Early Boycotts of Segregated Schools: The East Orange, New Jersey, Experience, 1899-1906

AUGUST MEIER AND ELLIOTT M. RUDWICK

Controversy over the issue of school segregation in the North is nearly as old as the history of American public education. Negroes have protested repeatedly against separate schools and classes, and on occasion in the past they even engaged in what would today be called direct action. In 1899 and again in 1905-1906 East Orange, New Jersey, was the scene of Negro protest against public school segregation. In the 1905 instance the colored citizens staged a boycott and established a counterpart of today's "freedom schools," rather than permit their children to attend separate classes.

With a population of 21,506 in 1900, East Orange was a wealthy and growing suburb of Newark. The Negro community of 1,420, two thirds of whom were females, was engaged primarily in domestic service. (1) A tiny entrepreneurial and professional class and a few servants in the homes of the wealthiest white families formed a Negro upper class in East Orange and neighboring Orange. The social and institutional life of East Orange's Negro community centered around the churches, which supplied much of its leadership and which were mainly Baptist: "fashionable" Calvary, "respectable" Mt. Olive, and the "shouting Baptist" North Clinton Street Church, which catered mainly to the newly arrived, lower-class Southern migrants.

Mr. Meier is Professor of History at Roosevelt University; Mr. Rudwick is Professor of Sociology at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville.
As will be observed later, the cleavage between the lower-class Negroes of the North Clinton Street Baptist Church and the "respectable" Negroes and leaders of the other churches was to limit the effectiveness of the protest against school segregation. In contrast to the civil rights movement of the middle 1960's, which articulates the aspirations and moods of the masses, the East Orange protest of the turn of the century was clearly a middle- and upper-class movement, and its leadership was drawn chiefly from an elite of "old" East Orange and Orange families. (2)

The two attempts to segregate Negro pupils at the turn of the century occurred at a time when East Orange's population was growing fairly rapidly and its Negro population was increasing in a striking manner. The number of whites rose 24 percent, from 19,927 in 1895 to 25,175 a decade later, while the number of Negroes increased from 1,112 to 2,680 in the same period, a rise of 151 percent. At the same time the Negro elementary school population exhibited an even greater growth. Merely in the half dozen years between 1899 and 1905 it nearly doubled from 368 to 312. (3)

Many East Orange residents resented and feared the increasing proportion of Negro pupils in the town's schools. This was especially true of those whites whose children were enrolled in the lower grades of the schools in which most of the Negro youngsters were enrolled. For although Negroes lived in all wards of East Orange (4) and their children attended all six of the town's elementary schools, they clustered in certain neighborhoods. Over three fourths of the Negro pupils were enrolled in two schools—Eastern and Ashland, (5) and nine tenths of these children were in the first four or primary grades. (6)

By the spring of 1899 more than 11 percent of the students enrolled at Eastern were Negroes (7) and School Superintendent Vernon Davey urged the Board of Education to "experiment" by establishing an "ungraded" class of 25 to 35 "backward colored pupils" drawn from the primary grades at that school. The Board overwhelmingly approved this recommendation and two months later hired Miss Clara W. Burrill, a Negro teacher in Washington, as instructor for the ungraded class. (8) Davey and Board President George S. Hulbert maintained that the new policy was necessitated by the presence in the primary classes of a large number of overage Negro children,
retarded chiefly because of the deficiencies of the Southern schools from which they came. The Board officials held that the purpose of the ungraded class was to improve the students' performance so they could be transferred to regular classes. (9)

The Negro citizens of East Orange were indignant. They suspected that the "experiment" was nothing more than a not-too-subtle entering wedge for the establishment of a completely segregated school system. They contended, moreover, that some clearly average students were placed in the "special" class. (10) At the July meeting of the Board a delegation presented a petition against the new policy. With them came a prominent local attorney and former board member, Joseph L. Munn, who questioned the legality of the plan. The Negroes held numerous meetings at homes and churches. Parents pledged not to send their children to the school if Miss Burrill came, and the family that had agreed to board her withdrew the offer. (11)

When Miss Burrill did arrive at the opening of the school year, Superintendent Davey astutely delayed organizing the colored class, and at first assigned her to give special help to the Negro students in the regular rooms. Toward the end of September, he selected 23 of them for the ungraded primary class. The rest of the 87 Negroes at the Eastern School were not shifted. (12) Immediately Negro leaders called a mass meeting, which drew 200 to Calvary Baptist Church. Speaker after speaker denounced the Board of Education for its "unconstitutional" act promoting "class distinctions" and paving the way for a completely segregated school system. They also attacked Miss Burrill, although she was the first Negro teacher ever employed by the East Orange School Board. J. H. Travis, Calvary's pastor, who chaired the meeting, declared: "The Board of Education are the servants of the citizens and I am not in the broadest sense a Negro, a darkey, or a black man. I am a citizen of the United States." Dr. John A. Stillwell condemned one Board member for saying that "all the Negro children need is sufficient education to make them servants. . . . If you submit to this," the physician continued, "it is worse than slavery." James N. Vandervall, owner of a carpet cleaning company, ironically wondered how such a step could have even been considered "in this banner Republican township." Expressing resentment at the implication that only their children were backward, the Negroes asked why there were no whites in the class for retarded
youngsters. "If they bring the white boys and girls that are stupid and were left behind into Miss Burrill's room, then my child can stay there, but not otherwise," declared a hostler's wife. A number of parents signed a statement demanding that the principal return their children to the regular classes. (13)

As a result of this protest, those who insisted were permitted to have their children reassigned to their original rooms. (14) Several families, however, continued to send their children to the ungraded class. Appalled, protest committee members alternately castigated the erring parents and described them as victims of the superintendent's pressures. Speakers at the mass meetings in October urged that the children withdraw from the class, assured the assembled citizens that prominent whites supported their cause, and warned the Republican party, which controlled the Board, that it would lose the Negro vote. The mass meeting on October 25 directed the protest committee to explore the possibility of taking the case to court. (15)

The Board seemed unconcerned. Hulbert asserted that the Negro committee did not represent the parents who were permitting their children to attend the ungraded class, (16) and indeed the Negro community was not unanimous. At the end of October Mrs. Travis publicly charged that Rev. N. A. Mackey, of the lower-class North Clinton Street Baptist Church, had accepted a three thousand dollar bribe to oppose the protest movement. (17) This denunciation was symptomatic of the protest committee's failure. Though Miss Burrill did not remain in the city for very long, (18) the separate class was retained. In fact, in May 1900 the Board of Education authorized extension of the system to the Ashland School at the discretion of the superintendent. (19)

Nevertheless, the school authorities did not choose to expand the system at that time. Indeed during the school year 1901-1902, the addition of several white children integrated the "backward class." (20) However, while the proportion of Negro pupils in the other four elementary schools declined, it continued to rise at Ashland and Eastern. Accordingly, in the fall of 1905 the Board created a new jim crow class at Eastern, consisting of about 35 first and second graders, and a similar one at Ashland. At the same time, about 150 other Negro pupils in the two schools remained in integrated classes. (21)

Whereas in 1899 a boycott had only been hinted at, in 1905 it
became a reality. Most of the segregated children were removed immediately by their parents. (22) Rev. Travis and Rev. George W. Krygar again opened the Calvary and Mt. Olive Baptist Churches for regular mass meetings. At the one on November 17, Vandervall, whose child had been placed in the new class at Ashland, (23) chided East Orange Negroes for having been asleep since the 1899 controversy, with the result that the new jim crow classes had been instituted. He warned that, if permitted to continue, these classes would prove but the first step on the road to separate streetcars and disfranchisement. (24)

Over a hundred parents and supporters were present when the protest movement's leaders appeared at the meeting of the Board of Education on November 27. A Newark Evening News reporter observed: "The Negro speakers, by their persistency and logic, made many members of the Board waver and cast about for ready answers." Pressed, the Board reluctantly agreed to grant the Negroes a special hearing the coming week; the News termed this decision a "partial" victory for the Negroes. (25)

For this December 4 hearing, the Negro committee came with two prominent Negro lawyers: Alfred B. Cosey of Newark and J. D. Carr, assistant district attorney in New York City. Carr, a leading Negro Democrat, and Vandervall both condemned the prejudice of this "absolutely Republican Board of Education." The meeting was chiefly notable, however, because for the first time the Board permitted the racial motivation for its actions to become overtly evident, thus confirming the Negroes' fears about the Board's original intentions. Passionately denying that he was prejudiced, Hulbert, now the Board's vice president, recalled his childhood among abolitionists. Yet Hulbert conceded that he and his colleagues had been influenced by parents and teachers who contended that the "different temperament" of the Negro children made them unsuitable classmates of the whites. The Board not only ignored the Negroes' appeals for justice and their threats to vote Democratic but unanimously enacted a new set of resolutions that explicitly opened the door for the segregation of Negro students in all the schools of the district: "Whenever a sufficient number of Afro-American pupils are found in any one of the [first four] grades of any school, such pupils may be separately taught." (26)
At a mass meeting the following night, December 5, 1905, the speakers articulated the bitterness and rage that the Board’s latest action engendered. Dr. Stillwell angrily reported having been informed that, if he would withdraw from the fight, his daughter would receive a job in the East Orange school system. Rev. Travis declared that for forty-four years he had “tried to love the white man, but last night all the love was knocked out of me.” His son drew sobs from the audience and was himself overcome with emotion as he described the most recent encounter with the Board. “When, with a satan’s grin akin to the regions of darkness, the superintendent of the public schools sat there last night and heard our complaint, a seed of anarchy, a seed of hatred for the white race, and a seed of revenge was implanted in me. If I had a pistol I really believe that I would have been guilty of murder.” (27)

As a matter of fact, however, there were some prominent whites who at this point were actively championing the Negroes’ cause. Young Travis himself recognized this, for he concluded by saying, “But I think that those thoughts are now overcome, for we see here tonight that we have some white friends.” Two weeks earlier the News had printed an open letter penned by a nationally known resident of Newark, Rev. William Hayes Ward, editor of the Independent. Describing the Board of Education’s policy as “a piece of contemptible white arrogance,” Ward urged the Negroes to educate their children privately rather than submit to public segregation, and he called upon the local white churches to support the Negro cause. (28) The News editorially applauded Ward’s message, and soon afterwards Rev. Walter Hunt of the Orange Unitarian Church also denounced the school board. (29)

More dramatic was the impact of Supreme Court Justice J. Franklin Fort’s unexpected appearance at the December 5 mass meeting described above. Fort, a future governor of the state, had hurried to the meeting as soon as he had read the Newark Evening News account of the school board’s resolutions the previous night. He walked up to the platform and, taking the rostrum, declared: . . . if I were what they call an Afro-American I would die in my tracks before I would submit to this.” (30)

Much encouraged by Fort’s “powerful backing,” (31) the Negroes maintained their boycott and proceeded with plans, which had been
under consideration for some time, to provide instruction for their children at Mt. Olive and Calvary Churches. (32) Fort sought to have his friend and fellow Republican, Mayor William Cardwell of East Orange, intercede with the Board of Education on behalf of the boycotters, but the mayor believed it would be politically unwise to do so. Accordingly the church schools opened as scheduled on December 11. (33)

The mass meetings in December featured several prominent local white speakers, like Rev. Hunt and Rev. Donald D. Munro of the Hawthorne Street Baptist Church. On December 12, Franklin W. Fort, son of Justice Fort and an influential Republican lawyer, joined William Hayes Ward in the pulpit of Calvary Church. On the same evening the audience was heartened by the announcement that financial and moral support had just been offered by Matthias M. Dodd, the ninety-one-year-old former town committeeman, whom local citizens revered as “the father of East Orange.” (34)

Late in December there was a concerted effort to persuade the Republican-dominated City Council to exert pressure on the Board of Education, but the Council blandly refused to take action on the Negroes' petition. (35) Nor was the East Orange Republican Executive Committee willing to act. At its December 7 meeting it had tabled a resolution of committeeman Franklin W. Fort asking the organization to go on record as “unqualifiedly disapproving of the action of the Board of Education in drawing the color line.” Fort vowed to bring up the matter again at the January 2 meeting. On that date, 23 of the committee’s 42 members absented themselves, reportedly out of “a desire not to entangle the committee with the affair.” By a vote of ten to eight, Fort’s resolution was defeated. (36)

At a mass meeting that same evening the Negroes discussed the question of continuing the church schools, which were a serious financial burden. Two mothers stood and promised that even if the struggle lasted a year they would never allow their children to return to Jim Crow classrooms. The meeting decided to continue the schools. It was agreed that the members of Mt. Olive and Calvary churches would help to underwrite the costs, and the chairman of what was now called the Negro-American Protective Association of Essex County, Robert Travis, appointed a woman’s committee which secured pledges from 20 people to contribute fixed amounts each week.
One speaker warned that, if any Negro leader failed to cooperate, his name would be publicized. This comment was intended particularly for the ears of Rev. E. D. Samuels, pastor of the North Clinton Street Church, who, like his predecessor in the 1899 protest, proved to be an accommodator. Samuels had recently resigned from the Protective Association, in sharp disagreement over the boycott. He told Association leaders that they should learn something from his native Richmond, where segregated schools provided employment for Negro teachers.

From the early stages of the boycott there had been considerable talk about the possibility of taking the case to court. City politicians had also been concerned lest protracted litigation result in the state withholding its annual $50,000 school-aid appropriation. At the January 2 mass meeting, Negro spokesmen announced that if they received no satisfaction from an appeal to the county school superintendent they would take the case to court, retaining Justice Fort as their adviser. Alfred Coskey volunteered his legal services gratis. All the Negro leaders seemed to favor legal action. Vandervall, for example, declared that victory in the case would help the Negroes of South Jersey where the schools were completely segregated in most communities. There is no evidence that the case ever went to court. To be sure, since 1881 New Jersey law had provided that no child could be excluded from any public school because of his color, and in 1884 the State Supreme Court had ruled that the town of Burlington, which maintained a dual school system, must admit a Negro child to the school nearest his home. Yet it was evident that the state statute did not explicitly outlaw racially segregated classrooms in a school building.

Thus the issues were clouded in the East Orange situation, and it was probably for this reason that the protest leaders decided to work for a new law instead of going to court. Coskey drafted a bill which some leaders like Vandervall criticized as “too sweeping.” Preferring a law specifically naming East Orange, Vandervall, Stillwell, and Robert Travis planned to redraft the measure. But this effort also proved abortive, and nothing further about it was reported.

It is uncertain why the Negroes never followed through on their legislative efforts. Possibly the failure may have been related to differences among the leaders. For example, one of them, James E.
Churchman, a mortician from Orange, was accused of condoning the segregated school system. Shortly afterward he organized a group of dissident Negro Republicans into a Negro Republican Union of Essex County, and early in February 1906 led fifty of his colleagues in a bolt from the annual meeting of the Essex County Colored Association, an older political club headed by Alfred R. Cosey. When Churchman ran for alderman from the First Ward of Orange in the fall of 1906, his opponents made his alleged support of segregated schools a political issue; Churchman’s backers, however, pledged themselves “not to support any aspirant or candidate who will not agree to use his influence against separate schools or jim crow classrooms.” (42)

Undoubtedly more important than the factionalism that Churchman’s problems reveal was an evident loss of white support. After the first few days in January 1906, indications of white interest pretty much disappeared from the press. Fort’s name in particular was no longer heard in connection with the matter. At the end of the month Cosey and Rev. D. D. Turpeau of the St. John’s Methodist Church in Orange conferred with the governor and attorney-general. Governor Edward C. Stokes apparently simply referred the case to the state department of education; two months later in a letter to Vandervall, he vaguely assured the colored citizens that he was willing to give them every possible support. (43)

Despite the evidence of declining white interest, despite the failure of the protest movement to institute legal action, the school board was faced with a continuing boycott and the necessity of filing with the state superintendent of education a reply to the Negroes’ complaint. Accordingly, on January 22, 1906, the Board rescinded the resolutions passed the previous month, which had explicitly permitted racial segregation in the primary grades. The Board, however, authorized the continuance of the original “ungraded class” in Eastern School and the two new “special classes” at Eastern and Ashland. (44) Three weeks later the News carried a story indicating that a “truce” between the school board and the Negroes had been established. Under the terms of the agreement, the Negro youngsters were to return to schools which they had not attended in the three months since the boycott began. They were to be “received as new pupils” and placed in classes according to the results of entrance examinations. The Negro leaders assumed that the segregated classes would
end, but Superintendent Davey told reporters that examinations were to be given only to those children whose parents specifically asked for them, while the other Negro children would remain in the jim crow class. (45) When the youngsters returned on February 12, even those whose parents requested examinations were placed in the all-Negro class “for at least a few days.” In anger, many parents again withdrew their children from school. (46)

This new boycott notwithstanding, the Board considered itself secure. It officially replied to the complaint the Negro leaders had submitted to state officials by a recital of “the facts of the colored situation up to date.” (47) In March, when Dr. Stillwell publicly protested against the ungraded jim crow class at Ashland School, the principal answered that it was for backward children and contained only Negroes because no backward whites attended the school. Stillwell accused the school board of having broken its promises. (48) However, the Board held its ground. All that the Negroes had actually gained was a reduction in the number of students assigned to the special classes. (49)

Negroes continued their agitation over the spring and summer. When school opened in September 1906, a hundred pupils appeared at Eastern and Ashland, each with a printed card requesting that he be assigned to a regular graded class. Davey, however, insisted on maintaining the jim crow classes. (50) Thereafter, the Negroes appear to have given up their protest.

The attempts of the East Orange school board to institute segregation, even on a limited “experimental” basis, were not an isolated occurrence. On the contrary, they came at a time when sectional reconciliation was bringing many Northerners around to accepting Southern white views on race relations, and the Negroes’ status was deteriorating even in cities like Boston and Cleveland, which had been most liberal in their racial practices. The reluctance of the majority of Republican leaders in East Orange to support the Forts in their stand against the color line is in part a reflection of this change in attitudes.

The old-established Negro leaders, who had undoubtedly been accustomed to a paternalistic benevolence from many of the upper-class whites in the community, were shocked and outraged by the turn of events. Yet in their efforts to reverse the new policy they operated
under certain disadvantages. For one thing, the cultural differences between the lower-class Southern migrants and the "respectable" older residents made unified action by the Negro community difficult. As in other cities, the recent migrants were more willing to accommodate to segregation. For another thing, the Negroes were politically impotent. The factionalism among the Negro politicians was more a reflection than a cause of this condition. More fundamentally, Negroes remained too small a portion of the electorate, and the Negro vote remained too solidly Republican for G.O.P. leaders to be very much concerned about occasional threats to bolt the party. Finally, legal action was an uncertain course for the Negroes to take since the law did not clearly cover the special kind of situation facing them in East Orange.

Accordingly the Negro leaders employed the only means of protest at their disposal—agitation through mass meetings, petitions to the public authorities, and the boycott, which today is a major tool of civil rights activists but at that time was a rarely used device. They received virtually no national publicity. Their only other leverage came from the activity of local white sympathizers. After this withered, the boycott's days were numbered.

In retrospect, the defeat of the Negro protesters would appear to have been almost inevitable, given the social context in which they operated. Even if there had been greater unity among the Negroes, their essential powerlessness as a small minority lacking substantial and sustained support from members of the majority group made their position untenable. The remarkable thing is not that segregated special classes were instituted in the East Orange schools at the turn of the century but that the Negroes were able to resist as effectively as they did.

Notes


2. The prominent members of the 1899 protest movement included Rev. John H. Travis, pastor of Calvary; his son, Robert, graduate of East
Orange High School’s two-year commercial course and later a bookkeeper; Dr. John H. Stillwell, physician and Republican Committee man from Orange; James H. Vandervall, owner of the Essex Steam Carpet Cleaning Company; William Blunt, a coachman; Lee R. Montague, an insurance agent and editor of a local Negro newspaper (the files of which do not exist); Rev. A. P. Cooper, pastor of the “society” St. Paul A.M.E. Church in Orange; Isaiah King, a contractor; and Rev. George W. Krygar, a native of Germany, educated at the Universities of Heidelberg and Berlin, who had migrated to the United States, married a Negro, and became pastor of the Mt. Olive Baptist Church. Most of these men were also prominent in the 1905-1906 movement. Others who became active at that time included Luther Tate, owner of a carpet-cleaning business; Daniel R. Watkins, proprietor of a blacksmith shop; Rev. D. D. Turpeau, pastor of St. John’s Methodist Church in Orange; James E. Churchman, an undertaker and active Republican leader; and Robert Foster, variously listed as a laborer and a gardener. Occupational information was derived mainly from Baldwin’s Directory of the Oranges and Townships of Essex County, editions of 1899-1900, 1901-1902, 1904, 1905-1906, 1908. Additional biographical data and the social standing of the different churches were obtained through interviews with old residents of East Orange and their descendants.

It should be noted that because of limited economic opportunities, the criteria for membership in the middle and upper classes of the Negro community have differed from the criteria employed among whites. This was even more true sixty years ago than it is today. At that time a long history of free ancestry, a respectable, bourgeois style of life, and service in prominent white families or ownership of a modest business such as a barbershop or blacksmith shop accorded one upper-class status along side of the tiny handful of physicians, schoolteachers, and well-educated ministers.

3. For population data, see New Jersey Census, 1895 and 1905, loc. cit.; for figures on school population see Public School Report of East Orange, N. J., 1899-1900 (no imprint, n.d.), p. 27; Annual School Report of the City of East Orange, 1904 (East Orange, 1904), p. 26; and Evening News (Newark), November 28, 1905. (Hereafter cited as Newark News.)

4. See Census, 1895, loc. cit.

5. 135 of the 168 Negro elementary school pupils in 1898-1899 and 188 of the 248 Negro elementary pupils in 1903-1904 were in these two schools. The following chart, drawn from data in the school board reports (see Note 3, above), illustrates the rising proportion of Negro pupils at Ashland and Eastern schools:
The school reports for 1904-1906 do not contain a racial breakdown.

6. Newark News, November 28, 1905. The East Orange elementary schools at the time had an eight-year program divided into two parts of four grades each, primary and grammar. Few East Orange Negroes of that period even completed an eight-year elementary school education, and the number in the high school seldom reached as high as five. *Public School Report... 1899-1900*, p. 27; *Annual School Report... 1903-1904*, p. 26.


8. Board of Education of East Orange, *Minutes*, April 10, June 10, 1899. (Hereafter cited as Board Minutes.)

9. *Ibid.*, April 10, 1899; Newark News, October 7, 1899. See also Newark News, December 5, 1905; Gazette (East Orange), December 7, 1905. (Hereafter cited as Gazette.)


18. Her name does not appear on the list of teachers given in Board Minutes, April 9, 1900.


21. *Ibid.*, November 16, 21, December 7, 11, 1905. For rise in number of children at Eastland and Ashland, see table in Note 5 above.


26. Newark News, December 5, 1905; see also Board Minutes, December 4, 1905.


30. Ibid., December 6, 1905; see also Baltimore, Md., Afro-American, December 23, 1905. On Fort, Justice of the State Supreme Court 1900-1907, and Governor, 1908-1911, see Who Was Who in America, I (Chicago, 1942), 415.
33. Ibid., December 8 and 11, 1905; Gazette, December 14, 1905.
34. Newark News, December 9 and 13, 1905.
35. Ibid., December 23 and 27, 1905.
36. Ibid., January 3, 1906; Gazette, January 4, 1906.
42. Ibid., December 29, 1905, February 9, September 10, 1906.
44. Board Minutes, January 22, 1906; Gazette, January 25, 1906.
45. Newark News, February 12, 1906; see also Board Minutes, February 10, 1906.
47. Board Minutes, February 17, 1906.
49. Ibid., March 27 and 29, 1906.
50. Board Minutes, March 26, April 9, 1906; Newark News, March 29, September 10, 1906; Gazette, September 13, 1906.