

EXTRACTS FROM *The Story of the Negro* · 1909

Freedmen could not wait for schoolhouses to be built or for teachers to be provided. They got up before day and studied in their cabins by the light of pine knots. They sat up until late at night, drooping over their books, trying to master the secrets they contained. More than once, I have seen a fire in the woods at night with a dozen or more people of both sexes and of all ages sitting about with book in hands studying their lessons. Sometimes they would fasten their primers between the ploughshares, so that they could read as they ploughed. I have seen Negro coal miners trying to spell out the words of a little reading-book by the dim light of a miner's lamp, hundreds of feet below the earth. In the early days of freedom, public schools were not infrequently organised and taught under a large tree. Some of the early schoolhouses consisted of four pieces of timber driven into the ground and brush spread overhead as a covering to keep out the sun and rain. It was a simple and inexpensive schoolhouse, but I am sure that the students were more earnest than many who have since had much greater advantages.

The night school became popular immediately after freedom. After a hard day's work in the field, in the shop, or in the kitchen, men and women would spend two or three hours at night in school. A great many of the Freedmen got their first lessons in reading and writing in the Sunday-school. In fact, there were frequently more spelling-books in the Sunday-school than Bibles. I, myself, got my first knowledge of the alphabet by perusing a spelling-book in the Sunday-school.