

Biographical Summary of James Yadkin Joyner (1862-1954)

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- Graduated University of North Carolina, 1881
- Dean, State Normal and Industrial College at Greensboro, 1893-1902
- North Carolina Superintendent of Instruction, 1902-1918
- Ex-officio Chair of the Board of Trustees, East Carolina Teachers Training School, 1907-1918
- Member, ECTTS Board of Trustees, 1922-1925

Summary:

James Yadkin Joyner was a central figure in the history of North Carolina education and in the early history of East Carolina Teachers Training School. He spearheaded Governor Charles B. Aycock's educational reforms, led the state's public school system during the most massive expansion in its history, and lent considerable influence to lobbying the legislature to create ECTTS. He was also a key player in the debates over universal education and funding for African-American schools. His legacy as a proponent of equal education for all, though real, is complicated by his acceptance of segregation and race-specific schooling

Background and Early Life:

Born in the western county of Yadkin, Joyner moved to the east as a child and spent most of his formative years there. He attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he made connections with many future leaders such as Charles Aycock, Charles McIver, and George Winston. As a teacher, school administrator, and college dean, Joyner became an eager apostle of the latest ideas in school reform and teacher training, concepts he took with him when his friend Governor Aycock appointed him Superintendent of Public Instruction in 1902. Joyner spend much of the next two decades leading a revolution in state education policy.¹

¹ George-Anne Willard, James Yadkin Joyner, NCPedia <http://ncpedia.org/biography/joyner-james-yadkin> (retrieved February 16, 2015); Gregory P. Downs, "University Men, Social Science, and White Supremacy in North Carolina," *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (May 2009), 271-273

Joyner's Views on Race:

The University of North Carolina was, at the time of Joyner's time there, a hotbed of intellectual racism, and many of Joyner's classmates and teachers went on to become vocal white supremacist politicians.² Joyner, however, did not follow this path. As a member of the white male elite in the Jim Crow South, Joyner shared many of the racial suppositions of his time, but his views of race tended toward the paternalistic and condescending rather than the vitriolic and violent. He certainly embraced the elevated view of the white race as the essential representative of progress, advancement, and civilization. He praised "the native capacity of Southern children through whose veins courses the purest strain of Anglo Saxon blood on the continent – the cleanest blood on earth . . ."³ And he implicitly embraced the connection between education, white literacy, and political power. For instance, when preaching the necessity for universal education, Joyner decried the fact the "140 out of every thousand white voters [are] unable even to read their ballots – an army marching under the black banner of ignorance . . . a menace to all that is best in civilization in a democracy."⁴ In linking white literacy to political power, Joyner at least implicitly validated the disfranchisement amendment of 1900, as when he stated in one speech that "the weaker race" had lost the suffrage "on account of [their] unfitness to exercise it."⁵

Joyner's views on the capacities and limitations of black people were complex and sometimes contradictory. In an undated speech in his private papers, he speculated on the impact of history on black development. Although he praised the end of slavery as an advancement, he also stated that emancipation at the end of the Civil War had "clothed them [black men] with the full rights of citizenship but it did not – it could not – fit them for the intelligent discharge of the solemn responsibilities of that citizenship." Elsewhere, Joyner called blacks "a child race" that was "a weak imitation of ours," possessing only "the flimsiest veneering of real culture."⁶

² Downs, "University Men."

³ Undated speech, James Yadkin Joyner Papers, (#345), East Carolina Manuscript Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina, USA. Box #6 (hereinafter Joyner Papers)

⁴ James Yadkin Joyner, "Address of Hon. J.Y. Joyner, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Before the North Carolina Press Association at Montreat, July 1, 1915." (Publisher not identified, 1915), 2

⁵ North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, *Biennial Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of North Carolina: 1900-1901 and 1901-1902*, (Raleigh: North Carolina Dept. of Public Instruction 1902), xi

⁶ Undated speech on "the Negro Problem," Joyner Papers, Box #6; *Biennial Report*, vii

On the one hand, Joyner's view of the inherent limitations of black people was tempered by his belief in environmentalism. Blacks may have been rendered inferior by history and natural characteristics, but for Joyner this did not mean that they were fated to ever be so. He believed that blacks could eventually become worthy of citizenship rights "through the elevating power of mental, moral and industrial education." And although he implicitly supported the necessity of disfranchisement, he also stated that "to take away from a weaker race by constitutional amendment the right to suffrage . . . and then virtually deprive that race . . . of the means of ever acquiring the fitness for the exercise of that right, would do violence to the conscience of the civilized world." Clearly, Joyner could envision blacks taking a role as full citizens once the necessary preparation had occurred through education. It was for this reason that Joyner insisted on the development of black public schools and teacher training through black normal schools.⁷

However, even accepting the conditional and gradualist nature of Joyner views of black advancement, his views on race were condescending, paternalistic and limited by bigotry. On the most basic level, Joyner accepted without question the need for the schools to be segregated by race. His belief in racial separation even extended to volunteer educational activities. When a group called The Women's Association for the Betterment of Public Schoolhouses and Grounds asked to allow a black women's auxiliary to attend their annual meeting in 1905, Joyner forbade it, saying the white and black women's groups should remain "severely distinct and separate." Although he embraced schooling for black children, he also subscribed to the notion of race-specific curricula tailored to black limitations, and he felt "trying to enforce upon the Negro race . . . with different racial traits and endowments, the same sort of education [that whites had]" was contrary to nature. He argued that education for blacks should be focused on "the industrial and the agricultural" subjects, and that African-Americans needed to be carefully "educated to work and not away from work" in order to "save him from idleness." In voicing these beliefs, Joyner echoed some elements of the racist creed that education could "spoil" blacks for fieldwork. Moreover, Joyner's view of the necessity of black education was often rooted in assumptions about the need for schools to tame the "savagery" of black people. "Who can estimate the danger that lurks in such a mass of ignorance, if these Negroes are left uneducated?" Joyner warned. "Without education," he continued, "the great mass of Negroes would sink to a state of animal brutality. Turn such a wild horde loose among our people . . . controlled by the passions of animals without the power to restrain them that comes from proper education, and our only safety will lie in extermination. With the negro it must be elevation through proper education or extermination."⁸

⁷ "The Negro Problem," Joyner Papers, Box #6; *Biennial Report*, xi

⁸ Quoted in Richard Barry Westin "The State and Segregated Schools: Negro Public Education in North Carolina, 1863-1923," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 1966), 185; *Biennial Report*, ix-x

Therefore, Joyner's views of ethnicity featured a benevolent, superior white race that had a duty to uplift a limited but improvable black race. The fact that he could use some of the same fear-mongering to encourage support for black education that white supremacists used to strip voting rights from blacks is one of the many peculiarities of the Jim Crow era.

Joyner and the Debate Over School Funding:

Joyner's complicated racial views are best exemplified in the debate over equal funding for black and white schools that occurred during the first years of his tenure as Superintendent. When he proposed his massive school expansion campaign at the beginning of his term, Governor Aycock faced much opposition from fellow Democrats, some of whom opposed education for blacks in principle, and others of whom believed in strict separation of funding sources for black and white schools – with black schools being funded exclusively by tax receipts from black citizens. Because this would have guaranteed that impoverished black communities would have vastly unequal funding for their schools, Governor Aycock opposed this separation, and indeed threatened to resign the Governorship over the issue. Joyner publicly supported Governor Aycock. He frequently advocated for increased funding for black schools, and touted increases in such funding as one of the touchstones of his administration. Joyner's advocacy for joint funding of white and black schools seems to mark him as a progressive who fought for universal education in the face of opposition from white supremacists.⁹

However, many scholars have recently reinterpreted the Aycock/Joyner legacy on this issue to reveal a more complicated picture. Even though he supported more equal funding in his public rhetoric, it is also clear that Joyner was willing to give a wink and a nod to white supremacists in order to further his broader goals for education. When asked in a private communiqué if a school district could still “discriminate vs. the negro” even under the new funding guidelines, Joyner responded affirmatively. When others questioned the need for equal funding for black schools, Joyner agreed to the extent that “the negro schools can be run for much less expensive and should be. In most places it does not take more than a fourth as much to run the negro schools as it does to run the white schools.” The reason? Because, Joyner argued, “the salaries paid teachers [in the negro schools] are *very properly* much smaller, the houses are cheaper . . . This can be done for the Negro at very little expense.” Revealingly, when publicly challenged on unequal funding by a white school administrator, Joyner

⁹ James L. Leloudis, *Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self and Society in North Carolina, 1880-1920*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 177-179; Elmer D. Johnson, “James Yadkin Joyner: Educational Statesman,” *North Carolina Historical Review*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 3 (July, 1956), 367-369

scoffed at the idea that such inequality existed, and instead claimed that his administration had been supportive of black schools. Clearly, Joyner was trying to play both sides of the race issue in order to attain what he surely thought was the greater good for education. But whether Joyner was simply trying to re-assure racist opponents for political reasons, or whether unequal school funding reflected his deep beliefs about the need for “different” education for whites and blacks, his behavior during the funding controversy shows him trading on the expectation that wide material disparities between white and black schools would remain a feature of the new system. It is impossible, therefore, to regard Joyner’s legacy as simply one of equal education for all races, despite the many progressive, even liberal features of his worldview on education.¹⁰

Joyner and ECTTS:

As perhaps the preeminent educational leader in the state at the time of East Carolina Teachers Training School’s founding, Joyner’s influence as an advocate for ECTTS was significant. He lobbied the legislature in coordination with other leaders such as Thomas J. Jarvis, William H. Ragsdale, and James Lawson Fleming. He supported the formation of the school by serving on the Board of Trustees. He was a frequent speaker at ECTTS events. Although his role was probably less crucial than that of other founders, he still was an important player in the origins of the school.¹¹

As readers of previous of these summaries will realize, it is important to note that ECTTS was founded as a segregated institution, and envisioned a way to specifically target white teachers for service in white communities. Certainly Joyner supported this essential concept, even though he also supported separate training for black teachers at their own normal schools. This must also be remembered when evaluating Joyner’s legacy.

¹⁰ Quoted in J. Morgan Kousser, “Progressivism – For Middle-Class Whites Only: North Carolina Education, 1880-1910,” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (May, 1980) 186; See also Richard Barry Westin, “The State and Segregated Schools,” 198; George-Willard, “Charles Lee Coon: North Carolina Crusader for Social Justice,” (M.A. Thesis, East Carolina University, 1966) 87-117

¹¹ Mary Jo Bratton, *East Carolina University: The Formative Years: 1907-1982* (Greenville: East Carolina University Alumni Association, 1985) 26-37

Conclusion:

James Yadkin Joyner was a key figure in the history of North Carolina. He represented all the promise and the limitations of the state progressive leadership at the turn of the century. Given the complexity of his views on race and education, it would be ahistorical to view him either as a champion of racial equality or an unreconstructed white supremacist. Rather, his views place him squarely in the mainstream of white Southern progressive thought at the turn of the century, with all that entails.