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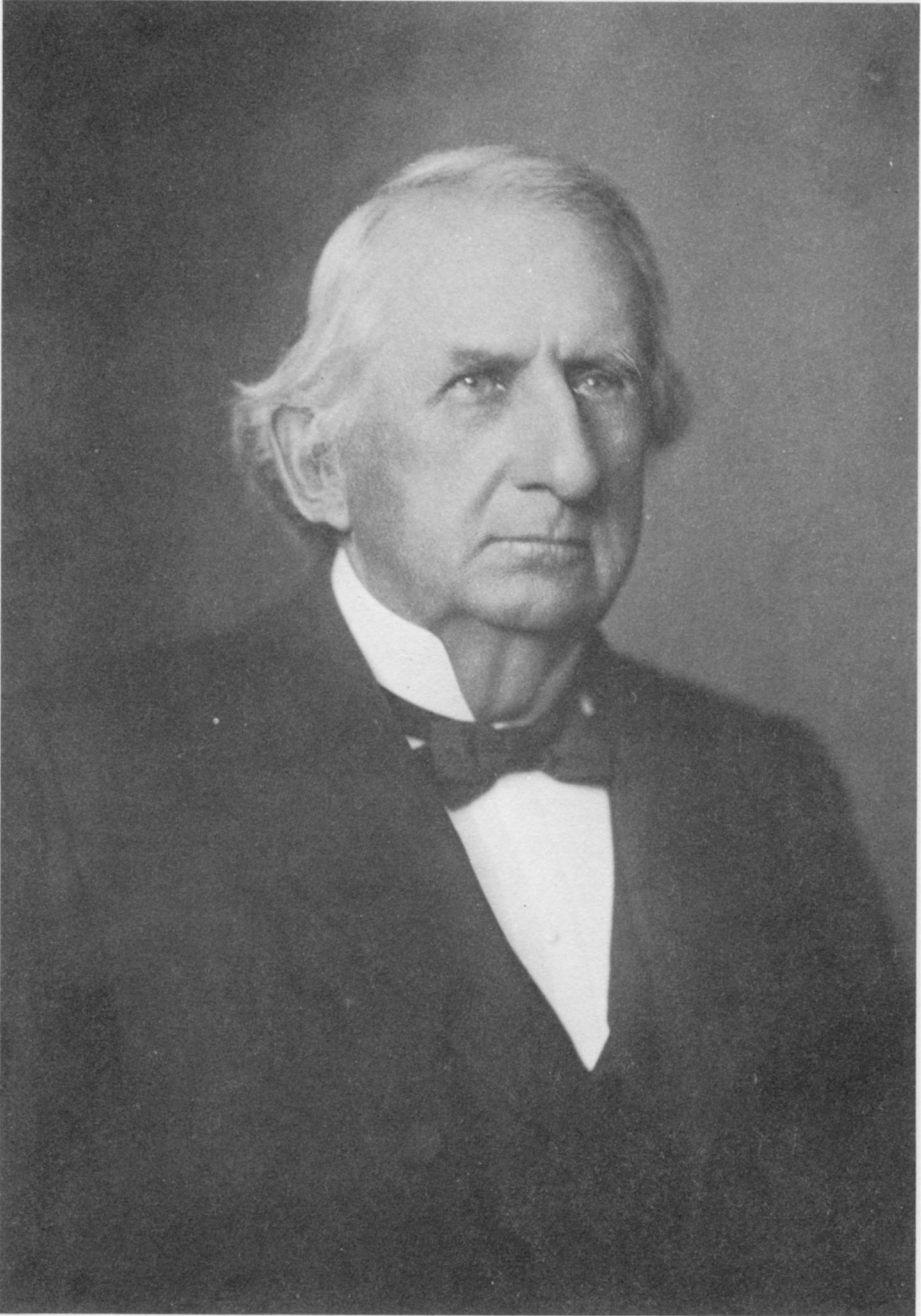
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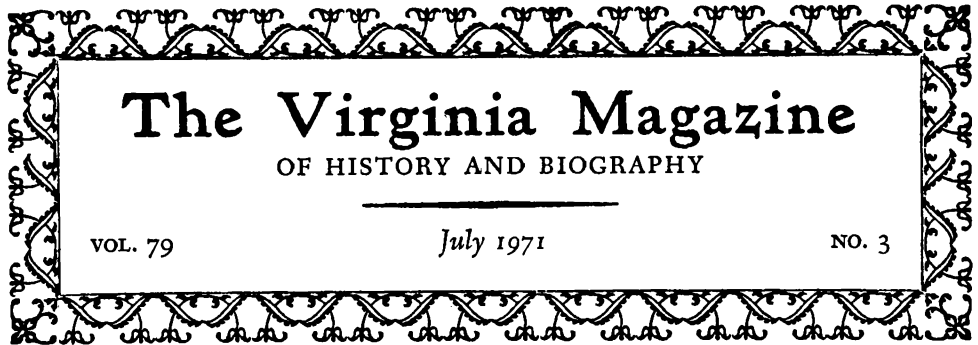
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*William Henry Ruffner*



WILLIAM HENRY RUFFNER AND THE  
ESTABLISHMENT OF  
VIRGINIA'S PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM, 1870-1874

by WALTER J. FRASER, JR.\*

A FEW days before Christmas 1869, William Henry Ruffner eased his large frame into a chair before his desk at "Tribrook," his hill-set, rambling farm-home near Lexington, Virginia, picked up pen and paper, and in a firm, cultivated hand wrote a close friend: "I am getting poorer & fatter & the logic of that paradox seems to be that it is time I was leaving the wilderness." His health troubled him: "I have for 18 mos. preached once every Sabb[ath] . . . but I could not preach twice." However, he believed that in "some widely useful position, I could do full duty. Such is that of the proposed Superintendent of Public Instruction." He concluded, "I understand the subject; I understand also the present condition of our poor old state. I think my sympathies are right all around."<sup>1</sup>

Born in Lexington in 1824 near Washington College, which was headed by his father, Dr. Henry Ruffner, William Henry was graduated from the college in 1842. He subsequently studied at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia and at Princeton. During the 1840's and early 1850's, not immune to the fever of reform upon the country, he publicly denounced slavery and demon rum, worked for the moral regeneration of the Negro, and promoted church causes and educational innovations. Linked by marriage with Virginia's planter aristocracy and loyal to Whig principles, when

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\* Dr. Fraser is assistant professor of history at The Citadel, Charleston, South Carolina. A grant from the Citadel Development Foundation aided in completing a portion of the research for this paper.

<sup>1</sup> William Henry Ruffner to William Brown, December 22, 1869, The Robert Alonzo Brock Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, California, hereafter cited as Brock Collection.

secessionist sentiment grew in Virginia, Ruffner urged moderation and Union. But when Virginia seceded, his love for Virginia was stronger than his love for the Union. Unable to escape the ravages of the war, for several years after Appomattox he experienced grinding poverty and struggled to eke out a living from the land. Perennially an avid student of public affairs, he followed closely during 1867-1868 the work of the Radical Republican dominated convention, which drafted a new constitution for Virginia. It provided for a superintendent of public instruction to supervise a state-supported system of free schools. Unlike many native white Virginians and their political leaders, who believed that the state could not afford a school system and who questioned both the need to educate the Negro and his educability, Ruffner applauded the idea of public schools for all the people. Thus, following the "redemption" of Virginia, when a newly formed Conservative party marshaled sufficient support to elect a moderate Republican governor and a Conservative controlled legislature, Ruffner, motivated by personal ambition, a belief that he was well qualified, a deep sense of public service, and a strong commitment to the concept of universal education, sought election to the superintendency of the school system called for by Virginia's new Constitution.<sup>2</sup>

Aware that several others were seeking the office, Ruffner began to enlist support for his candidacy in the late fall of 1869. He sought testimonials to his character, abilities, and educational philosophy from friends and prominent public figures across the state. Though characteristically the life-long, ubiquitous reformer dreamed grand visions of a rapidly expanding, liberally financed public school system, he reasoned practically that his election depended on a legislature whose members were either hostile or apathetic toward public schools. Consequently, his testimonials emphasized his cautious approach to launching a school system. His friend and fellow Lexingtonian, General Robert Edward Lee, president of Washington College, endorsed Ruffner as a man eminently qualified to head the school system and "sensible of the necessity of adapting it to the present wants of the

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<sup>2</sup> Walter J. Fraser, Jr., "William Henry Ruffner: A Liberal in the Old and New South," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Tennessee, 1970, pp. iii, 290-292, 294-295; Anne Ruffner Barclay, "Notes on W. H. R.," Notebook No. 3, William Henry Ruffner Papers, Presbyterian and Reformed Church Archives, Montreat, North Carolina, hereafter cited as Ruffner Papers; C. Chilton Pearson, "William Henry Ruffner: Reconstruction Statesman of Virginia," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, XX (January 1921), 29-30; Charles Martin to Wyndham Robertson, November 24, 1869, Wyndham Robertson Papers, University of Chicago Library; James Douglas Smith, "Virginia During Reconstruction, 1865-1870: A Political, Economic and Social Study," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1960, pp. 94-95, 109-110; Allen W. Moger, *Virginia: Bourbonism to Byrd, 1870-1925* (Charlottesville, 1968), pp. 6-7, 12-13.

people.”<sup>3</sup> A leading Conservative party politico, John B. Baldwin, recommended him to the legislature as a man highly qualified for the superintendency and with “grasp enough to master a new subject & yet with caution and prudence enough to avoid all rash or ill considered experiments upon the body politic.”<sup>4</sup> By mid-February 1870 several of his friends in Richmond were distributing copies of his testimonials to members of the General Assembly and personally lobbying for his election. On February 18 John Miller wrote that he had secured from Governor Gilbert C. Walker a promise to work for Ruffner’s nomination by the Conservative caucus. Miller, however, was pessimistic about his chances for election. Having sampled the opinion of numerous delegates, Miller believed that arch-conservative W. W. Walker “will be elected if we do not prevent him.” He urged Ruffner to come to Richmond “to be at hand to answer questions that may be sprung at the last” minute. Acting on his friend’s advice, Ruffner left Lexington for Richmond on February 22.<sup>5</sup> The following day he wrote his wife from a room at the Arlington House, “I am in good heart about the Superintendency. Everything is much as I expected. Walker not as strong as Miller thought; tho’ strong.”<sup>6</sup> When the Conservative caucus of the legislature met a week later, a last-ditch effort by Ruffner’s opponents “imperilled” him and “cost me several votes,” he told his family, “but the South West, Richmond & the Valley carried me thro’.”<sup>7</sup> On March 2 the General Assembly confirmed his nomination 174-1.<sup>8</sup> The liberal Richmond *Whig* applauded Ruffner’s election. “He is regarded as a man of great intellectual vigor, sound judgement and finished education,” the *Whig* editorialized. “We feel that while he will recommend no scheme which will entail extravagant expenditures upon an impoverished state, he will inaugurate a moderately progressive system.”<sup>9</sup> Noting the election of the superintendent of public instruction, the *Rockbridge County Gazette* prophetically observed, “It will require the patience of Job and the perseverance of Jacob to organize this school system successfully.”<sup>10</sup>

Virginia’s first superintendent of public instruction began work im-

<sup>3</sup> General R. E. Lee to Dr. A. Leyburn, February 5, 1870, Ruffner Papers.

<sup>4</sup> John B. Baldwin to Col. W. H. Taylor, February 24, 1870, *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> John Miller to William Henry Ruffner, February 18, 1870, Barclay, “Notes,” *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> William Henry Ruffner to “My Dear Wife,” February 23, 1870, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> William Henry Ruffner to “My Dear Wife,” March 2, 1870, *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> William Henry Ruffner, *Diary, 1870-1907*, March 2, 1870, *ibid.*; *Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Virginia, 1869* (Richmond, 1870), pp. 154-155.

<sup>9</sup> Richmond *Whig*, March [?], 1870, clipping, Scrapbook, Ruffner Papers.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in William Couper, *History of the Shenandoah Valley* (New York, 1952), II, 1009.

mediately on a plan for a system of schools. The scheme that Ruffner prepared was based in part on the school laws of New Jersey and Pennsylvania, which had been sent to him by northern friends.<sup>11</sup> After sketching out his plan, he met and talked with New Englander Dr. Barnas Sears, General Agent of the Peabody Fund, and long-time friends Professors William Holmes McGuffey and John B. Minor of the University of Virginia. With one major reservation they heartily approved of the proposal.<sup>12</sup> Minor told Ruffner that "There should be by all means, a provision that white and colored pupils should not attend the same schools."<sup>13</sup> Well aware of the strong racial feelings in the state, Ruffner replied, "My copyist . . . omitted the most essential section in the plan, viz., 'Separate schools shall be provided for white & colored pupils.'"<sup>14</sup> Making the correction, he submitted the plan to the chairman of the House of Delegates committee on schools and colleges, who then requested Ruffner to prepare a bill based on the scheme.<sup>15</sup> The new superintendent, however, worried over the eventual fate of such a measure. Talking with various members of the General Assembly about a system of schools, he discovered "a painful aversion on the part of the many leading legislators to the whole subject, & a dread of expenses on the part of all." Ruffner told Minor that he feared that if he asked the Conservative-dominated legislature for too much money to support the schools, "measures wd. be inaugurated instantly to get clear of me & alter the constitution."<sup>16</sup>

During the first two weeks of April, Ruffner reduced his plan into a bill to be offered in the legislature and then traveled to Charlottesville to consult with Professor Minor on the legal phraseology of the measure. Working uninterruptedly for four days, they completed the redrafting

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Colwell to William Henry Ruffner, January 12, 16, 1870, John L. Hart to William Henry Ruffner, January 25, 1870, Ruffner Papers; Edgar W. Knight, "Reconstruction and Education in Virginia," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, XV (January 1916), 37-38; Charles William Dabney, *Universal Education in the South* (Chapel Hill, 1936), I, 144; Pearson, "Reconstruction Statesman," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, XX, 31; William Henry Ruffner, "Ruffner Family," Ruffner Papers. Some authors strongly suspect that the basis for the scheme was his father's public school proposal of 1841, which passed the Virginia House, but failed in the Senate; however, Ruffner pointed out in the 1890's that he did not see his father's draft until the mid-1870's.

<sup>12</sup> Ruffner, *Diary*, 1870-1907, March 7, 9, 10, 1870, *ibid.*; William Henry Ruffner to John B. Minor, March 23, 1870, Minor Family Papers, University of Virginia Library.

<sup>13</sup> John B. Minor to William Henry Ruffner, March 25, 1870, Ruffner Papers.

<sup>14</sup> William Henry Ruffner to John B. Minor, March 28, 1870, Minor Papers.

<sup>15</sup> William Henry Ruffner, *First Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of Virginia for the Year Ending August 31, 1871* (Richmond, 1871), p. 3; Ruffner, *Diary*, 1870-1907, March 30, 1870, Ruffner Papers.

<sup>16</sup> Ruffner to Minor, March 28, 1870, Minor Papers.

about 2:30 A.M., April 24, "and as we were so pleased with our work, and so with each other, we chatted on until 4," Ruffner wrote his wife. He added, "Tomorrow I go to Richmond with the best and most finished school law in America and I shall see that it is not butchered by the legislature."<sup>17</sup>

The school bill was placed before a joint meeting of the Senate and House committees on April 26, reported without alterations a few days later, and printed.<sup>18</sup> While Ruffner waited anxiously for action by the committees of the whole, he was shaken by an anonymous article in the May number of the *Educational Journal of Virginia*, which charged that the superintendent was attempting to create a school system modeled after those in the "regions of Yankeedom."<sup>19</sup> Fearing that the article would afford ammunition to critics of the school bill in the General Assembly, Ruffner communicated his concern to John Minor. Attempting to allay his friend's anxieties, Minor counseled Ruffner to expect and to ignore such diatribes. "We are the attacking party & cannot but look for a vehement resistance & out cry."<sup>20</sup> But legislative inaction on the bill continued to worry the superintendent. As May dragged on, he lamented, "I have met with nothing . . . except indifference."<sup>21</sup> Then in late May and early June, when the bill was reported on the floor of the House and Senate and debate began, Ruffner's spirits rose. Although still frustrated by his inability to hasten his bill safely through the legislature, he wrote his family, "This is a jejune life I am living;" concluding nevertheless, "My work is a great one & I must be about it."<sup>22</sup>

Debate on the bill began in the Senate and as Ruffner watched powerless, Conservatives attempted to cut the budget of the school system at every point. He sought out various senators and urged them to stand by the plan as it had been submitted, but his efforts were of little avail. The Senate reduced the salary of the superintendent to \$2,000 annually, pared the pay of his clerk and county superintendents, and slashed travel expenses for all school officials. Believing that the Senate was "taking the energies

<sup>17</sup> William Henry Ruffner to "My Dear Wife," April 24, 1870, Ruffner, *Diary, 1870-1907*, March 30, April 18, 19, 1870, Ruffner Papers.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, April 26, 30, May 6, 1870; Ruffner, *First Annual Report*, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> *The Educational Journal of Virginia*, I (May 1870), 223-225; Charles Martin to William Henry Ruffner, April 30, 1870, Ruffner Papers.

<sup>20</sup> John B. Minor to William Henry Ruffner, May 2, 3, 1870, *ibid.*; William Henry Ruffner to John B. Minor, May 3, 6, 1870, Minor Papers.

<sup>21</sup> Ruffner to Minor, May 6, 1870, *ibid.*; Ruffner, *Diary, 1870-1907*, May 24, 1870, Ruffner Papers.

<sup>22</sup> William Henry Ruffner to "My Dear Daughters," May 29, 1870, *ibid.*

of the system out,"<sup>23</sup> Ruffner warned a prominent Conservative political figure, "I fear the Leg[islature] will injure the working of the school system by the miserable pay allowed."<sup>24</sup> When the bill cleared the Senate on July 13 and was sent to the lower chamber, Ruffner undertook to "recover the lost ground." He was, however, "not hopeful after witnessing the scenes" in the Senate,<sup>25</sup> and so was not surprised when, on July 1, the House of Delegates agreed to the fiscal surgery performed by the Senate.<sup>26</sup> The legislature having done what he had tried to prevent, butcher the funding provisions in the bill, Ruffner was amazed when informed that Governor Walker was considering a veto of the measure because the General Assembly had been *too* generous to the schools. Hastily arranging a meeting with the governor, Ruffner reviewed each fiscal provision with him and shortly thereafter Walker signed the bill.<sup>27</sup> Disappointed over the underfunding of the new school system, the new superintendent privately admitted that the system created was "better than none"; publicly he declared that July 11, the day that the bill became law, "marks an epoch in the history of Virginia."<sup>28</sup>

The school law provided for a highly centralized system of public schools. Although the superintendent of public instruction had direct supervisory control over all matters touching the schools, a state board of education composed of the governor, attorney-general, and superintendent had complete and final administrative and financial control over the system; among the duties of the board was the appointment of all county superintendents and district trustees. A state capitation tax of one dollar, a property assessment of ten cents on every \$100 valuation, and interest from the old Literary Fund were the financial bases of the system of schools. At the discretion of local citizens, counties were authorized to raise additional funds by property and capitation taxes. Among subjects to be offered during the five-month school year were spelling, reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, and geography. Provision was made for the establishment of graded schools

<sup>23</sup> William Henry Ruffner to John B. Minor, June 11, 1870, Minor Papers; *Journal of the Senate*, pp. 494-495.

<sup>24</sup> William Henry Ruffner to General J. L. Kemper, June 10, 1870, James L. Kemper Papers, University of Virginia Library.

<sup>25</sup> Ruffner to Minor, June 11, 1870, Minor Papers; *Journal of the Senate*, p. 507.

<sup>26</sup> Ruffner, Diary, 1870-1907, June 29, July 1, 1870, Ruffner Papers; *Journal of the House of Delegates of the State of Virginia for the Session of 1869-70* (Richmond, 1870), p. 615.

<sup>27</sup> William Henry Ruffner to "Dear Wife," July 10, 1870, Ruffner Papers; Jack Pendleton Maddex, Jr., "The Virginia Conservatives: A Study in 'Bourbon' Redemption, 1869-1879," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1966, p. 592.

<sup>28</sup> Ruffner to "Dear Wife," July 10, 1870, Ruffner Papers; Ruffner, *First Annual Report*, p. 4.



and normal schools "as soon as practicable." Although the schools were to be free to all between the ages of five and twenty-one, separate school-houses were to be used by black and white pupils.<sup>29</sup>

Faced now with the enormous job of putting the system into operation, Ruffner first undertook the selection of county superintendents and school trustees. When pressured by leading Virginia politicians to appoint "their" men to school offices, he emphasized that the schools had to remain "free of politics." He confided to his friend Minor "that many highly recommended men *will not* do at all."<sup>30</sup> Describing the work as one "demanding the utmost caution and involving immense correspondence," Ruffner sought to place the most qualified men in office. He asked close friends to check the credentials of candidates. Desiring further information on six candidates for county superintendencies, he wrote one associate, "The more information you get, the more I shall be obliged. I should scarcely venture to trouble you so much, if it were not a matter of such public importance."<sup>31</sup>

As Ruffner worked long, hot hours into the summer to select school personnel so that they could be confirmed by the Board of Education, thereby insuring the opening of schools in the early fall, he remained acutely aware of continuing criticism that might jeopardize the system. In July, prior to the first scheduled meeting of the board, Ruffner was distressed by remarks of Professor Matthew Fontaine Maury before the Virginia Educational Association. Reflecting the sentiments of many Virginians, Maury referred to the newly created public school system as "This system . . . which has been *forced upon us*." Ruffner believed that the phrase was calculated "to hurt the schools."<sup>32</sup> Then in late July and again in August when Governor Walker canceled scheduled meetings of the board of edu-

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<sup>29</sup> Ruffner, *First Annual Report*, p. 7; Smith, "Virginia During Reconstruction," p. 95; Andrew Jackson Fielder, "A History of the Educational Journals of Virginia, 1869-1942," unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Virginia, 1942, pp. 61-66; Pearson, "Reconstruction Statesman," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, XX (April, 1921), 137-138; Knight, "Reconstruction and Education," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, XV, 40.

<sup>30</sup> William Henry Ruffner to John B. Minor, August 29, 1870, Minor Papers; Ruffner, *First Annual Report*, p. 5; Charles Martin to William Henry Ruffner, April 9, 1870, John F. Lewis to William Henry Ruffner, May 18, 1870, Ruffner Papers; Ruffner to Kemper, June 10, 1870, Kemper Papers.

<sup>31</sup> William Henry Ruffner to Messrs. Starke & Ryland, August 17, 1870, Brock Collection; William Henry Ruffner to John B. Minor, July 20, August 17, 1870, Minor Papers; Ruffner, *First Annual Report*, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> William Henry Ruffner to John B. Minor, July 23, 1870, Minor Papers; Ruffner, *Diary, 1870-1907*, July 13, 1870, Ruffner Papers. As printed in *The Educational Journal of Virginia*, I (August 1870), Maury's address contained nothing which could be construed "to hurt the schools." The phrase "forced upon us" does not appear (*Virginia Journal of Education*, LVII, no. 2 [October 1963], 8-13).

cation called for by Ruffner to act on his personnel selections, he was convinced that efforts were being made to impede the opening of the schools. He told Minor, "I feel sure that there is an influential party in the state who designs foul play in regard to the school system."<sup>33</sup>

Toward the end of August, Ruffner wrote Minor again, "The Govr. aggravates me mightily, but he will come to his work after awhile—you see if he doesn't, he & I will be good friends too!"<sup>34</sup> Finally responding to the superintendent's urgent pleas to confirm school officials, Governor Walker convened the State Board of Education in Richmond in mid-September. "We had three laborious sessions," Ruffner recorded. The board confirmed the appointment of thirty-three superintendents, finishing the work "so far as able—there being some co's offering no satisfactory men & a few *none*." Ruffner felt that the governor, attorney-general, and he had worked together "faithfully & pleasantly." "In almost every case, I got the man I wanted," and "whilst my convictions as to certain ulterior purposes remain, & whilst the Govr. loves power . . . I am on the whole encouraged." By late September, Ruffner was able to write Minor, "Schl. matters go on well. The Governor & I are working together like true yoke-fellows."<sup>35</sup> Two months later the first public schools were opened under the new system.<sup>36</sup> But keenly aware of the hostility and apathy toward public schooling, the tight-fisted fiscal policies of the Conservatives, and the strong racial prejudices within the state, Superintendent Ruffner realized that his work in establishing a permanent system of common schools had just begun.

To awaken the people to the need for and efficacy of public education, to gain support for education of the Negro, to advocate federal aid to education, and to show the ability of the state to pay for the system of schools, Superintendent Ruffner made public addresses, wrote for the *Educational Journal of Virginia*, and published an annual *Report*. During his years as head of the schools, he likened his campaign for education to a religious crusade. He exhorted local superintendents to rouse citizens from "their lethargy," to proselytize for the public schools "wherever . . . two or three are gathered together," and to lead "an educational revival among the people." Never relax your efforts, "the plowing, and sewing, the thinning and weeding, the reaping and sowing," to win converts to public educa-

<sup>33</sup> Ruffner to Minor, August 17, 1870, Minor Papers.

<sup>34</sup> Ruffner to Minor, August 29, 1870, *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> William Henry Ruffner to John B. Minor, September 19, 30, 1870, *ibid.*; Ruffner, *Diary*, 1870-1907, September 16, 17, 18, 1870, Ruffner Papers.

<sup>36</sup> Ruffner, *First Annual Report*, p. 5.

tion, he told school officials, "Education has to be propagated like Christianity."<sup>37</sup>

In his first annual *Report*, Superintendent Ruffner dispelled charges that the school system was a "Yankee invention" and a radical innovation. He also developed his arguments for the need and efficacy of public schooling. By summarizing the history of education for the masses in Europe and Asia, he pointed out the centuries-old legacy of universal free education. America's founding fathers, Ruffner wrote, were also "strong advocates" of public education. He reminded readers that Jefferson had advocated, "a system of general instruction" and along with other eminent Virginians had admired northern public school systems. Recounting the history of the state's ante-bellum efforts for public schools, Ruffner concluded "that Virginia has from the beginning admitted the propriety and duty of the state's making provision for the education of her people."<sup>38</sup>

Well aware of the depression and prevailing conservative attitudes on money matters, Ruffner cleverly emphasized the economic advantages of a system of public schools. His major premise was that "the prosperity of every community is dependent upon the character of its labor," rather than its natural resources and available capital. He argued that only the best educated workers "by their labor made a profit for . . . themselves [and] their employers." Citing reports by both Horace Mann and the United States Commissioner of Education, John Eaton, he pointed out that in both Europe and America employers were in agreement that education improved the character and value of the laboring class. Marshaling further evidence, Ruffner noted that England's decline as the world's leading manufacturer had been due to the better education of the laborers in other nations. "Can anyone rationally expect our state, with her mass of uneducated laborers, to compete successfully in manufacturing with states and countries whose laborers are educated?" he asked. Virginia, then, should learn from England's experience.<sup>39</sup>

The need to educate and the educability of the Negro was a persistent theme in Ruffner's public school crusade. Quoting the conclusions of a recent survey by Commissioner of Education Eaton, "the majority of . . . Southern planters . . . did not believe in giving the Negro any education,"

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<sup>37</sup> Ruffner, *Diary*, 1870-1907, November 3, 4, 1870, Ruffner Papers; *Educational Journal*, II (December 1870, January, February, March 1871), 72-74, 112, 155, 188-189, III (January 1872), 119.

<sup>38</sup> Ruffner, *First Annual Report*, pp. 77-82, 84, 87-88, 92.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62-65, 67, 73, 75-76.

Ruffner wrote in his initial *Report* that he regretted this lack of "faith in the improbability of the Negro" and he aimed to show the "unseasonableness" of this attitude.<sup>40</sup> Approaching the question of the education of the freedman from a world view of "Emancipation and Its Historical Consequences," Ruffner pointed out some of the results of emancipation in England's West Indies, "so that all may see the need of vigorous measures to counteract these evils in our case." Following emancipation by Parliament in 1833, thousands of blacks "sunk into vagrancy and pauperism, and even into downright barbarism." The reasons for this degradation were found in the lack of an occupation due to the want of an education. Thus Ruffner argued that with over 500,000 freedmen in Virginia, the state's most urgent problem was "what can be made of them. . . . If they are to be left to themselves, we may see our future in the mirror of the past." Whether these Negroes "will be a blessing or a curse" to future generations would depend on "what is done for them, and what is left undone."<sup>41</sup>

Turning to what should be done and to his premise that neither capital nor resources, but the laborer was the basis of a state's prosperity, Ruffner advocated an elementary education for Virginia's blacks, which would increase their efficiency in holding jobs by twenty-five percent or add "\$25,000,000 directly to the wealth of the state." For political reasons, too, Ruffner argued for the education of the Negro. In a democracy the ballot box was the foundation of freedom and it could not be left in the hands of the illiterate. He warned that if the freedmen were not educated to make their own decisions at the polls, their votes would be controlled by those with ulterior motives. Therefore for both economic and political reasons, and as the state was the only agency capable, "a prodigious effort to elevate our most illiterate population" must be made; "Delay is death!"<sup>42</sup>

To counter the arguments of those who would say that the Negro's "intellect is too feeble to be materially benefited by attempts to educate him," Ruffner asserted:

It is utterly denied that there is any such difference between the two races insusceptibility of improvement, as to justify us in making the Negro an exception to the general conclusion of mankind in respect to the value of universal education.<sup>43</sup>

Though the Negro had "deteriorated" under slavery, there was no doubt

<sup>40</sup> Ruffner, *First Annual Report*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92, 94, 95, 98, 101, 106, 153.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 107-109, 126-128.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.

as to his ability to profit from education under his new, more favorable conditions. Evidence of the "Improvability of the Negro" abounds, Ruffner declared. Millions of native Africans had learned to read Arabic; Benjamin Banneker's *Almanac*, which had greatly impressed Jefferson, also offered proof that the Negro's mind could pursue "abstract investigations." The flowering Republic of Liberia showed the Negro's improvability; attendance records and study habits in Freedmen Bureau schools exhibited his "desire for education and capacity for learning." Reports from county superintendents had indicated that blacks still manifested a great desire for education; and Ruffner concluded that many ante-bellum slaves and free Negroes displayed a shrewdness, enterprise, and "noble spirit and superior capacity" that their descendants continue to evidence.<sup>44</sup>

From the opening of the first public schools Ruffner urged black pupils to enroll, exhorting his superintendents to "By no means neglect the colored people. . . . Give them confidence in you and your work, and make them eager to educate their children."<sup>45</sup> Thus at the end of the first school year, Ruffner suffered a major disappointment when he calculated that only thirty-nine thousand Negro children had attended public schools compared with ninety-two thousand whites. Greatly concerned over the numerical disparity between the white and black pupils and schools, he felt that this was not due to any discrimination on the part of school officials, for he had "instructed them to be careful to avoid anything that would even present the appearance of unfairness." Rather Ruffner believed that the reason for the small number of black pupils and the few black schools was due to the practice of converting former private schools to public ones by influential whites who subsidized the transition on the condition that the schools would be for whites only.

A critical shortage of qualified Negro teachers and the refusal of whites to teach in black schools also accounted for the disparity in numbers, he averred. To overcome the shortage of Negro instructors he informed superintendents where they might secure competent Negro teachers. To induce

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<sup>44</sup> Ruffner, *First Annual Report*, pp. 109-115, 117-118, 121; John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York, 1967), pp. 157-158. Benjamin Banneker was "perhaps the most accomplished Negro" living during the early years of the new nation. Born in Maryland in 1731, he was a precocious youth, demonstrating an extraordinary aptitude in science and mathematics. After Jefferson read a manuscript copy of Banneker's almanac (the first of a series he edited between 1791 and 1802), he told him that it was "a document to which your whole race had a right for its justifications against the doubts which have been entertained of them."

<sup>45</sup> *Educational Journal*, II (December 1870), 72-74; Ruffner, *Diary, 1870-1907*, November 3, 4, 1870, Ruffner Papers.

whites to teach in black schools, he argued, "It is no discredit to anyone to give instruction to the ignorant of any race." He scotched the view of white teachers who felt that if they taught blacks they would be "socially ostracized." Rather, Ruffner informed readers of the *Educational Journal*, "it is a laudable enterprise on the part of any competent Southern man or woman to engage in the instruction of the freedman, with a view to elevate their character, and to adapt them to the successful discharge of the new duties imposed upon them by their changed condition."<sup>46</sup>

It was soon apparent to Superintendent Ruffner that his crusade to educate the freedmen was meeting a cool reception in the state. Minor, in early 1872, cautioned Ruffner with regard to his "pleadings for the Negro" that "It does not become any of us to dogmatize upon a subject where experience has as yet taught little." Minor held out little hope for the educability of the freedman—"whilst the Negro . . . eminently emotional . . . will succeed in whatever involves chiefly the asthetic faculties . . . they will be found at least for generations, incapable . . . of very vigorous & sustained efforts purely intellectual."<sup>47</sup> A Richmond business executive also wrote forwarding several letters and comments which he had received regarding the superintendent's arguments for Negro education. He told Ruffner that the letters were "indicators, to some extent, of the public pulse." Dr. Charles May of Lunenburg County, whose opinions were "held in high esteem by his brother planters," questioned Ruffner's theories of the school's acting as a cultural agency for uplifting the Negro. May wrote, "moral culture" is passed on through "the family circle and here the Negro child is at great disadvantage." Dr. George W. Briggs of Nansemond County, editor of the *Rural Messenger*, took exception to Ruffner's faith in the improvability of the Negro. Briggs felt that there was little hope for the black: "The general character of the Negroes for honesty, faithful work, performance of contracts, is retrograding." Another difference of opinion with Superintendent Ruffner's estimate of the Negro came from Colonel William M. Ambler, a one-time wealthy planter of Louisa County, who had been impoverished by the war. He believed "that Wm Ruffner views the Negro from a wrong stand point." He could understand Ruffner's error, however, "for no man, I care not what his powers or opportunities, can justly appreciate the Negro character . . . who has not as we say in Eastern Virginia 'been raised with them.'" Ambler was convinced that

<sup>46</sup> *Educational Journal*, II (February, March, May 1871), 155-156, 272, 280; Ruffner, *First Annual Report*, pp. 15, 25.

<sup>47</sup> John B. Minor to William Henry Ruffner, February 28, 1872, Ruffner Papers.

for "a man to form any just opinion with regard to them [he] must have had a Negro 'mammy'—hunted, played marbles, bathed and spent the 'long summer day' in wandering about with Negro playmates." Only through this experience could a man begin "to lay even the foundations of an opinion with regard to" Negroes.<sup>48</sup> The truth was that Superintendent Ruffner had "been raised with them"; that his idealism, vision, and scholarship with regard to the black man far surpassed that of his most learned contemporaries.

Criticism did not stifle Ruffner's advocacy of Negro education. Vitally interested in securing more black teachers for the public schools as well as the higher education of the Negro, Ruffner maintained close contact with former Union General Samuel Armstrong, president of Hampton Normal and Mechanical Institute, the newly founded college for Negroes in Hampton, Virginia. Appointed as a curator of the college by Governor Walker, Ruffner was asked to address the student body and a group of northern visitors in early 1873. Before the gathering of black students and white philanthropists, among them General Oliver Otis Howard, Ruffner spoke on the noble role of the Negro in ancient history. A northern newspaper reporter who was present observed that Ruffner's "expression of opinion was remarkable as coming from a Virginian, addressing upon Virginia soil an audience four-fifths of whom were Negroes." The reporter found "the spirit of it was most encouraging to students . . . for he not only wiped away much of the obloquy of their past, but held out to them the promise" of their great future as citizens of Virginia.<sup>49</sup> Several months later when Ruffner again addressed the students and their guests, he applauded the great job that Hampton was doing as "worthy of all praise." Hampton was an example, he said, of Virginia's effort to educate both black and white, which "she intends to keep on with."<sup>50</sup> In his *Second Annual Report* Ruffner praised the work being done by Hampton in providing teachers for Negro schools. He pointed out, however, that even greater financial support was needed, both for Hampton and Negro elementary schools, as the wide gap between the number of black and white pupils still remained. To the lack of funds and the continuing shortage of teachers, he now added another

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<sup>48</sup> John Ott to William Henry Ruffner, October 30, 1872, and enclosures G. W. Briggs to John Ott, October 16, 1872, Col. William M. Ambler to John Ott, October 25, 1872, Ruffner Papers.

<sup>49</sup> Unidentified newspaper clipping, Scrapbook, *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *The Southern Workman*, July, 1873, clipping, Scrapbook, Ruffner, Diary, 1870-1907, June 12, 1873, *ibid.*

reason for the difference in numbers, "an unjust discrimination . . . against the colored people."<sup>51</sup>

To supplement the state's support of the public schools, particularly with a view toward obtaining additional funds for Negro education, Superintendent Ruffner became an ardent champion of federal aid. When the Hoar Bill, which in part provided for the funneling of proceeds of the sale of public lands into states having the highest illiteracy rates, was before Congress in the spring of 1870, Ruffner confided to Minor, "I . . . hear that Congress is devising liberal things for Southern Education. *Please* let me set out my tub if it rains dollars."<sup>52</sup> Minor, however, mirroring the attitudes of many Virginians of his time as well as modern-day southerners, was hotly opposed to the idea. "My abhorrence of Fedl. aid . . . as being part of the proceeds of the public lands . . . is as great as ever. I don't want the fingers of Congress thrust into our affairs." He opposed any scheme for Congressional aid to southern schools, for such action was subversive of the Constitution and it would "sell our birthright for less than a sum of pottage; it is to unite . . . with barbaric negroes"; and he urged Ruffner to "beware" of accepting federal money or any meddling of Congress in Virginia school affairs. "Congress does not mean justice! It means humiliation first, and a precedent for intolerable aggression afterward."<sup>53</sup>

Despite Minor's protestations and dire predictions, from Ruffner's initial enthusiastic response to the Hoar Bill—the beginning of the effort over the next twenty years to channel federal funds to common schools—he continued to advocate federal aid to education. If he did not find in Minor a "soul mate" in the cause of federal aid for Southern schools and the education of the freedman, Ruffner discovered one in Commissioner of Education John Eaton. Coordinating his efforts in behalf of federal aid with those of Eaton,<sup>54</sup> Superintendent Ruffner used his propaganda organ,

<sup>51</sup> William Henry Ruffner, *Second Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction for the Year Ending August 31, 1873* (Richmond, 1872), pp. 2-3, 15.

<sup>52</sup> Ruffner to Minor, May 6, 1870, Minor Papers; Gordon Canfield Lee, *The Struggle for Federal Aid: A History of the Attempts to Obtain Federal Aid for the Common Schools, 1870-1890* (New York, 1949), p. 43.

<sup>53</sup> John B. Minor to William Henry Ruffner, May 21, 28, 1870, Ruffner Papers.

<sup>54</sup> Walter J. Fraser, Jr., "John Eaton, Jr., Radical Republican: Champion of the Negro and Federal Aid to Southern Education, 1869-1882," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, XXV (Fall 1966), 240-243, 257; John Eaton to William Henry Ruffner, September 27, 30, December 23, 1870, Letters Sent by the Commissioner of Education, 1870-1890, Letterbooks, National Archives, Washington, D. C.; Lee, *The Struggle for Federal Aid*, p. 55. John Eaton was a native of New England and a graduate of both Dartmouth College and Andover Theological Seminary. He had held a chaplaincy in the Union Army and worked closely with Freedmen's Bureau offi-



the *Educational Journal*, to argue that “the state needs Federal help to give her school system a healthy and vigorous start.” Congress he hoped would soon act to “offer to . . . late slave states a bonus in money or land bearing some proportion to what each state does for itself.”<sup>55</sup> When the ill-fated Perce Bill (sponsored by Legrand W. Perce, a black Republican Congressman from Mississippi), providing that the proceeds of the sale of public lands be applied to education, was being debated before Congress in 1872 and early 1873, Ruffner vigorously worked for its passage. He publicly declared that it was “unfathomable” why Southern members of Congress continued to oppose the distribution among the states of the proceeds of the sale of public lands. They “seem . . . to imagine . . . that there [is] . . . a scheme to subject all the states to Federal authority”; perhaps they opposed such federal action, he suggested, because they opposed free public education or lacked the depth and vision to realize its importance to the South. But what “Congress ought to do above all things,” Ruffner wrote, is to provide “for a special donation of money to the Southern States.” Particularly, the United States government had “a clear moral obligation . . . to provide for the education of the freedmen and their children.”<sup>56</sup> In February 1873 Ruffner went to Washington to lobby for the Perce Bill. He talked with his close friend John Eaton on the possibility of its passage, called on Congressmen trying to enlist their support, and met with a Senate and House conference committee, evidently proposing various modifications to make the measure more palatable to Southern Congressmen. On March 2 he lamented to his family that the bill would have probably passed “but for the melancholy fact that Congress was within five days of its adjournment & it was then absorbed in the trial of the heroes of the ‘Credit Mobilier.’”<sup>57</sup>

While Ruffner sought federal funds for education, he continued to agitate for more state monies for the public schools. Knowing the widespread belief that the state could not afford the schools, he tried to convince the people that Virginia had ample financial resources to support the system.

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cials in providing for the physical and education needs of the black man. Following the war he had launched a Radical Republican newspaper in Memphis in support of Grant and subsequently headed Tennessee’s first public school system before being appointed to head the Bureau of Education.

<sup>55</sup> *Educational Journal*, II (January, April 1871), 119, 227.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, IV (December, 1872, April 1873), 73-75, 240; Lee, *The Struggle for Federal Aid*, p. 57.

<sup>57</sup> William Henry Ruffner to “My Darling Children,” March 2, 1873, Ruffner, Diary, 1870-1907, February 5, 6, 26, 1873, Ruffner Papers.

Admitting that a fiscally conservative legislature had strait-jacketed the state economically by funding Virginia's \$45,000,000 debt, Ruffner averred nevertheless that Virginia annually consumed or destroyed about \$20,000,000 through the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other luxuries. Therefore, "it is scarcely consistent in a people to doubt their ability to educate the children . . . and pay interest on the public debt when they are wastefully consuming five times as much as would do both." But even if poverty could be used as a justification for neglecting the schools, he wrote, "the present generation had better go into bankruptcy than let the children grow up in ignorance."<sup>58</sup>

As Ruffner witnessed many of his reasoned, scholarly arguments for additional monies for more and better furnished schools, the opening of graded and normal schools, increases in pay for teachers and administrators consistently ignored by the legislature which cut school funds in 1872, he became increasingly angered by the actions. He publicly labeled legislators who voted to pare school monies as "the cheap system men."<sup>59</sup> Before the legislative elections of May 1872, he warned the friends of education to beware of any candidate who did not unequivocally declare for the schools. Keep the General Assembly free of those who appear to be friendly to the schools, but who are really "traitors" and "trimmers." He asserted that there were those who would "wipe out the school system if they could" and darkly hinted that revenue was being diverted from the schools to meet other state expenses.<sup>60</sup>

When cuts in the school budget and the channeling of money from the schools to pay interest on the state debt created a crisis in the availability of school funds by early 1873, Ruffner took his plea for more money before the Senate. Reporting that most rural schools were operating on the anticipation of state subsidies, he called for "immediate action . . . to avert a catastrophe to our educational interests." When the legislature, however, refused to vote a special appropriation to mitigate the crisis, Ruffner boldly blasted the legislators for truckling to vested interest groups

<sup>58</sup> *Educational Journal*, II (April 1871), 232-233; Ruffner, *First Annual Report*, pp. 38, 51-52, 138-140.

<sup>59</sup> *Educational Journal*, III (March, April 1872), 199-200, 243; Ruffner, *Second Annual Report*, Part II, pp. 14, 15, 63, 74.

<sup>60</sup> *Educational Journal*, III (May, September 1872), 281-282, 439; Ruffner, *Diary, 1870-1907*, April 11, 13, 25, May 10, 1872, Ruffner Papers; Ruffner, *Second Annual Report*, pp. xi, xiv, 20, 26-29. In a few years Ruffner would publicly expose massive diversion of school funds and charge the Conservatives with illegally funneling off thousands of dollars earmarked for the schools.

who opposed support of the public schools. He declared that Virginia's "two greatest burdens [were] *debt and ignorance*." Again taking his cause to the people, in May he urged the friends of education to "enter actively into the canvas for the nomination and election of supervisors" in the various counties. Since these officials had the power to authorize or withhold local taxes as supplements to state school funds, the people had to protect against would-be "trimmers," enemies of the schools.<sup>61</sup> His calls for political activism, his incessant demands for more funds, and attacks on the fiscally conservative legislature triggered an angry backlash from his long seething opponents. The *Lexington Gazette* charged that Ruffner's plea to the people to elect only the "right" supervisors was a political move to be deprecated. Furthermore, the *Gazette* editorialized, "the sentiment of the people is decidedly opposed to the system of public instruction as advocated by Mr. Ruffner." Over \$4,000 annually flows out of Rockbridge County "to educate the idle offspring of the negroes of Tidewater, Virginia who return our taxes in solid votes at every election for our ruin and humiliation."<sup>62</sup> In late May a writer in the *Richmond Whig*, usually favorable to the schools, also scored Ruffner for meddling in politics, declaring that "the people have no idea of being ridden over rough-shod, or being dictated to by those who have been entrusted with the easy task of disbursing the taxes that they, out of their hard earnings, have to pay for the benefit of others." The superintendent's zeal "has led him too far and unless he applies the curb and holds his horse he may be unseated."<sup>63</sup>

Early in his superintendency Ruffner had been aware of the growing Conservative hostility and the efforts to unseat him when he stood for reelection. An editorial appearing in the Radical-controlled *Richmond Evening State Journal* during Ruffner's first year in office testified to the Conservative disquiet.

When [Ruffner] was appointed, the General Assembly thought . . . that they had selected a good, easy sort of half-way enemy to the common school system, who would be content to draw his salary and not trouble himself much about putting the schools in operation. But they were deceived in their man. Dr. Ruffner has turned out to be one of the most ardent and zealous friends of education in the country. To the consternation of the Conservatives in the Legislature, who thought to let the educational

<sup>61</sup> *Educational Journal*, IV (April, May 1873), 238, 281-283, 284-285; Maddex, "The Virginia Conservatives," pp. 717-718; *Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Virginia* (Richmond, 1873), pp. 319-320.

<sup>62</sup> *Lexington Gazette*, May 9, [1873], 1873, clipping, Scrapbook, Ruffner Papers.

<sup>63</sup> *Richmond Whig*, May [?], 1873, *ibid*.

provisions of the Constitution sleep, or to merely pretend to carry them out, the Superintendent at once set energetically to work in the organization of the schools . . . and from the time of his appointment to the present moment he has not faltered in the grand work. . . . He has by his untiring labors, by his writings and his example, awakened an interest which amounts almost to enthusiasm.<sup>64</sup>

Informed in the summer of 1872 that Conservative elements in the state were forming a coalition to defeat him so great was their antipathy to his administration, he considered resigning to save the school system. But appeals by close friends, who praised his work, and Dr. Barnas Sears, who urged him to stay on or "all . . . would be lost," convinced Ruffner to continue his crusade for the schools.<sup>65</sup>

In the fall of 1873, on the eve of the gubernatorial and legislative elections and with the election of the superintendent only a few months away, Conservative politicians stepped up their campaign against Ruffner, charging in the *Whig* that he "is not in sympathy with the Conservative party as to our free school policy." Rather, Ruffner's loyalty lay with the Republican policy for the schools—funneling more funds into education even to the point of jeopardizing the state's ability to meet its prior fiscal commitments.<sup>66</sup> Pressured to declare for either the Conservative or Republican party and convinced that the election of the superintendent would be determined by a Conservative-dominated caucus, Ruffner was forced to abandon his policy of not aligning the schools with any one party and to publicly declare that only the Conservatives could insure "the continued prosperity and usefulness of the school system in Virginia." But at the same time he asserted that he would continue to work to extend "the blessings of education with absolute impartiality to all classes, rich and poor, white and black."<sup>67</sup>

After the November gubernatorial and legislative elections which were landslide victories for the Conservatives, Ruffner discovered a new source of opposition to his reelection. For personal economic reasons Professor Charles S. Venable of the University of Virginia, who wrote the mathematic book for the "Southern Series" of texts long used in Virginia's private schools, and Colonel Robert E. Withers, who represented the publishers of the "Southern Series" in Virginia, opposed Ruffner's optional textbook policy for the public schools. As the field was now open to competitors,

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<sup>64</sup> Richmond *Evening State Journal*, January 14, 1871, *ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Barnas Sears to William Henry Ruffner, August 5, 1872, John B. Minor to William Henry Ruffner, August 8, 1872, Ruffner Papers.

<sup>66</sup> Richmond *Whig*, October [?], 1873, *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

Ruffner's policy cut into the sales of Professor Venable's books and the commissions of Colonel Withers. Angered by declining sales, Venable charged that Ruffner's policy showed that he must be "cheek by jowl with the agents of the publishing houses which are circulating through the schools North and North West the most infamous slanders of our people."<sup>68</sup> But it was Withers, Ruffner concluded in late November, who was vindictively launching a movement which would lead to "a secretly devised scheme being suddenly developed in caucus" to defeat his reelection. Therefore Ruffner informed Governor-elect James Lawson Kemper, his classmate at Washington College some thirty years before, of the possible plot to keep him abreast of the behind-the-scenes maneuvers. Among others whom Ruffner alerted to the scheme was Delegate W. D. Sutherlin. Acknowledging that Withers was Ruffner's enemy, Sutherlin believed that opposition would also come from other sources.<sup>69</sup>

By early December newspapers both friendly and hostile to Ruffner began to publicize the maneuvering over the election of the superintendent. A friendly editorial urged the legislature not to be influenced by any schemes concocted "by certain book 'rings'" to supplant Superintendent Ruffner.<sup>70</sup> The *Richmond Whig* observed that the legislature would commit a grave injustice if it replaced Ruffner, "the very life of the free schools," a man "who has been tried and found a 'faithful servant' . . . won a reputation second to that of no school officer in the Union, if equaled by any." In the western part of the state the *Floyd Reporter* similarly implored the legislature to reelect a man of "ability and experience." On Christmas Day the *Virginia Monitor*, a Franklin County paper, also agreed that Ruffner's experience, "remarkable executive ability," and "uncommon earnestness and zeal" warranted his reelection.<sup>71</sup> But that same day the *Petersburg Index and Appeal* editorialized, "We are glad to hear that there will be a contest about the Superintendency of Public Education, and we don't hesitate to say we hope there will be a change." The editor opposed Ruffner's reelection because of his bias against the "Southern Series" of textbooks for the public schools. Since these texts had been used in Vir-

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Maddex, "The Virginia Conservatives," p. 621; William Henry Ruffner to James L. Kemper, December 12, 1873, Kemper Papers.

<sup>69</sup> William Henry Ruffner to James L. Kemper, December 12, 1873, Kemper Papers; W. D. Sutherlin to William Henry Ruffner, December 5, 1873, Ruffner Papers; Robert R. Jones, "Conservative Virginian: The Post-war Career of Governor James Lawson Kemper," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1964, p. 319.

<sup>70</sup> Unidentified newspaper clipping, Scrapbook, Ruffner Papers.

<sup>71</sup> *Richmond Whig*, December [20?], 1873, *Floyd Reporter*, December 19, 1873, *The Virginia Monitor*, December 25, 1873, *ibid.*

ginia schools for twenty years, "we see no reason why we shall now become so progressive as to go out of Virginia and the South for school books." Texts by southern scholars are "the only bulwark we now have left upon which we may rely for the protection against the great and damning influx of Yankee notions and ideas."<sup>72</sup>

Deeply concerned over the charges leveled at him and the strong opposition to his reelection, Ruffner communicated with friends sympathetic to the school cause both in and out of the legislature and asked for their support. Among those who responded to his call for aid was Dr. Barnas Sears. Privately the general agent of the Peabody Fund told a leading member of the legislature, "I should regard it as a great public calamity if [Superintendent Ruffner] should by any means be interrupted in his great work." Under Ruffner's leadership, Sears continued, the school system of Virginia has become a model copied by the southern states. He warned that if Superintendent Ruffner's system now passed into other hands it "might be mangled & botched."<sup>73</sup>

Even though Ruffner had attempted to undercut the opposition, when the Conservative caucus met in early January 1874 a determined effort was made to defeat him. No doubt some of his opponents had been alienated for personal reasons—by his refusal to appoint their nominee to public school posts or by his textbook policy. These legislators were joined by others who opposed what they considered his "extravagances" as superintendent, his "fanatical appeals" for higher taxes to be used for the schools, and his efforts to use his office for political ends. One member of the caucus, introducing another reason to supplant Ruffner, branded him a Negrophile! The legislator charged that in an attempt to secure legislation favorable to the schools, Ruffner had gone "among the Negro members, putting his arms lovingly around their necks and talking sweetly in their ears!" Such a charge was very damaging before a caucus of men whose party was founded on white supremacy. But caucus members loyal to the superintendent fought the effort to unseat him. During the battle Ruffner sent messages to his forces on the floor to counter the allegations hurled at him. As debate raged on into the night, Ruffner's supporters realized that the opposition was so strong that they dared not allow a ballot; time was needed outside the caucus to work in his behalf. When anti-funder,

<sup>72</sup> Petersburg *Index and Appeal*, December 25, 1873, *ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Barnas Sears to General Joseph R. Anderson, December 5, 1873, Sutherland to Ruffner, December 5, 1873, Kemper to Ruffner, December 12, 1873, Jno. W. Daniel to William Henry Ruffner, January 3, 1874, Ruffner Papers.

later Readjuster party member "Parson" John E. Massey threatened to filibuster for Ruffner, the caucus adjourned. By the time it met again, Ruffner's supporters had bargained for enough votes to renominate him. On January 6 the General Assembly confirmed the nomination. A leading legislator and friend of the school system notified Ruffner of his victory: "Congratulations, I would have regarded your defeat as a calamity to the state."<sup>74</sup> Superintendent Ruffner had been granted four more years to build his school system.

Long interested in the field of education, William Henry Ruffner, at forty-six, had welcomed the opportunity to enhance both his own reputation and serve his state in the newly created post of superintendent of public instruction. After drafting the bill that put Virginia's first state-wide school system into operation, Superintendent Ruffner launched a crusade to dispel the hostility toward public schooling and the education of the Negro and to awaken the people to the need for state-supported education. Unable to secure adequate funding for the schools, he advocated federal aid for Southern education, which most of his contemporaries considered as subversive of states' rights. To a fiscally conservative General Assembly more concerned over paying interest on Virginia's funded debt than paying for public schools, Ruffner demonstrated that the state had ample resources to do both. Although his crusade incurred the enmity of many Conservative politicians who fought his efforts, at the end of his first four years in office the new-born school system employed 3,962 teachers at an average monthly salary of \$32.64, and enrolled 52,086 black pupils and 121,789 white who were taught over five months of the year in 3,902 schools at a cost to the state of \$1,004,990.02.<sup>75</sup> He had laid the foundations that irrevocably committed Virginia, a state which lacked a tradition of common schooling, to a system of public schools for all the people. But the obstacles Ruffner encountered during his first term of office and his near defeat in caucus when up for reelection foreshadowed the herculean tasks which lay ahead and the powerful opposition which would eventually sacrifice Virginia's apostle of education on the altar of political expediency.

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<sup>74</sup> H. M. Bell to William Henry Ruffner, January 7, 1874, Barclay, "Notes on W. H. R.," Notebook Nos. 1 & 4, Ruffner, Diary, 1870-1907, January 7, 1874, *The Shenandoah Democrat*, January 22, 1874, clipping, Scrapbook, Ruffner Papers; *Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Virginia* (Richmond, 1874), p. 58; *Journal of the House of Delegates of the State of Virginia for the Session of 1874* (Richmond, 1874), p. 54.

<sup>75</sup> William Henry Ruffner, *Tenth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction for the Year Ending July 31, 1880* (Richmond, 1880), pp. 118, 128.