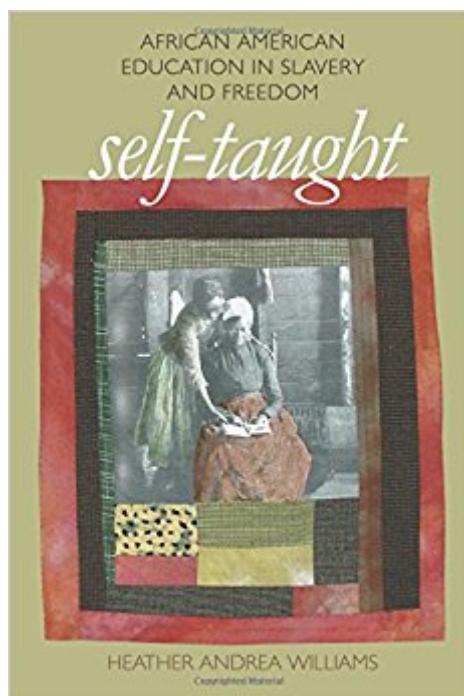


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# **Self-Taught: African American Education In Slavery And Freedom (The John Hope Franklin Series In African American History And Culture)**



## **Synopsis**

In this previously untold story of African American self-education, Heather Andrea Williams moves across time to examine African Americans' relationship to literacy during slavery, during the Civil War, and in the first decades of freedom. *Self-Taught* traces the historical antecedents to freedpeople's intense desire to become literate and demonstrates how the visions of enslaved African Americans emerged into plans and action once slavery ended. Enslaved people, Williams contends, placed great value in the practical power of literacy, whether it was to enable them to read the Bible for themselves or to keep informed of the abolition movement and later the progress of the Civil War. Some slaves devised creative and subversive means to acquire literacy, and when slavery ended, they became the first teachers of other freedpeople. Soon overwhelmed by the demands for education, they called on northern missionaries to come to their aid. Williams argues that by teaching, building schools, supporting teachers, resisting violence, and claiming education as a civil right, African Americans transformed the face of education in the South to the great benefit of both black and white southerners.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

"With great skill, Heather Williams demonstrates the centrality of black people to the process of formal education--the establishment of schools, the creation of a cadre of teachers, the forging of standards of literacy and numeracy--in the post-emancipation years. As she does, Williams makes

the case that the issue of education informed the Reconstruction period--the two-cornered struggle between North and South over the rebuilding of Southern society, the three-cornered struggle between white Northerners, white Southerners, and black people over the nature of education, and the less well-known contest between black Northerners and black Southerners over the direction of African American culture. "Self-Taught is a work of major significance. (Ira Berlin, University of Maryland)"*ÃƒÂ¢ÃÃÂÂ*" passionate historical analysis. . . . Upon finishing "Self-Taught" the reader will be changed."Black Issues Book Review"Beautifully written and cogently argued, "Self-Taught" deserves the attention of all scholars interested in early history of African-American schools."Journal of Economic History"This book is a well-told story of a courageous people's quest to obtain an education."Louisiana History"A book that eloquently places African Americans at the center of the struggle for education."Reviews in American History"This delightfully well-written and swift reading scholarly monograph may well be considered a classic in its field."Civil War Book Review"[A] passionate historical analysis. . . . Upon finishing "Self-Taught" the reader will be changed."Black Issues Book Review""Groundbreaking. . . Williams marshals enormous primary evidence to reveal a previously untold story. . . . Ultimately, a book of triumphant reading--both enslaved and freedpeople's acts of reading." -- "Southern Cultures""Provides a needed corrective to the existing literature. . . . [A] readable and carefully researched work. . . . Represents an important expansion of knowledge about Reconstruction, the South, the political and cultural struggles of African Americans, and the nation's educational system." -- "North Carolina Historical Review""An original, informative, and moving account. . . . [A] major corrective study of the struggle of African Americans." -- "Arkansas Historical Quarterly"

This delightfully well-written and swift reading scholarly monograph may well be considered a classic in its field. . . . By tapping the rich historical experience of African Americans, Heather Andrea Williams presents readers with the important personal exercise of autonomy and rejuvenating dignity that was gained by black Americans who worked within their communities to establish or demand educational institutions in the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction.--Civil War Book ReviewSelf-Taught is a well-written, thoroughly researched study of the African American effort to employ literacy in the quest for true freedom and empowerment. Its insightful analysis of African American agency is a welcome and significant addition to the literature of black education in the era of emancipation.--Journal of Illinois HistoryAn original, informative, and moving account. . . . [A] major corrective study of the struggle of African Americans.--Arkansas Historical QuarterlySelf-Taught, a history of African American education in the South from the

antebellum era through Reconstruction, could scarcely be more timely.--Civil War History

Self-Taught is not merely the most comprehensive documentation and analysis of African American education in the South during the 1861-1871 period, it is in every respect the first definitive study of the formative stages of universal literacy and formal education among ex-slaves. Never before has anyone described so fully the broad range of roles and the significant contributions of African Americans to the development of formal and public education in the South for themselves and for the entire region.--James D. Anderson, author of *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*

This book is a well-told story of a courageous people's quest to obtain an education. . . . The book is a testimony to the resiliency of the indomitable human spirit.--Louisiana History

With great skill, Heather Williams demonstrates the centrality of black people to the process of formal education--the establishment of schools, the creation of a cadre of teachers, the forging of standards of literacy and numeracy--in the post-emancipation years. As she does, Williams makes the case that the issue of education informed the Reconstruction period--the two-cornered struggle between North and South over the rebuilding of Southern society, the three-cornered struggle between white Northerners, white Southerners, and black people over the nature of education, and the less well-known contest between black Northerners and black Southerners over the direction of African American culture. Self-Taught is a work of major significance.--Ira Berlin, University of Maryland

Provides a needed corrective to the existing literature. . . . [A] readable and carefully researched work. . . . Represents an important expansion of knowledge about Reconstruction, the South, the political and cultural struggles of African Americans, and the nation's educational system.--North Carolina Historical Review

A book that eloquently places African Americans at the center of the struggle for education, establishment of schools, and teaching despite the daunting legal, economic, and societal barriers that confronted them in the American South.--Reviews in American History

Makes contributions beyond the author's stated goal of documenting the agency of blacks in acquiring literacy. . . . Williams provides a useful model for how to elucidate relations of power while also explaining their significance for larger historical developments. Hopefully, her success will inspire other historians to pursue similar work.--Florida Historical Quarterly

Provides us with glimpses into the often heroic activities of African American teachers during this period, and illuminates their education, their teaching philosophies, and the numerous obstacles they overcame. . . . A wonderful book that clearly explains and fully documents the 'history of freedpeople's role in educating themselves.'--Journal of African American History

Self-Taught joins that body of scholarship pressing the case that African Americans were not passive recipients of education, but rather the active agents of realizing the promise of formally schooled intelligence.--Journal of

American HistoryHeather Andrea Williams's excellent new book . . . tells their story, emphasizing the role that literate African-Americans played in 'jumpstarting' the extraordinary reduction in illiteracy after the War. . . . Beautifully written and cogently argued, *Self-Taught* deserves the attention of all scholars interested in early history of African-American schools.--*Journal of Economic History*Groundbreaking. . . Williams marshals enormous primary evidence to reveal a previously untold story. . . . Ultimately, a book of triumphant reading--both enslaved and freedpeople's acts of reading.--*Southern Cultures*A subtle, compelling, and poignant portrait of freedpeople's determined efforts to secure the right to an education for themselves and their children. . . . In this finely-crafted, nuanced, and well-written book, Williams brings to light a history that has never been fully told before, telling that story through the words of the protagonists themselves.--*Journal of Social History*In *Self-Taught*, Heather Andrea Williams . . . offers a passionate historical analysis. . . . Upon finishing *Self-Taught* the reader will be changed. Untold stories of protest and resistance come alive through Williams's expert analysis and captivating storytelling.--*Black Issues Book Review*This book is a testimony to the resiliency of the indomitable human spirit. . . . Further evidence of the great indebtedness of African Americans of today to the slaves and freedmen.--*Louisiana History*

I read this book for my upper level history class. First of all, I respect a slave who want to read and write better. During slavery, Whites did not allow masters and teachers to help slaves with writing and reading. After emancipation, slaves were eager to write their names on contracts. And read the bible. When educated black teacher taught students, some Whites became offensive and the Klu Klux Klan whipped Blacks. Life in the late 1800s was dangerous. Blacks walked a fine line between danger and safety in their communities. I believe today that the average black student does not know all the obstacles that an ex-slave endured. As an older student I enjoyed learning about the history of the black community's education and struggle for survival. I got an A on my history research paper, and I also enjoyed reading the book.

One of the best books I have read surrounding the issue of early African-American interest in the importance of education. Personally, I believe the information included in this book could very well act as a catalyst to motivate some Black children to realize that Blacks have a legacy of commitment to education. I recommend this book for middle school and high school students. One does not get this type of African-American history in school.

This research is a much needed contemporary history of the education of African Americans in the South from slavery through reconstruction and the beginnings of the common (public) school. It addresses the question from the local, 'grassroots' perspective--Williams explores how blacks sacrificed to build schools, pay for teachers, advocate for their own education, and how these individuals striving for freedom inspired a movement for education across the South. Poor whites, seeing blacks entering schools, were driven to anger, jealousy, violence, and imitation. Some whites enrolled in freedpeople's schools, as they believed them superior to the poor white schools in the neighborhood (if there were any). Williams' work could definitely use an update and a broadening of perspective. Her research is education-centric--she does not consider broader social forces at play in her analysis, or if she does, she brings them up for a paragraph before moving on. In other words, she does not string her analysis along broader themes of race/ism, freedom, democracy, etc, all at play during this period. Education was in fact the very foundation of new conceptions of democracy: it was foundational to the ideology of freedom, and it was not coincidental that freedpeople associated education with a way up in the world. They were in some ways appropriating a republican ideology of free labor that valued education as foundational. By not considering the broader context--the North, the new forces of industrialization and the changing meaning of labor, contestations of freedom, and so on, Williams' point is less forceful, less connected. However, as descriptive work, and as \*the\* contemporary (21st century) work on the subject, this is definitely must-reading.

Great supplement to the study of American history (black, white, red, yellow, etc.) - history is history and it affects everyone regardless to the insensitive-demeaning-labeling-of-colors.

This is an insightful book on the history of not just African-American education but the development of our nation's conscience on the subject of education. Perhaps, if more read this and other sources on American education, we could re-pledge ourselves to true equal (quality) education for all.

This book was recommended to me and it far exceeded my expectations. The research was well conducted and noted. A wonderful historical piece.

Had to write a report on the struggles finding Education for African Americans during the Antebellum Period, this was the resource that made my work!

Books on education in the Reconstruction period are relatively rare; some of the more important ones--Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862-1875 (Contributions in American History) by Ronald Butchart and A Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873 by Jacqueline Jones--are themselves getting old by now. Even another, updated book in the vein of Butchart's or Jones's would've been valuable, but Williams's book is different in both scope and focus, and it makes a vital contribution to educational history and the history of race relations. For one thing, Williams's book focuses on black education broadly, not just on the school and not just in the Reconstruction period. Williams's book includes not only information on the freedpeople's schools that are the subject of other studies in post-Civil War education for African Americans but also on the "underground" learning taking place in the slave quarters and elsewhere prior to emancipation. Williams is also interested in more than the "Yankee schoolmarm," who has been frequently studied (though, admittedly, not that often in recent decades). Instead, taking the lead of such scholars as James Anderson (*The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*), Williams focuses on black initiative in founding, running, and maintaining schools despite white indifference and hostility. While the northern missionary teacher is--rightly--a part of this story, so too are the "native" black teachers who taught other African Americans, formally and informally. While other books and articles have attested to ex-slaves' desire for learning, Williams's book goes to great lengths to illustrate it through a rich array of primary sources and extended examples. Where *Self-Taught* truly shines is in its highly detailed exploration of the intricacies of starting, staffing, and maintaining schools for African Americans in the immediate postwar period; equally impressive are her efforts to discuss the role of black teachers, both those from the North and those native to the South. Williams is less successful, however, in contextualizing her study, both historically and historiographically, and the two aspects of the problem are closely related. Williams objects to Butchart's earlier study on the grounds that Butchart seems to her to be suggesting that northern whites imposed education on southern blacks. This is, in fact, a misreading of Butchart's main point. He argues not that southern African Americans had education imposed on them per se (he's quite willing to acknowledge that they themselves wanted education) but that schooling was, in essence, a weak lever for creating social justice, where land reform would've been a more powerful tool. Williams's misreading here points to the larger historical problem of her work: black education is treated mostly in a vacuum. While she does an admirable job of conveying the variety of white northern and southern attitudes to black education, Williams doesn't really explore the issue of what value, ultimately, education had for African Americans in the South. Clearly, it had personal importance, and there were clearly cases

where education helped individuals, but Williams's book doesn't really grapple with the thorny question of whether education aided freedpeople economically and politically. Indeed, as the book ends and Reconstruction efforts wane, we get the distinct (and, I think, correct) impression that increasing levels of literacy and education generally weren't able to forestall generations of discriminatory laws and practices. In short, Williams treats education unproblematically, as if it were, ipso facto, as important as its seekers made it out to be, as if (were it attained) it would achieve the full panoply of goals African Americans (and many whites) believed it would, including civil, political, and perhaps even social equality between the races. In general, Williams spends relatively little time explaining the nature of Reconstruction itself; this is a legitimate enough approach, but potential readers should be aware that terms such as "presidential Reconstruction" and "Redeemers" are going to be used without much gloss. Ultimately, *Self-Taught* is a great contribution to historical literature and truly covers new ground (as well as old ground in an invigorating way). I would highly recommend this book, even as I would suggest that some of its premises be interrogated.

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