolated incidents of integration before 1871. This study adds to prior scholarship by showing evidence of more widespread integration before 1871.

movement.¹⁰² The school board could have used its position of power in a number of ways, but the course it chose was moderate and consistent with their race-neutral philosophy. The board stripped official racial designations from both schools and students,¹⁰³ and, in theory, students were permitted to enroll where they liked. Schools that were designated “colored” before tended to remain so, but the “white” schools were now open to everyone.

A January 12, 1871, *Daily Picayune* article reflects the community’s anticipation as the board took the first steps toward integration:

There [were] ... some rumors that the question of admitting negro children into our public schools had been forced to an issue. ... [T]he rumors proved to be true in so far as colored pupils had been admitted into two white schools as far as we could ascertain.¹⁰⁴

The *Daily Picayune*, a pro-segregation paper that would later launch vile attacks concerning Edmunds’s appointment, was more balanced in its reporting on integration at this time. The paper remarked that some schools lost students but admits that integration was successful at the Robertson Girls’ School; while “the colored mixture ha[d] been forced in[to]” the school, there was no “ill effect,” and the school was “flourishing.”¹⁰⁵ Historian Louis Harlan estimated that approximately one-third of the city’s schools were integrated in the years 1871 to 1874 and that the movement was successful in large part because of the black men in political leadership positions who defended and sustained it, even when others could not muster the political will.¹⁰⁶ What Harlan did not mention is that the experiment’s success also depended on the children and their families of African descent who chose to enroll and attend integrated schools, in spite of the difficulties.

Edmunds graduated from the Fillmore School in June 1871, five months after integration formally began. He traveled to Paris later that month, to enter the École Polytechnique, which was the top college of mathematics and science in France, perhaps even the world, at the

¹⁰²Harlan, “Desegregation in New Orleans Public Schools,” 665; “Infamy Consummated,” *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), Nov. 24, 1870, 1; and “The Courts,” *New Orleans Republican*, Dec. 21, 1870, 1.

¹⁰³Minutes, Jan. 9, 1875 to Feb. 7, 1877, Orleans Parish School Board, Louisiana Digital Library, University of New Orleans Collection, <http://louisianadigitalibrary.org/islandora/object/uno-p15140coll4%3A4172>.

¹⁰⁴“Mixed Schools.”

¹⁰⁵“Our Public Schools,” *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), June 23, 1871, 2.

¹⁰⁶Harlan, “Desegregation in New Orleans Public Schools,” 675.



Figure 1. E. J. Edmunds at the École Polytechnique, *bottom left, seated*. (Salle 8 [group photograph], Collections École Polytechnique, Bibliothèque Central, Centre de Ressources Historiques (Palaiseau, France), file X2B 54 / 1871–1872, used with permission.).

time.¹⁰⁷ A photograph of Edmunds from the École Polytechnique archives shows him and some of his classmates in their military uniforms posing on the school steps.¹⁰⁸ Edmunds stayed at the École Polytechnique for the standard two-year course of study and afterward entered, but did not finish, his training at the l'École d'Application de l'Artillerie et du Génie (the School of Application of Artillery and Engineering) in Fontainebleau, France.¹⁰⁹ Edmunds returned to

¹⁰⁷ Florian Cajori, *The Teaching and History of Mathematics in the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1890).

¹⁰⁸ Group photo of students, circa 1871–1873, Collections École Polytechnique, Bibliothèque Centrale, Centre de Ressources Historiques (Palaiseau, France), file X2B 54 / 1871–72.

¹⁰⁹ M. Edmunds, *Classement Général de Fin d'Année, 1871 – 72* [school record from Edmunds first year], Collections École Polytechnique, Bibliothèque Centrale, Centre de Ressources Historiques (Palaiseau, France), file X2C 4 / 1872; M. Edmunds (Edgard Joseph), *Rangs Obtenus Successivement* [summary of school promotions], Collections École Polytechnique, Bibliothèque Centrale, Centre de Ressources Historiques (Palaiseau, France), file X2C 8 / 1871–1873.

New Orleans sometime between 1873 and 1875, and in April 1875 Edmunds was appointed principal of Sumner Boys' School, an all-black public grammar school,¹¹⁰ for the remaining months of the school year.¹¹¹ The next fall, Edmunds would receive his controversial assignment.

White Supremacists Reassert Dominance

The years leading up to Edmunds's appointment were the beginning of the so-called Southern "Redemption." The period saw a renewed boldness of white-supremacist Democrats in Louisiana and a new willingness to use violence to achieve what they could not accomplish politically. In Colfax, Louisiana, in April 1873, armed white Democrats overpowered a group of freedmen who had seized the county courthouse after a disputed election, resulting in "the bloodiest single instance of racial carnage"¹¹² in Reconstruction. The following year, on September 14, 1874, an armed gang of eight thousand men overthrew the Republican governor, William Kellogg,¹¹³ until federal troops restored him to power. On a national level, Democrats made gains in the 1874 election, and to ensure the passage of what would be the Civil Rights Act of 1875, Republicans removed the school integration clause from the bill, an indication that support for Reconstruction on a national level was waning.¹¹⁴

With momentum finally on their side, the conservative press, led by the *New Orleans Bulletin*, the voice of the White League,¹¹⁵ found a strategy that helped them launch an all-out war on the city's integrated schools. On December 14, 1874, three girls from the Coliseum Street Colored Girls School arrived to take the entrance exam at the Girls' Upper High School. (There was no separate "colored" high school at this time.) The principal turned the girls away, but the school's current students were not satisfied and threatened to boycott the school.¹¹⁶ The event may have gone unnoticed, but the conservative press leveraged it to start a movement. The *Bulletin* ran a front-page story calling the protest the "first gun in the war" and "their 14th of

¹¹⁰Minutes, Jan. 9, 1875 to Feb. 7, 1877, Orleans Parish School Board, 7–8; and "City School Board: Reports, Communications and Resolutions," *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), April 8, 1875, 2.

¹¹¹"City School Board."

¹¹²Foner, *Reconstruction*, 437.

¹¹³White, *The Republic for Which It Stands*, 280.

¹¹⁴DeVore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 76.

¹¹⁵Harlan, "Desegregation in New Orleans Public Schools," 672.

¹¹⁶"The Color Line," *New Orleans Times*, Dec. 15, 1874, 1.

September”¹¹⁷—a reference to the coup from earlier that fall. The *Bulletin* organized and encouraged further protests by meeting with students in its offices and by printing calls for others to follow the lead.¹¹⁸ The *New Orleans Times* ran a story the same day praising the protesters and declaring that it was an “Exciting Time” for opponents of mixed schools.¹¹⁹ The *Daily Picayune* followed the lead of the other papers in praising the “brave New Orleans girls who have so earnestly . . . asserted their rights” and wished them success.¹²⁰ The city’s papers, most of which were Democrat-leaning and politically conservative, ran daily stories on the movement they were simultaneously building, praising copycat acts of student protest, such as when a group of boys (so-called “Youthful Knights”) patrolled the perimeter of Boys’ Central High to prevent black boys from taking the school’s entrance exam.¹²¹

The calls for action from the press were paired with a relentless propaganda war to reestablish the dominance of the white ruling caste by defining and diminishing people of African ancestry based on a strict binary conception of race. While the city’s black leadership was disciplined in their race-neutral message of equality, the conservative press manufactured a race problem and then placed it front and center: “At last the race-issue has been definitely raised.”¹²² The argument was not at all subtle. The *Bulletin*, for example, argued that racial separation was necessary because the black race was the “inferior race,” and it made appeals to history, philosophy, the laws of “physiology and psychology,” and the “science of archeology” to back up its claim.¹²³

With overtly racialized assertions like these, it is easy to overlook the subtlety of how the press delineated and shaped the concept of the *negro*. In prewar New Orleans, several race-conscious terms, including *negro* and *colored*, were used to navigate distinctions of ethnic and cultural background, skin color, and social status,¹²⁴ but the conservative press now conflated the terms. They swept aside the distinctions because the only thing that mattered now was whether a person was at all “tainted” by African descent. The *Bulletin*, for example, asserted that there were two races, “physiologically apart,” and that “an

¹¹⁷“The Race Issue in the Schools,” *New Orleans Bulletin*, Dec. 15, 1874, 2.

¹¹⁸“The Race Issue in the Schools.”

¹¹⁹“The Color Line.”

¹²⁰“The Public Schools,” *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), Dec. 16, 1874, 4.

¹²¹“Youthful Knights,” *New Orleans Times*, Dec. 17, 1874, 2.

¹²²“The Race Issue in the Schools.”

¹²³“Mixed Schools,” *New Orleans Bulletin*, Dec. 12, 1874, 4.

¹²⁴Other terms included “blacks,” “*gens de couleur*,” “Creoles,” “griffes,” “briqués,” “mulattoes,” “quadroons,” and “octaroons.” Dunbar-Nelson, “People of Color in Louisiana,” 3.

admixture of an inferior with a superior race” also produces an inferior group.¹²⁵ The *Daily Picayune* spoke of a negro essence in the mixed-race members of the school board—the “negro character” and the “nature” of colored people¹²⁶—as though they shared a common, identifiable, debasing characteristic. Having argued that the essence of the negro was base, it became a moral imperative to protect white children; the paper referenced the need to maintain the “integrity” of white schools¹²⁷ and the “purification” of schools by removing students of color.¹²⁸

The propaganda was effective. Even the *New Orleans Republican*, a white-run paper that was sanctioned by the Union-occupied government and was generally a supporter of political equality, adopted the idea that the controversy was, in essence, a war between two races: The paper characterized the girls’ protest as “resist[ing] the forcible introduction in their midst of colored girls.”¹²⁹ The framing of the issue in that way, as if the white girls were protecting themselves from a forceful invasion, signaled the *Republican’s* shift away from supporting integrated schools.¹³⁰ Black leaders were undaunted and stuck to their position. The *Weekly Louisianan*, a Reconstruction-era newspaper founded and edited by the city’s African American political elite,¹³¹ berated the *Republican* for compromising its principles and abandoning its allies, arguing that “drawing of lines between the races [was] dubious” and that both morally and legally, “the distinction now sought ha[d] been abolished.”¹³²

From there, the movement spread and triggered violence. In a letter to the school board, members of the junior class from Boys’ Central High adopted the talking points of the conservative, white press. They

¹²⁵“Mixed Schools,” Dec. 12, 1874, 4.

¹²⁶“Was It a Conspiracy?” *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), Dec. 16, 1874, 4.

¹²⁷“The Public Schools.”

¹²⁸“Youthful Regulators,” *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), Dec. 18, 1874, 1

¹²⁹“The Schools,” *New Orleans Republican*, Dec. 19, 1874, 2. The Catholic paper did not report on this incident but in the past had defended racial segregation in Catholic schools, writing that admitting a single black student to one of its schools would “ruin [the] institution”; and “Philosophical Law Suits,” *Morning Star and Catholic Messenger* (New Orleans), March 29, 1868, 4.

¹³⁰“The Schools.”

¹³¹The *Louisianan*, later *The Weekly Louisianan*, was a Republican newspaper that was, according to its second-page masthead, “owned, edited and published by colored men.” It was founded by P. B. S. Pinchback. DeVore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 70. William G. Brown, another prominent black leader, was editor and resigned in 1872 to become the state superintendent of education. “Our New Superintendent of Public Education.” *Weekly Louisianan* (New Orleans), Jan. 4, 1873, 2.

¹³²“The Republican and ‘Mixed Schools.’” *Weekly Louisianan* (New Orleans), Dec. 19, 1874, 2.

spoke of the “miserable stench” of the “negro” and the need to preserve the “sacredness” of all-white classrooms.¹³³ A group of students from the school then took matters into their own hands by entering a nearby integrated school and forcibly removing students suspected of African descent from their classrooms. It must have been a bizarre and tragic scene—a group of high school boys checking each classroom of a girls school, classifying them based on the color of their skin, with the girls they “found spiced a little too highly” in tears as they collected their things to leave.¹³⁴ The movement spread to other schools over the next days.¹³⁵ The boys discovered that identifying people of African descent was not as straightforward as they had been led to believe, making mistakes of both overinclusion and underinclusion. They ejected some dark-skinned Jewish students and left alone some students whose African ancestry was not apparent; they returned later to correct the mistakes.¹³⁶ One of the girls outed some of the aggressor boys as being “colored” themselves, which led to further investigations and scandals about racial purity.¹³⁷ As bumbling as this effort was, the movement ignited by the *Bulletin’s* rhetoric spread, leading to mobs, street violence, and even one black man’s death.¹³⁸

With the racial unrest, white Republican voices grew timid about integration, but the school board did not. In September 1875, African American political leaders¹³⁹ dominated the seventeen-member school board, and these men wanted to push the idea of race-neutral schools as far as they could. The most vocal member of the 1875 board, and its de facto leader, was P. B. S. Pinchback, the son of a slave from Georgia. Pinchback was no ordinary school board member. Before his school board appointment, Pinchback helped draft the 1868 constitution, had served briefly as governor, was elected US Senator, and founded the *Weekly Louisianan*.¹⁴⁰ His decision to put his political

¹³³“The Race Issue in the Schools,” *New Orleans Bulletin*, Dec. 17, 1874, 2.

¹³⁴“The Lower Girls’ High School,” *New Orleans Bulletin*, Dec. 18, 1874, 2.

¹³⁵“The War Commenced,” *New Orleans Bulletin*, Dec. 18, 1874, 1; “The School Question,” *New Orleans Bulletin*, Dec. 19, 1874, 2; and “The Week,” *Weekly Louisianan* (New Orleans), Dec. 26, 1874, 2.

¹³⁶“The Week”; and “The School Question.”

¹³⁷“The Week.”

¹³⁸“The War Commenced,” Dec. 18, 1874, 1; and “The School Question,” Dec. 19, 1874, 2.

¹³⁹“A Model(?) School Board,” *New Orleans Bulletin*, Sept. 19, 1875, 2 (identifies members by race and shows a black majority). Rankin identified four of the men as among New Orleans’s “black leadership.” Rankin, “The Origins of Black Leadership in New Orleans,” 436–40.

¹⁴⁰White, *The Republic for Which It Stands*, 138; and “Circular to the Republicans of Louisiana,” *New Orleans Republican*, March 31, 1868, 2.

weight behind Edmunds's appointment, and to school integration generally, speaks to the importance of the issue to New Orleans's black leaders.

Edmunds Appointment Fuels Anti-Immigration Propaganda War

On September 11, 1875, the Pinchback school board doubled down on its policy of race neutrality by appointing E. J. Edmunds¹⁴¹ as one of six teachers at the Boys' Central High School in New Orleans,¹⁴² the very same school whose boys had recently caused violence in the name of racial purity. It is not clear where the idea of Edmunds candidacy originated; the minutes do not record the discussions or the vote tally, and in fact the board was later accused of making the decisions secretly so that no one member could be blamed.¹⁴³ Wherever the idea originated, the school board knew Edmunds well. The same board members had appointed him a few months earlier as principal of the all-black Sumner School. Even before Edmunds returned to New Orleans from France, the black board members likely knew of Edmunds. Within this tight community, prominent members knew each other, and Edmunds's studies at the École Polytechnique would have been a source of community pride. Edmunds also called attention to himself as principal of the Sumner School by making a formal complaint to the school board of "disturbances" from boys from the nearby all-white Fisk School.¹⁴⁴ Pinchback later defended Edmunds's extraordinary qualifications but also hinted that Edmunds's appointment was meant as a test case to clarify the status of black people.¹⁴⁵ Edmunds was a perfect subject for such a test not only because of his academic degree but because of his prominent family background and fair skin color. In spite of his qualifications, the appointment was an act of defiance for both the board and E. J. Edmunds himself, who would have been aware of the context. In this charged atmosphere, Edmunds and the board must have known that the conservative, white press would see his appointment as a shot across the bow.

The *Republican* describes the protest on Edmunds's first day as a small incident and the only one in the city that otherwise saw a

¹⁴¹School board minutes announced the results without reporting individual votes. The *New Orleans Bulletin* later questioned the board and reported that the vote was twelve to five, with three white members joining the black majority. "The Vote," *New Orleans Bulletin*, Sept. 15, 1875, 1.

¹⁴²Minutes, Jan. 9, 1875 to Feb. 7, 1877, Orleans Parish School Board, 60.

¹⁴³"The Indignation Meeting," *New Orleans Republican*, Sept. 30, 1875, 1.

¹⁴⁴Minutes, Jan. 9, 1875 to Feb. 7, 1877, Orleans Parish School Board, 27.

¹⁴⁵"Board of School Directors," *New Orleans Republican*, Sept. 16, 1875, 1.

successful first day of school. When boys from the senior class protested to their principal about having a “colored” man as a teacher, the principal told them that they had two choices, to stay or to leave. The eleven boys of the senior class opted to walk out, some under pressure from their classmates.¹⁴⁶ The white-supremacist press responded by doing what they had successfully done before—promoting and escalating dissent through a barrage of stories and editorials praising acts of protest as an act of “moral purity”¹⁴⁷ and a “sacred duty.”¹⁴⁸ A week after Edmunds’s appointment, the *Bulletin*, under the headline “Colored Teachers in White Schools,” published a list of black teachers’ names, and even a black child, who were currently working in or attending “white” schools.¹⁴⁹ The paper gave no context or explanation for the list, but none was needed. It was clear that the *Bulletin* was encouraging its readers to remove black people from the schools as they had in December.

Again, coupled with the imperative to act, this was a propaganda war to justify the movement’s moral high ground, and the language grew even more extreme. The white-supremacist press painted a picture of an us-versus-them war between two poles—white versus black, good versus evil, purity versus filth, even human versus animal. The *Bulletin* compared a school with black children to a shop being “fumigated for disinfection”¹⁵⁰ and claimed that white parents were withdrawing their children “in order to save them from contamination.”¹⁵¹ It warned white teachers who taught black children that they were breathing in the “the odor of immorality.”¹⁵² The *New Orleans Times* spoke of blacks “forc[ing] themselves upon the white children.”¹⁵³ The *Daily Picayune* said that mixing races in schools was “unnatural and disgusting.”¹⁵⁴ The black members of the school board, especially Pinchback, were the subject of particularly vile attacks that questioned their morality, intelligence, and competence. The Catholic newspaper, which was staunchly white-supremacist even though Catholic schools in the city had a long history of racial

¹⁴⁶“Local Intelligence,” *New Orleans Republican*, Sept. 14, 1875, 3.

¹⁴⁷“Temporary Abandonment for the Sake of Reform,” *New Orleans Bulletin*, Sept. 17, 1875, 4.

¹⁴⁸“The Public Schools,” *New Orleans Bulletin*, Sept. 14, 1875, 4.

¹⁴⁹“Colored Teachers in White Schools,” *New Orleans Bulletin*, Sept. 19, 1875, 1.

¹⁵⁰“Temporary Abandonment for the Sake of Reform.”

¹⁵¹“The Movement Against the City School Board,” *New Orleans Bulletin*, Oct. 9, 1875, 4.

¹⁵²“The Public Schools,” Sept. 14, 1875, 4.

¹⁵³“The Times vs. the Negro School Board,” *New Orleans Times*, Sept. 26, 1875, 4.

¹⁵⁴“The School Board’s Experiment,” *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), Sept. 18, 1875, 4.

tolerance and outreach, referred to the black school board members as “ignorant negroes” and attributed to them “immoralities too gross for enumeration here.”¹⁵⁵ The paper said that it was humiliating for white women dealing with the black men on the board to have to use a “tone of deference and veneration.”¹⁵⁶ As for Edmunds himself, his prestigious academic degree did not fit into the world view of the white supremacists: the newspapers concluded that he must either have lied about his degree or received it through “a species of fraud.”¹⁵⁷

The campaign culminated with a call for a public meeting in Lafayette Square on September 29, 1875. The *Bulletin* had published daily reminders about the meeting and postponed it more than once for weather; it was hurricane season after all. The night of the meeting, a crowd of “men and boys,”¹⁵⁸ assembled, and more people arrived as the meeting progressed. Small boys remained on the outskirts of the group, playing, making noise, and drowning out the speakers.¹⁵⁹ It is not clear how many of the people there were supporters and how many were there simply out of curiosity. The chair of the organizing committee, Edward Phillips, was a lawyer who had been actively involved in anti-Reconstruction protests before. He opened the meeting with a plea to the public about the importance of the issue of race in the schools (“It is a question which underlies the very foundation of our society”).¹⁶⁰ The main speaker that evening was Judge J. H. Kennard, an ex-Confederate soldier¹⁶¹ and judge who dismissed the law (“I care not for the Constitution of the United States. I care not for the one hundred and thirty-fifth article of that of Louisiana”) on the grounds that “the legislation of God” against mixing races was higher and justified an armed revolution.¹⁶² The meeting ended with the adoption of a resolution stating, among other things, that by appointing Edmunds and “forc[ing] the race issue in the public schools,” Pinchback and the other black members of the board violated the public trust.¹⁶³ The organizers called for the board’s resignation.

¹⁵⁵“The School Excitement,” *Morning Star and Catholic Messenger* (New Orleans), Sept. 19, 1875, 4.

¹⁵⁶“The School Excitement.”

¹⁵⁷“Query?” *New Orleans Bulletin*, Sept. 19, 1875, 2.

¹⁵⁸“Indignation Meeting.”

¹⁵⁹“Indignation Meeting.”

¹⁶⁰“Mass Meeting,” *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), Sept. 30, 1875, 1.

¹⁶¹J. H. Kennard, Civil War Service Record, *Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soldiers Who Served in Organizations from the State of Louisiana* (Washington, DC: National Archives Microfilm Publications, n.d.), M320.

¹⁶²“Indignation Meeting.”

¹⁶³“Mass Meeting.”

Edmunds won the battle but not the war. The board finished its term, and Edmunds stayed at Central Boys' High School¹⁶⁴ until the Compromise of 1877 led to the withdrawal of federal troops, the return of Democrats to power, and the cementing of racial categories in New Orleans public schools.¹⁶⁵ Edmunds continued to teach at various "colored" schools that were opening in and out of the city, including a position as one of two founding faculty members of The Colored Normal Institute,¹⁶⁶ a position as the principal of the Colored High School,¹⁶⁷ and a position as the first chair of the Mathematics Department of the new Southern University.¹⁶⁸ Tragically, Edmunds began suffering from an illness, perhaps as early as 1878,¹⁶⁹ and he died in a mental asylum in 1887 at the age of 36.¹⁷⁰

Conclusion

It is by tracing the history of people like Edmunds, who lived in the blurred area between "black" and "white," between slavery and freedom, that we see so clearly what was at stake for this population during Reconstruction. Afro-Creoles before the war lived precarious lives, with their rights subject to the whims of the ruling caste, who could withdraw their privileged status at any moment. In some ways their lives were full, but in other respects they lived in the shadows, hoping to avoid any notice that might cause a backlash. In spite of their status, the Afro-Creoles clearly felt no sense of inferiority. They developed community networks before the war to educate their own children and, in the case of E. J. Edmunds, to such a level that he could compete with the best young mathematical minds of Europe. After the Civil War, Afro-Creoles dared to believe they could use public schools to tear down what was left of the old racial order, even when their white Republican allies were too cautious to take a stand. Even ordinary Afro-Creoles, like E. J. and his siblings, had the confidence in their abilities and their preparation to enter the schools that had excluded them for decades. They entered as soon as the schools were open to them, and in some cases even before. With Reconstruction came

¹⁶⁴ Edmunds was still at the school in Dec. 1876. Minutes, Jan. 9, 1875 to Feb. 7, 1877, Orleans Parish School Board, 200.

¹⁶⁵ DeVore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 82–85.

¹⁶⁶ "The Colored Normal Institute," *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), Dec. 13, 1877, 2.

¹⁶⁷ "Editor Louisianan," *The Weekly Louisianan* (New Orleans), Dec. 28, 1878, 2.

¹⁶⁸ "The Colored State University," *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), Oct. 21, 1880, 2.

¹⁶⁹ "Academic School No. 4," *New Orleans Daily Democrat*, June 20, 1878, 8.

¹⁷⁰ "Death of a Colored Teacher," *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), July 3, 1887, 11.

hope and promise, and the New Orleans Afro-Creole community did not hesitate to claim their place in society.

Afro-Creole leaders, and other black leaders like Pinchback who were drawn to New Orleans, were guided by a clear-eyed, intellectual vision rooted in the ideals of the French Revolution; they were dismantling an aristocracy. These men were ahead of their time in one sense, recognizing “race” as a dubious concept that the ruling caste used as a tool to oppress. They chose their words and their actions carefully, treating the concept of *race* almost dismissively, with the lack of seriousness they believed it deserved. The black *Weekly Louisianan* captured that dismissive attitude in talking about white supremacists: “Foolish caste lovers will insist on the distinction.”¹⁷¹ This confidence in the rightness of their vision may seem naïve today given the horror of what was to come. The white supremacist campaign to consolidate the population of African descent into a unified, lower caste—the “negro race”—was savage and potent. A narrative that paints a story about a conflict of good over evil captures the imagination more than an intellectual argument about human equality, and in the end New Orleans’s historical uniqueness did not save it from the decades of Jim Crow that afflicted the rest of the South.

¹⁷¹“Our Colored Schools,” *Weekly Louisianan* (New Orleans), Sept. 18, 1875, 2.