

CHARLES H. THOMPSON



POLICY ENTREPRENEUR OF
THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, 1932–1954



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This book is dedicated to my mother, Hattie Hobbs,
to my wife, Muriel A. S. Grimmett,
to my mentor, Henry J. Perkinson,
and to the memory of my mentor, Carroll Lee Liverpool Miller.

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Prologue

In the winter of 1963, at the beginning of the new year, Charles H. Thompson, founder and editor of the *Journal of Negro Education*, reflected on events occurring in the nation's capital and in communities across the nation. As the new year unfolded, African Americans celebrated the centennial of Abraham Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation; in many places they did so uproariously, very much as historians depicted the celebration of the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia on April 16, 1862. In an editorial innocuously entitled "The Centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation," Thompson chronicled events from the perspective of a scholarly journal editor, a distinguished college educator, and a skilled historian.¹

Emancipation had radically reshaped human relations about thirty years before Thompson's July 19, 1895 birth in Jackson, Mississippi, and many of the events that he discussed in the editorial had occurred within his lifetime. In a sense, Thompson's editorial reviewed the ideas and events that had powerfully informed the African American experience as well as his particular approach to education and public policy. The teacher in him complained that too many of the celebrants misapprehended the purpose and scope of Abraham Lincoln's war measure. Indeed, they were confusing the Emancipation Proclamation with the Thirteenth Amendment that ended slavery in the United States some three years later. Their belief in Lincoln as the Great Emancipator, thus, rested upon a misunderstanding.² Writing eight months before the death of W. E. B. Du Bois in recently independent Ghana and the historic August 1963 March on Washington, Thompson sought to correct what he perceived as a fundamental misreading of American history. In the space of five pages, he assessed the slow, uneven progress made by generations of African Americans from the shackles of slavery to legal equality in the sixth decade of the twentieth century.

In doing so, he pointed out that Lincoln, in his first proclamation on September 22, 1862, warning of the policy shift to come and in his second proclamation of January 1, 1863, had reaffirmed his support for colonization. Lincoln also had gone on record as supporting gradual abolition and monetary compensation for the slaves of the slaveholders who remained loyal to the Union. The integration of more than four million ex-slaves into that Union worried Lincoln because his nineteenth century notions of law acknowledged human beings held against their will as slaves were effectively forms of capital and property. By limiting the abolition of slavery to the several states then in rebellion against the Union, Lincoln sought to deliver a knockout blow to the Confederate economy; by limiting the abolition of slavery, he also sought not only to intensify its effect, but to shoo reluctant states back into the Union.

By surgically limiting the abolition of slavery to the states comprising the Confederacy, Lincoln intended to demonstrate that he was a just and prudent commander in chief.³ His primary goal was preserving the Union: if abolishing slavery in the states then in rebellion was necessary to preserve the Union, so be it; however, if slavery and allegiance to the Union could coexist like a hand in a finely stitched glove, he would embrace that arrangement, too.

Thompson also argued that moral and humanitarian concerns reshaped military policy as well as public policy during the Civil War and that the Civil War demonstrated that the social contract was flexible, dynamic, and capable of expansion far beyond nineteenth century notions:

The conflict which began as a "white man's war" to save the Union, with the Negro as an irrelevant bystander, was on its way to being changed to a struggle to free upward of four million slaves, with the indispensable aid of 186,000 black soldiers.⁴

Thus, he implied, a valid understanding of history was essential for assessing African Americans' social progress and for focusing energy, attention, and resources on socially worthwhile goals. Accordingly, he envisioned the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation as a superb occasion for gaining the historical perspective that would allow marginal groups such as African Americans to participate as equals in the democratic experiment. He urged his readers to have their children and students read or re-read Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, arguing that the reward for their efforts would be the discovery that

whatever progress the Negro has made in attaining even a legal status of equality has been due to political expedience on the one hand and a few unequivocal egalitarians like Charles Sumner, on the other.⁵

Indeed, as Shakespeare eloquently surmised, misery doth make for strange bedfellows.

This book examines the editorial stance of Charles Henry Thompson, “unequivocal egalitarian.” Together with likeminded advocates, Thompson worked assiduously as editor of the *Journal of Negro Education* from 1932 to 1963 to advance a more democratic notion of the United States. Throughout these years, he sought to discredit and eventually nullify racial segregation as public policy in the United States. He served as a “policy entrepreneur,” developing the research and marshalling and timing the arguments for advancing civil rights; he worked tirelessly to shape public opinion within and beyond Afro-America in support of an extension of freedom for all Americans; and he thereby contributed to the expansion of freedom and democracy on the international scene.

The political scientist John Kingdon has defined a “policy entrepreneur” as “an advocate distinguished by his or her singular willingness to invest their resources—time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money” to realizing their vision of the future in terms of a desired public policy.⁶ Thompson had these qualities in large supply: he did his homework; he developed and maintained sound data regarding the pervasive discrimination that inevitably accompanied racial segregation; and he tirelessly engaged in the reading, research, social networking, and politics necessary for launching and sustaining a leading scholarly journal. Thompson’s interest was not in intellectual pyrotechnics. Instead, he focused on identifying, refining, and synthesizing the best ideas in order to mold public opinion—initially among scholars, and then in the public sphere. He continually scanned the political, social, and policy landscapes to respond to threats, crises, and opportunities and he employed his brilliant intellect, high standards, and a sterling work ethic for more than forty years to become a consummate educational insider and policy entrepreneur.

Thompson understood that it was necessary to engage in politics if one wanted to craft workable solutions to vexing social problems. He attended or testified at hearings and was an expert witness for landmark higher education cases while advocating, publicizing, and lobbying for the policy solutions that he believed were feasible and just. He did this work in order to be prepared when a policy window might suddenly fly open. On the rare occasions when this occurred, Thompson thrust preferred solutions to the top of the policy agenda with the support of politicians and other decision makers. Although such proposals might languish atop the policy agenda unless their sponsors secured enough votes to ensure implementation, Thompson was a resourceful public intellectual whose leadership and work highlight the courage, political astuteness, and ethical resolve that grounded many leaders of the twentieth century civil rights struggle.

Thompson expressed his views in editorials that were crisp, pungent, and hard-hitting. The *Journal of Negro Education* (henceforth referred to as the *Journal*) was eminently readable and accessible to readers with a high school education, and portrayed the modern civil rights struggle's major actors and events as they chronicled its highs and lows. More importantly, his editorials dissected and analyzed the major policy proposals advanced by the proponents of segregation and desegregation alike. Thus, Thompson's *Journal* editorials provide an informed, candid, and nuanced diary of a sustained thirty-two-year effort to nudge the United States to the fuller realization of its democratic precepts.

Thompson's efforts, as well as the efforts of the other "unequivocal egalitarians" who befriended him, formed an important phase of the civil rights struggle that analysts today often overlook. Because he focused on ideas and public policies rather than the dramatic events publicly associated with major breakthroughs, these contributions have tended to fade from view.

Yet, educational and policy research such as that practiced by Thompson formed the bedrock of the litigation and direct action campaigns that brought change, and his approach, example, and insights therefore remain relevant. Although scholars looked to the *Journal* and its editorials for guidance, direction, and affirmation, Thompson's contributions often go unnoticed precisely because his skill lay in directing attention to the issues rather than to himself. However, it was this skill for highlighting the contributions of others that allowed Thompson to sustain the support of intellectuals who were bitter rivals often competing for recognition and rewards that were scarce.

Thompson's particular gift was his ability to focus his thinking and action upon the advancement of equal educational opportunity and social justice. Contemporaneous activists admired his example of fearless, selfless leadership as he made the case for equal citizenship rights in a land that regarded itself as the world's leading democracy and yet casually acknowledged various classes and categories of citizenship. Thompson assessed arguments on their merits: it mattered little to him whether it was hard-line segregationists or a frustrated

W. E. B. Du Bois who authored proposals favoring segregation. With a patience that is scarcely imaginable today, Thompson painstakingly gathered, published, and coaxed into existence a coherent research literature capable of undermining racial segregation as public policy. He stayed at this task throughout the Great Depression, World War II, and the advent of the Cold War, working relentlessly until a policy window unexpectedly opened and the postwar civil rights struggle ushered in a national and international era of freedom.

Historians have described the dawn of the twentieth century as a time when science superseded religion as a major force in American life. With a near religious fervor, Thompson used social science research to enhance the

prospects and living conditions of marginalized and disfranchised Americans. This commitment to democracy and social engineering is all the more remarkable for Thompson's having been born in Mississippi, which was arguably the poorest and the most repressive state in the Union at the turn of the twentieth century. Interestingly, historian Michael R. Winston attributed the sharp edges of Thompson's realism to his birthplace, explaining that the harshness of race relations in Mississippi helped Thompson to understand the central role of political expedience in United States history. Whatever the case, Mississippi would repeatedly symbolize the nadir of race relations and the apogee of segregation, racial discrimination, and educational inequality throughout Thompson's career.

This study focuses on Thompson's editorial thought because his *Journal* editorials constitute his major tool for mobilizing activists and shaping public opinion in more humane directions. This is the story of Thompson's use of research, publicity, the scholarly journal, and persistence to sustain one of the most successful ventures in public policy in the twentieth century. The *Journal* provided strong support for the innovative work of Charles Hamilton Houston who used the law as a tool for forging public policies consistent with American notions of participatory democracy and equality. Moreover, it led a generation of scholars, African American and white, to join Thompson and Houston in doing the careful and painstaking work that eventually overturned racial segregation as public policy in the United States.

NOTES

1. Charles H. Thompson, "The Centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation," *Journal of Negro Education* 32, no. 1 (Winter 1963): 1–5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2294485>.
2. *Ibid.*, 4.
3. *Ibid.*, 3.
4. *Ibid.*, 5.
5. *Ibid.*
6. John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2003), 122–124.

Chapter One

Charles Henry Thompson: The Early Years, 1895–1925

Unequivocal egalitarians such as Charles Sumner had long vanished from the American political scene by the time Charles Henry Thompson was born on July 19, 1895.¹ Death had also silenced Frederick Douglass' voice on February 20 of that year, at the end of a day Douglass had spent excoriating his audience about their lax attitudes toward civil rights. By 1895, the nation had grown weary of sectionalism; it wanted to forget the implications of a Civil War that had prodded a reluctant Lincoln into freeing four million slaves and initiating an unprecedented experiment in democracy. Having preserved the Union, historian James D. Anderson argued, Northern industrialists were eager to exploit the material wealth and human capital of the South. They were interested in introducing subtle methods of social control and cooling the racial climate to the point where commerce and capital could flow unmolested. If segregation, discrimination, disfranchisement, and white supremacy were the cost of doing business in the South, then, they were willing to sacrifice African Americans' civil rights. According to Anderson, Northern industrial capitalists such as Andrew Carnegie, George Eastman, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., and retailer Robert C. Ogden shared a belief in white supremacy with white Southerners. They, too, regarded African Americans as useless except for their value as unskilled laborers capable of rescuing King Cotton. What were a few African American sharecroppers' votes to men bent upon dominating the world?²

By 1895, African Americans had had more than thirty years to understand that they inhabited a complex, hostile world. The years following Emancipation taught African Americans to learn forbearance. They learned to change what they could, but to wear the mask of perseverance, often mistaken for indifference toward issues beyond their control. Nevertheless, even this stat-

us that Benjamin Quarles called quasi-freedom significantly expanded African Americans' sphere of operation beyond that of slavery. Emancipation gave them fuller access to literacy, commerce, and culture. As Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has noted, the ex-slaves made good use of this freedom developing a national culture within thirty years of Emancipation.³ Family life provided some respite for African Americans even during the nadir of the African American experience. Charles Henry Thompson's parents raised him in such an environment.

Thompson was the only child of his loving parents, the Reverend Patrick H. and Mrs. Sara E. Thompson. He was born into a stable middle class family at the campus of Jackson College—a rare site of interracial cooperation in the state of Mississippi. In 1877, the American Baptist Home Mission Society founded Jackson College connecting a small academic community to the world outside Mississippi through Baptist networks and affiliations. Within two decades of its founding, significant control of the college shifted to African Americans, and by the time of Thompson's birth in 1895, the college's faculty, including Thompson's parents, was entirely comprised of African Americans.⁴ When the American Baptist Home Mission Society celebrated its 125th anniversary in spring 1958, Thompson commended its role in the development of African American higher education during Reconstruction as follows:

The graduates of these institutions have demonstrated that those pioneers who conceived of higher education for ex-slaves were not the doctrinaires or fanatics that anti-Negro propaganda tried to make them appear. History has more than justified their faith. And, this faith and the movement which it started for Negroes were one of the most significant heritages of Reconstruction. Just as important, however, is the fact that Negroes have never ceased to be grateful to the organizations which exhibited this faith in those dark days and acted upon it.⁵

An African American college such as Jackson College was more than a place of learning in the nineteenth century. It was a symbol, a fortress, an oasis, a form of cultural capital and the hub of a social network. It also served as a social agency and a cultural center for a people isolated by segregation. On May 15, 1947, as an expert witness at the landmark trial known of as *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), Thompson recounted his early educational experiences as follows: "I attended an elementary school, private Baptist school in Kosciusko, Mississippi, and graduated from what I thought was a high school."⁶ An intensely private person, Thompson rarely discussed his personal experiences in print.

For a more personal view of teacher and student relationships among African Americans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is helpful to examine the experience of Walter G. Daniel, a protégé of

Thompson. The historians Richard Bardoph and Willie T. Howard, Jr., relate that six of the eight Daniel siblings earned baccalaureate degrees and five of these six earned the Ph.D.; and that one of them, Robert Prentiss Daniel, after earning his doctorate at Teachers College, Columbia University, became the second African American elected to the presidency of Shaw University.⁷ Bardolph described the Daniels' penchant for organization:

The family was formally organized, with a chairman, a secretary, treasurer and other officials, and at the death of the elder Daniel, when Robert was fourteen, the organization efficiently coordinated family efforts to put each through college, to cooperate in home-buying, and other joint undertakings.⁸

Like Thompson, Walter Daniel was the second generation of his family to attend college and both of his parents had been educators. Daniel once declared that much of his life had been spent on or near a college campus.⁹ Daniel stressed the importance of mentoring, respect and social networking to African American survival. In spring 1990, he recalled the advice of his seventh grade teacher, the late Albert V. Norrell, Sr., an African American teacher who Daniel described as “an [able] veteran of the school system.” According to Daniel, while emphasizing academics, Norrell also

stressed discipline, social behavior, and how to get along with people. To this day I remember well his advice: ‘Make friends, make friends with every dog for, some day, a friend or a dog may save your life.’¹⁰

African American students during the period under discussion learned that access to African American social networks was essential for survival. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has described respectability as a core value of the social networks controlled during the period by middle-class or middle-class aspiring African Americans.

As Thompson wrote in spring 1958, the African American college was a declaration in brick and mortar that “the ceiling of Negro ambition was not to be limited by his status at the time [circa Reconstruction] nor his previous condition.”¹¹ Simply put, the job of an African American college was to produce leaders capable of working effectively as racial intermediaries, teachers, and ministers. Jackson College had been founded in 1877 on the belief that there should be no ceiling on African American aspirations that could be achieved by diligence and merit. Its founders reasoned that collegiate education modeled after the antebellum New England college had done well for the nation, and therefore the same model of collegiate education was appropriate for producing leaders who would minister to the needs of an impoverished people formerly held in bondage. In its early years, Jackson College relocated from rural Mississippi to the more congenial climate of the state capital, Jackson, Mississippi, and during Thompson's youth, the college

held classes near the heart of downtown Jackson, in the Farish Street District, segregated hub of commerce, professional offices, and residences consisting of more than 580 buildings.¹²

From his testimony, we know that Thompson learned about the destructiveness of racism firsthand, as a child. According to Richard Bardolph, leading citizens accorded the Reverend Patrick H. Thompson privileges usually reserved for whites. In recounting several stories about race relations in Jackson told to him by Thompson, Bardolph notes that once, when a white salesperson publicly insulted Mrs. Sara E. Thompson, “the sheriff himself smiled when the elder Thompson thrashed him.”¹³ On the other hand, one of the searing memories of Thompson’s youth was his recollection of a banker’s off-the-cuff remark to Thompson’s father, “Thompson, it’s a shame you’re a nigger.”¹⁴

Bound by obligations, the Thompsons enjoyed none of the boons of citizenship and far into his adulthood Thompson recalled this episode as one of the defining moments of his life. The psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum argues that such experiences often mark the development of racial identity in African American youth; in Thompson’s case, this experience led him, instead, to devote his life to exorcising the demons of racism from the larger society.¹⁵

As later chapters will detail, as late as the 1930s very few high schools existed for African American students in the South, and so a promising student like Thompson found it necessary to leave home and travel long distances to obtain a high school and college education at added expense, out-of-state. According to Michael R. Winston, the Thompsons, devout Baptists, believed that it was not only logical but their duty to send their son to the best Baptist college open to African Americans. They chose Virginia Union University located in Richmond.¹⁶ The merger that had resulted in Virginia Union was scarcely more than a decade old when Thompson arrived in Richmond in 1911.¹⁷ Union was a small, intimate community anchored by reverence for the Baptist faith, by hard work, and by a fervent belief in the liberating powers of education. According to Raymond Gavins, in 1910, Union consisted of “an academy of preparatory instruction and manual crafts, a liberal arts college, and a theological department.”¹⁸ In 1910, “when Du Bois rated it sixth among the 11 best black colleges,” Union enrolled 240 students taught by 15 faculty members.¹⁹

When Thompson first set foot onto the stunning campus of Virginia Union, it was still under construction. An example of “late-Victorian Romanesque Revival style,” Union’s: “nine gray granite buildings, [were] artistically spaced on thirty acres along North Lombardy Street and Brook Turnpike [a bridge joining the] campus of Hartshorn Memorial College,” made the campus at the turn of the century “a Richmond tourist attraction” according to Gavins.²⁰