

Berea College and Southern African American Educational Development (1855-1912)

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Background

Berea College, in Berea, Kentucky, is a four-year, secondary education institution established in 1855 by abolitionist John Gregg Fee. From its opening, the college has been a racially-integrated institution.

1855-1861

As the first racially-integrated college in the South, Berea brought a unique perspective to African American education. In offering the first class in 1855, the college's leaders supported the idea that higher education should be coupled with training in life-skills. Even today, all students work to support their studies on campus. From the start, Berea served economically disadvantaged white Appalachian and African American students alike, believing everyone deserved an affordable education.

1861-1899

Berea was closed for a brief period before the Civil War. The college was a target for racial prejudice and people demanding that the institution close or transition to whites-only education.

In 1866, Berea College reopened, offering a full class to students of both races. It was one of the few racially-integrated colleges during these troubled times in the South, providing advanced education for African American students without a lower standard found in most similar institutions. Historian and journalist Carter G. Woodson, the son of enslaved parents, was graduated from Berea and in time established "Negro History Week," the precursor to Black History Month.

1899-1912

Even after a state legislative bill (the so-called Day Law) in 1904 forced segregation upon Berea, the college worked to set aside funds specifically for African American students and, in 1912, established Lincoln Institute in the city of Louisville to provide comparable education for African American students.

Was Berea A Perfect School for the South's African American Students?

Despite the college's dedication to racially-integrated education, it has a history of prejudice within its walls.

In the 1890's, Berea transitioned to a new president who believed that the college would be stronger if it was segregated, like most Southern colleges during the Jim Crow era, and had a strong dislike toward Black educators. In those years, James Sheldon Hathaway, a Black Tutor at the institution for almost a decade, was replaced, intentionally, with a white professor, despite student protest. The college's president claimed there was "no African American alternative available." Hathaway went on to take a lead in Black education in the state.

Prejudicial treatment like that complicated African American education at Berea.



Sources

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