

Teaching the Freed People: Selected letters from Nathan Tappan Condol to George Whipple, 1864-1866

American Missionary Association Archives, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University

Born in 1842 either in Connecticut or in Geneva, Nathan Condol was the youngest of William and Chloe Condol's eleven children. In that year, the Condols bought property on High Street near land that Samuel Condol, perhaps a brother, had bought five years earlier. As a child, Condol may have been a student in Henry Highland Garnet's school, held in the High Street chapel across the street from his home. By 1862, he taught in the segregated High Street district school next door to his home. Condol was a subscription agent for the periodical American Missionary, published by the American Missionary Association (AMA). The AMA evidently published a circular recruiting teachers for the freedmen's schools it sponsored and had begun to create in the South.

In 1864, when he was secretary of Geneva's Colored Ladies Freedmen and Soldiers Aid Society (which sent AMA money to help support Condol at Oberlin College), Condol wrote AMA secretary Whipple to express his desire to teach in the South. After repeated requests, Condol was given a school in Aberdeen, Mississippi, in the middle of the cotton-producing "black belt" of the state, which at the time had a larger black than white population. Condol probably taught at the school, named for him, until 1878, when he died in the yellow fever epidemic. He was one of only five African-American New Yorkers to secure a teaching post in the freedmen's schools.

Geneva Sept 13th 1864

Dear Sir,

Yours of the 31st ult is received and would have been answered before had my Pastor been at home, but as soon as convenience offered, I have hastened to reply. I am a single man, aged 23 yrs and have been desirous of assisting in the edification of my race for some time past, but at the present I would require (as I am now teaching in Geneva) Thirty-two (32) dollars per month and to be located in the vicinity of Washington and would engage for six months as required in the circular. The remaining points of interest, I believe, is included in the recommendation from Drs. Goodwin & Wheeler.

Enclosed is Twenty-five cts from the hand of Mrs. Harriet Gayton for the "American Missionary." please send the September number to her.

I would be pleased to hear from you again. Yours &c

Nathan Tappan Condol

Letters of Nathan Tappan Condol and DeWitt C. Allen
reprinted in Kathryn Grover, *Make a Way Somehow: African-
Americans in Geneva, New York 1790-1865* (Geneva, NY: Geneva
Historical Society and the Strong Museum, 1991): 54-8.

Oberlin College Oct 10 1865

Rev. Geo. Whipple

My Dear Sir; — You will remember that a little more than a year ago, the Rev. J. R. Johnson gave my name to the Association, as an applicant to go south as a teacher. At that time I was engaged in teaching a school in Geneva, and have been ever since until I left to come here. I could not longer teach, on the account of being deeply impressed, that my labors were wanted south. I came to Oberlin by the assistance of a few friends, for the purpose of spending a few terms in academical training, and since I have been here, I have been unable to content myself, for the reason of feeling intensely that I am called upon by the Supreme Being, working within, to go immediately south and work in His vineyard. I have just come from Pres Finney [Charles Grandison Finney, founder of Oberlin], whom I have told my feelings, and he advised me to write to the association and procure an appointment to go south.

It is impossible for me to rest contented here. I can not tell you, by letter, how I feel in regard to the matter. I have also expressed my desire, to study for the ministry, but as I am unable to take that course, for the want of means, at present, I beg of you, to give me an appointment to go south, where I may be useful in imparting instruction to those that are in want, and where I can receive enjoyment and rest at ease. I can not live under the state of mind, that I now am in. Every sermon and lecture I hear, seem to be directed right to me, and call upon me to be doing something. Not a moment passes, but what I feel, I am *not* doing my duty. I ask you, therefore, again, to give me an appointment *somewhere* south, I care not where, so long as I know I am working not for myself.

Friends have desired me to teach their schools, here north, but I have been unable to do so, for the above reasons. *I care not about the price, only do by me as you are doing for others.*

Please give me a reply as soon as possible and oblige

Yours very truly

N. Tappan Condol

P. S. I have rec'd the \$25. The same Society has promised to help me on further in my labors for the Freedmen. I am, also, greatly obliged to you for the use of your Scholarship.

Yours & c N. T. C.

Aberdeen April 21st 1866

Rev Geo. Whipple

Dear Bro., You will please pardon me for not writing before. On the 8th of Jan. the First Colored School was organized in Aberdeen, Miss., by the undersigned. During this time, we have had under our supervision 272 scholars, none were advanced more than to read in three letters, t, h, e—the &c. All others in their a b abs or in the Alphabet. Friday afternoon and evening, the 13th inst, we had our First Exhibition. On that day we had scholars reading fluently in the Third Readers, answering questions *half through* Geography No 1, from the beginning, without a failure, and went through the Prog. Tables [tom]. Several of the distinguished Gentlemen of the City were present viz; Dr Jno L. Tindall, an Alderman, Rev. B. B. Barker, Pres. of the Police Court, Prof James Whiteman, Teacher of the White Schools. R. B. [tom]dall Esq and _____ Lozier Esq, all of whom spoke encouragingly to the gathering, which numbered, perhaps, 800, or more. They expressed themselves to be greatly surprised, yet highly pleased (?) with the progress the scholars had made during so short a period (three months) and also remarked, that even now, *our* schools would compare favorably with any school in the state, white or black, *some* informed me that *they* went for the purpose of having *fun*, but I assure you their *fun* was of a different character, than they expected. Bro. [tom; probably Wright] has been teaching with us for three or four weeks.

We could not have got along at *all*, if it had not been for the services rendered us by our Supt. Wright. He is just the man for this place. We have need of just such a man here, so as to answer the many inquiries made by the fault-finding caucasians. We receive a great many abuses, and threats, but mind them not. Our Trust is in the Lord; if we live, we *live*; if we die, we *die*; we have no fears, whatever. Our work ceases neither day or night. When we are not doing one thing, we are doing another. Whatever we procure, we have to *pay* for it, and dearly, too. At the expiration of the exhibition we had a grand Festival, we were not able to get away from the old school house till after eleven o'clk at night. We had the Freedmen's Fire Engine Co. No 2, to wait upon the school, dressed in their uniform, red shirt & black pantaloons. They looked noble. The engine (a small one) was presented to them by their once owners. The Co. numbers 50 men. The Freedmen also have an "African Benevolent Society." The Society has expended, already, over \$300.00 for carrying on the school, such as making repairs around the school building, paying for our board, washing &c. Our general report for the month of March, you have already received, through Bro. Wright. We desire to say more, but time will not permit. We shall endeavor to report monthly hereafter. Please forward the magazine to Aberdeen, Miss. and oblige.

Yours Very Respectfully

Nathan T. Condol

Fighting School Segregation in the North: Entering Geneva Classical and Union School, 1870

Geneva Historical Society Collection

By the 1860s, school district reports and complaints reported in Geneva newspapers made clear that the segregated High Street School did not receive its fair share of public funds. While children in white schools had been distributed into grades, each with its own teacher, High Street School remained one large classroom with one teacher. African-American parents were vocal about the inadequacy of instruction at the school; in one jocular account in the Geneva Gazette, African-American tradesman Albert Arnold was claimed to have said that the school's teacher (almost certainly white) told stories and played a fiddle and that "the children needed a little less fiddlin' and more geografy." George J. Bland claimed the children didn't "learn to speak the English language" at the school.

With the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1870, Geneva's African-Americans pressed their legal claims to equal treatment in the schools. At a December 1869 school meeting, they petitioned the district to permit all children, regardless of "race or color, . . . the same educational advantages and privileges in any of the public schools of Geneva," including the Classical and Union School. The school board agreed to admit African-American students to the school's classical department (what today would be high school) "whenever they could pass an examination." Two letters to the Geneva Courier from a correspondent who called himself "Fair Play" recounted what happened when two young African-American men tested the sincerity of this vow. Referred to in the Courier only as "Brown" and "Allen," the former was probably the twenty-one-year-old Albertis Brown, son of backman William T. Brown; "Allen" may have been the fifteen-year-old Dewitt C. Allen, son of barber G. W. Allen. Fair Play published Brown's statement about his efforts.

I went to the new school house on Monday, the 23d ult., and took seat in the senior department; went with the rest of the school down to the chapel exercises; when I returned Mr. Vail requested all who were in the school for the first time to take seats in front of his desk; four white boys and myself took the seats designated; Mr. Vail recorded *all five* names; Mr. Vrooman [superintendent of the Classical and Union School] came in and invited two of the white boys, who were from the country, out into the hall, where they remained, I should judge, about *three minutes*; on entering the room the white boys were all returned to their seats, and I was requested to follow him down stairs, which I did. He then said to me that the law of the State required that I should pass a certain examination before he could admit me to the school; that the questions he was about to give me were from the "government," and they they required to be answered in writing. He then handed me 14 questions in Geography, which I submitted answers to in one day and a half. I had never been taught in the higher geography except one half term by Miss Chester; she taught the school one term and a half. Tuesday afternoon Mr. Vrooman gave me 14 questions in mathematics, and when I had answered these, he gave me 10 more, making 24 in all; I

do not distinctly remember all of these questions, but I do recollect that there was one in "square root," and that the major portion were in branches I had not been taught in the high street school. I had studied Robinson's Practical Arithmetic but one-half term under Miss Chester's instruction. On Tuesday he gave me 24 questions in grammar, consisting of a long sentence in which certain words were designated to be thoroughly parsed, giving the part of speech, person, number, gender, case, and the rules of syntax by which they were governed. I had never been instructed in this branch but one-half term by Miss Chester. She was the *only* teacher that ever attempted to teach these branches in the High street school that I know of. On Friday Mr. Vrooman said he had submitted the answers to Mr. Chester, and that he had pronounced more than six of each class to be wrong; consequently I had failed to pass the examination. He then advised me to return to the school which I had been attending; that it was *now* provided with a good teacher, and that in time I might be able to pass this examination.