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They "Dare[d] to Call Their Souls Their Own":
African American Resistance to the Suppression
of the Classics at Historically Black Colleges

After emancipation, African Americans quickly moved to gain what had been denied them under slavery, namely, a formal education. Indeed, by the 1880s not only had grade schools and high schools emerged, there were also a number of colleges. These colleges, often founded by New England missionaries and northern churches, offered a "classical" education based on northern models, i.e., training in Greek and Latin, mathematics, philosophy, and religion. For a number of reasons, but largely having to do with a desire for equal citizenship and rights, African Americans embraced this style of education. In this time period, commonly referred to as the "nadir" (1890-1920), the worst time period for African Americans outside of slavery, forces were at work to replace "classical" education with industrial and domestic training.

By the 1890s conservative voices in the white community, and even black accommodationists, were calling for an end to "classical" education in southern black schools. The white power structure felt that such elite training would make African Americans "uppity" and unsuited for their "natural" place in life as manual laborers, housekeepers, and gardeners. Conservative African Americans opposed "classical" education for more complicated reasons. First, because of the intensity of the racial climate, college-educated African Americans were often the targets of racial attack simply for being "educated." Second, given the prevailing racial climate, it was almost impossible for African Americans in the South to get jobs commensurate with their training. Third, black education, particularly at the college level, was dependent on white financial support. All these forces worked to put an end to what whites saw as an education ill suited to their racial and social inferiors. Thus, from the 1890s through the 1940s, there was a continual effort to eliminate "classical" education for African Americans in the South.

What this paper proposes to do is to examine three examples of African American resistance by educators and/or black institutions during the "nadir" who appeared on the surface to bend to white pressure by publicly disavowing "classical" education and stressing manual training, but who in reality challenged white supremacy by maintaining the teaching of the "classics," including Greek and Latin, at their schools. These three are Charlotte Hawkins Brown of the Alice Freeman Palmer Memorial Institute in Sedalia, North Carolina; the Rev. T. O. Fuller of Howe Institute in Memphis, Tennessee; and the first three presidents of Florida State Normal and Industrial College. Why and how they engaged in this subterfuge will be the focus of this paper.

