

APPENDIX D

POSSIBLE REASONS FOR THE DEMISE OF STORER COLLEGE

On the surface, Storer College's demise can be attributed to two obvious factors: declining enrollment and increasingly poor finances. The matter is not as simple, though, as "not enough students" or "not enough money." Each of those factors possesses its own complex web of components. It can be determined that the decline in enrollment, for example, was caused by multiple elements, among them the creation of two regional colleges that siphoned off potential Storer students; the first and second world wars, which sharply diminished the number of male students; and the school's failure to receive full accreditation, which could have caused some students to seek degrees elsewhere. The school's financial crises, likewise, were caused by many things: a dependence on a particularly small pool of funding sources, the end of the nineteenth century's emphasis on benevolent enterprises, a physical plant constantly in need of repair, failures to institute appropriate tuition increases or to collect on overdue student debts, and, not unsurprisingly, declining enrollment. Some reasons for Storer's demise can be pinpointed with certainty, such as the repercussions of *Brown vs. Board of Education*; others, though, must be extrapolated from a survey of the college's history, such as its ongoing uneasy status as a "colored" school. This section will focus on some of the more complex reasons for Storer's closure: its uneasy status as a "colored" school, denominational dependency and nepotism, competition from new regional schools for blacks, and legal considerations.

Racial Status

Regardless of the degree to which, after an initial period of resistance, the Harper's Ferry community became acclimated to the presence of the college, Storer would always be a "colored school." The nexus of issues that accompany such a designation is far more complex than might at first be imagined.

Organized by whites but focused toward assisting blacks, on the heels of the Civil War the school was rejected by "Confederate sympathizers" who questioned its existence and derided its faculty as "nigger teachers." As time went on, however, the presence of Storer College became more acceptable, a fact helped along by the status of two presidents, Brackett and McDonald, as community leaders. Then came its first black president, McKinney, who on his first night in the ferry town was welcomed by a burning cross in his front yard. Clearly, even as late as 1944, it was still possible for Storer to rankle at least some of the residents of Harpers Ferry and surrounding regions; however, the racial nature of the college affected the nature of its relationship not only with the outside world but also with the inside one.

Racially, did Storer ever make peace within its *own* community? Under Brackett and McDonald, students spoke out against what they perceived to be discriminatory practices, and in letters McDonald openly expressed his paternalistic belief that blacks should be educated by whites, who were fitted for the task by both position and heritage. Despite these facts and numerous run-ins with their respective Boards of Trustees, both presidents enjoyed long terms. McKinney, though, lasted barely six years and was under constant pressure by his Board to rectify the school's ailing financial status, although such woes had been inherited from former administrations. So great grew the tension

between McKinney and the Board that some members who had welcomed McDonald's departure renewed contact with him in order to seek his advice.

Always, then, to some degree, Storer was thus plagued on various fronts by racial tensions created solely because of its status as a "colored school."

Denominational Dependency and Nepotism

Without the Free Will Baptists' determination to establish first a mission school, then a secondary school, and eventually two- and four-year colleges, Storer could not have existed. With the help of John Storer, the denomination created the school, saw it chartered, staffed it, helped expand its campus—and, perhaps most important of all, financially supported it as the main component of its "Southern enterprise." In some ways, however, Storer's denominational affiliation enabled both its success and its failure.

The Free Will Baptists and various organizations within the denomination provided the central funding for Storer. While over the years the school received assistance from a variety of other sources—including the Freedmen's Bureau, private philanthropic organizations, the state of West Virginia, and individual donors—its primary source of income continued to be the Baptist denomination. To make a very modern comparison, Storer's financial portfolio remained relatively undiversified. Storer never broadened its support base, or its investment strategy suggesting that the institution's fiscal reliability was indeed vulnerable.

To some degree, this situation was inevitable: Storer College was formulated as a Christian school, so its ties with its founding denomination, both financially and

philosophically, naturally would have been close. However consistent the Baptists' funding, it was never tremendously generous—never enough, in other words, to constitute the school's sole means of support. From the moment it opened its doors, Storer College was chronically in need of funds. Yet even as late as 1953 and again in 1959 before the federal acquisition, when its very future depended on increased funding, there is evidence that the college declined to seek monies from other sources although viable fiscal plans had been offered to the Board of Trustees.¹ At a February Board meeting, Trustee Ballenger delivered a report on potential sources of funding, but then noted quite pointedly that “Storer is a church related school (founded by Free Will Baptists), a child to the Home Mission Board, and associated with the American Baptist Convention. A college that is attempting to be Christian”.² As a result, they appealed only to the American Baptist Convention, which “offered little hope” since the convention was operating from an ecumenical dimension under which Storer's pleas were assigned secondary status thus deferred until it was too late to salvage this aspect of the convention's outstanding interests.³

Storer's affiliation with the Baptists led to another interesting effect, what one might call “denominational nepotism.” That Storer initially was staffed by Free Will Baptists is logical, particularly when one considers its ties to the mission school; however, the fact that it retained generational and familial ties over time does indeed suggest a system or pattern, however unofficial, of nepotism. At one point during Brackett's administration, for example, several members of his immediate family were

¹ Mary P. Dyson and Madison Briscoe v. President and Trustees of Storer College and Clarence W. Cranford, 1959 Complaint, at 2-8 (United States District Court For the District of Columbia) (No. 391-59)

² Gozdizik and et al., *A Historic Resource Study for Storer College*, 215.

³ Ibid.; Baxter, *History of the Freewill Baptists: A Study in New England Separatism*; Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia, PA: The Judson Press, 1993).

employed at the school in various capacities. That trend continued—but far more blatantly—under McDonald. In fact, while still a student at Hillsdale College, McDonald courted (and eventually married) the daughter of Frances Stewart Mosher, an influential member of Storer’s Board of Trustees. According to historians, after Osgood retired as interim president and the search for a new administrator began just before McDonald’s appointment, “Mrs. Mosher apparently played a significant role in promoting her future son-in-law” for the administrative post.⁴ Although we have no letter in which Mrs. Mosher states her intention to secure the position for McDonald nor any evidence from Board members that they were being influenced by her, her “candidate” was chosen—a fact that pretty much speaks for itself. After being appointed, McDonald gradually increased his power at the school, taking control not only of the treasury but also serving as the Dean of Men, while his wife (the former Elizabeth Mosher) served as the Dean of Women. This assumption of control across many fields of the school’s operations eventually troubled the Board and was later one of the weighted factors that led to McDonald’s eventual resignation.

Although both administrators were absolutely dedicated to Storer, it stands to reason that with the passage of time they could have lost their objectivity when it came to what was needed to maintain the school and how best to sustain its operation in the rural community. As a result, their limited vision could be identified as one of the reasons for Storer’s demise. Since both Brackett and McDonald were devout Free Will Baptists and prioritized according to church agenda, one might also widen the conception of “limited vision” to include the denomination itself. The Free Will Baptist Home Mission Society was vital to the creation of Storer; however, as time passed and the school’s needs

⁴ Gozdizik and et al., *A Historic Resource Study for Storer College*, 70.

became more complex and far-reaching, to ensure future growth, the FWB-HMS should have give the Board of Trustees and therefore the school’s development over to another agency, or at the very least *consulted* another agency. Yet, as the “takeover controversy” during the McDonald administration suggests, the denomination could not quite make itself give up control of the school, even to the State of West Virginia.

Regional (Educational) Competition

Storer College catalogs from the period 1899 – 1915 indicate that “an average of 94.5% of Storer’s student body was drawn from the states of West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland and from the District of Columbia”.⁵ During those same years, the percentage of students from West Virginia remained nearly constant, at 54%.⁶ For a few years, in fact, Storer College had a regional “lock” on advanced education for blacks.

That would change, however, in 1891, when—despite the efforts of Storer’s Board to have it named the state’s land-grant institution—West Virginia legislators voted to establish a new college for that purpose near Charleston. Although the new West Virginia Colored Institute “offered agricultural courses in order to receive its annual federal subsidy, [it] functioned mainly as a normal school”.⁷ The new school dealt a “harsh financial blow” to Storer, which in the aftermath of the legislature’s decision lost “much” of its greatly-needed annual state appropriation.⁸ In 1895, the founding of Bluefield Colored Institute in coal-rich Mercer County multiplied Storer’s problems by siphoning off potential students in the southern portion of the state. Created to provide

⁵ Ibid., 92.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁸ Ibid.

teachers for educating the children of black coal miners, Bluefield Colored Institute thus provided the same sort of Normal training as did Storer. As a result, after 1891, Storer witnessed a decline in its normal school enrollment. During the 1889 – 1891 school years, 186 out of 265 students enrolled at Storer (70%) attended its Normal classes; by 1897-98, that number had dropped to 82 out of 165 (50%).⁹ Clearly, then, the competition presented by two additional educational choices in the region affected Storer’s enrollment, its funding, and decreased its political clout; thus, these statewide decisions were contributing factors to the institution’s “death knell”.¹⁰

Legal Considerations

When determining other factors that might have led to the demise of Storer College, one must consider several legal issues. To begin with, the “Establishment Clause” in the United States Constitution defines the separation of church and state. Therefore, the West Virginia Legislature was treading a very fine line when it continued to appropriate monies to Storer College. The fact that it was for a time the only school for blacks in the state made such an endeavor on the part of the West Virginia legislature more justifiable, as appeals from the minority community provided no uncertain impetus; however, that justification was soon nullified by the creation of the West Virginia Colored Institute and the Bluefield Colored Institute, both of which offered education for Negroes without the deeper dimensions of religious affiliation that had become the accepted *modus operandi* for Storer’s developmental processes over time.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Richard I. McKinney, President, Storer College, *Preliminary Research Interview: Richard I. McKinney*, Audiovisual Transcription (Baltimore, MD, December 21, 1999).

In addition, and perhaps more ominous for Storer's prospects, came legal news that on its surface should not have been anything but welcome to anyone who supported equality for minorities: the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas* decision, which legally and effectively ended segregation. Although its full realization was slow in coming, with that decision integration of schools became a national mandate, and the state of West Virginia could no longer justify Storer's annual monetary appropriation. At the Board of Trustees meeting in the spring of 1955, the announcement was made that West Virginia "declined to continue Storer College's \$2,000 appropriation".¹¹ Although that figure seems impossibly small to modern ears, to Storer it was a goodly sum—and certain money, for which the school did not have to search. Moreover, *Brown vs. Board of Education* meant that minority students could now attend the schools of their choice, not merely regional institutes or denominational colleges prefaced by the title "colored," so the actual need for Storer College—at least in its present incarnation—was reduced dramatically. Since the school was already in extreme financial ruin at this stage, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, coupled with the decision of the legislature, verified or articulated openly that which the board had been discussing but had not wanted to accept: that Storer College had to dismantle its classrooms, liquidate its furniture and fixed and real properties, lock up its classrooms, secure its buildings, and forever close its doors.

¹¹ Gozdizik and et al., *A Historic Resource Study for Storer College*, 222; Free Will Baptists, Storer College Archives, A & M 2621, BX 27, FF 2, Storer College Book of Trustee Annual Minutes, 1955, West Virginia & Regional History Collection, Wise Library, West Virginia University.