

## Refining Racial Accommodationism in the Jim Crow South: The Case of Joseph W. Holley, Accommodationist or a Black Apostle of White Oppression?

Thomas V. O'Brien  
The Ohio State University at Mansfield

The goal of this paper is to interrogate the meaning of accommodationism, a tactic used by black educators in the segregated South who interacted with whites to bring about improved school opportunities, and more equity for the black masses. To reach this goal, the paper explores the life and work of Joseph W. Holley (1870-1958). Holley is considered the most conservative black educator of his era. In 1903 Holley founded a private Bible and manual training school in Albany, Georgia. Under his leadership the school eventually became a college and part of the public university system. In his 43 years as president Holley called for differentiated curricula for the races, promoting industrial training and later vocational education. Holley accepted segregation as the way of life in the Jim Crow South and made sure that the programs at his school in Albany conformed to the region's racial etiquette. As inroads were made toward disrupting segregation in the 1930 and 40s (*Missouri v. ex. el Gaines*, 1938), Holley took his stand with conservatives, and spoke out against racial mixing. Moreover, Holley was late to embrace the logic of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which called for equal but separate accommodations for the races. In the 1950s, after he had been forced to step down as president of the school he founded, he became well known as a black segregationist.

Accommodationism is routinely associated with the approach used by Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute. Washington's accommodationism is routinely contrasted with the confrontational tactics of W.E.B. Du Bois. The literature on black schooling in the Jim Crow South is rich with examples of accomplished accommodationists (Gilmore, 1996, LeLoudis, 1996, Fairclough, 2001; Harlan, 1983; Bond, 1939; Litwack, 1998). There is very little scholarship, however, about black educators who publicly embraced a similar curriculum, but may have operated for different goals and purposes. While nearly every African American educator in the region had to "put on ol' massa," not all black educators privately rejected their public rhetoric or intended to mislead. Some, it seems, may have even believed in the racial superiority of whites, and implemented a curriculum, and taught and operated their schools on such assumptions. Holley may have been one of them. Nevertheless, a number of scholars have described Holley as an extreme accommodationist (Grant, 1993; Cell, 1983; Litwack, 1998). The historical record of Holley's life and work presents an opportunity to determine the suitability of this portrayal and label. *A Note on Sources*  
Holley's correspondence and papers pertaining to his work as an educator and school founder have been located in a number of places including at The Rhode Island Historical Society, Albany State University, The Georgia Archives, The Albany and Macon Public Libraries, The Atlanta University Center, The University of Georgia, Phillips Academy--

Andover, and Fisk and Lincoln Universities. I have visited each of these sites. Holley also wrote five short books in his last 10 years --between 1948 and 1958 (an autobiography, a monograph on his views on slavery, two pieces describing his religious views, and a book on segregation and education)—which I make use of to understand his social theorizing.

Holley called for blacks to be practicing Christians and to be industrious, and on these fronts he was well within the borders of accommodationism. (Indeed, calls for "true" Christian practice were even within the borders of more radical spokesmen for racial uplift, Blum, 2005). Holley cited W.E.B. Du Bois in his rationale for a high quality Christian training: "Honesty, truth, and purity are seldom taught, for neither preacher nor people have come to realize that these virtues are essential to a Christian life . . . . What kind of school is needed for this problem? Certainly the basic need here is a training of the heart as well as the mind and *hand*" (Holley, 1948, 56)

Like other accommodationists, Holley accepted the reality that blacks should be educated separately from whites. Unlike them, however, he argued, sometimes forcefully, that blacks should fill subordinate roles in society. The races came from vastly different backgrounds, Holley maintained, and were destined to have different futures. Placing both groups in one system, he argued in 1936, and offering them similar types of school experiences as whites, and--as reformers from the northern philanthropies were advocating--was ill advised. It "would be unfair to both races to establish and operate mixed schools here in Georgia," he declared. What if two young men had studied agricultural economics? he asked. The white lad could find appropriate work in a bank, but the black lad could work only as a custodian or run the elevator. "It's not fair for my boy to fit himself for service in a field where the door is closed," asserted Holley. Instead, a system of black schooling should be based on blacks' "special needs." "Courses of study designed for the white children of New England are not suited for the needs of Negro boys and girls in Georgia. The great mass[es]... need to be trained in agriculture, the mechanical arts, the trades and industries, and in the art of homemaking" (Holley, 1948, 88. Holley's 1936 "Statesboro" address is reprinted on pages 88-90.)

Holley's argument for such a program contained an economic rationale: "We must plant ourselves firmly in the soil and in the fundamental and basic industries of the country, or we will be lost in the battle for economic security." (Holley, 1955, 17). "Economic prosperity," he wrote, "is the desideratum for the student-products of our school system." (Holley, 1955, 25).

Elements of Holley's argument reflected his call for efficiency: Black students must be prepared "to earn a better living. To accomplish this," he continued, "we must give them selective training in those vocations which they are most needed. The field of cultural pursuits offer very little, presently, in terms of economic security; they are overcrowded, or they are being superceded by competing interests" (Holley, 1955, 26).

Holley's words also smacked of white supremacy: "The educational requirements of the people who are only a few hundred years out of the jungle are not the same as those who have had thousands of years of civilization. Their future prospects are not the same. . . . The question is not one of human equality, but of difference in basic needs" (Holley 1948, 87-8).

A number of indicators suggest that Holley was sincere in his belief in white superiority. First, he used this type of rhetoric often with both blacks and whites. Second Holley genuinely felt that Christianity was the source of civilization, and that Europeans and their descendants had embraced it for a much longer period than Africans and their descendants. While visiting Africa in 1928, for example, he wrote: "It is a gracious providence that has delivered the American negroe [sic] from such a background, as we have seen him living in absolute filth in their native huts our sympathies have certainly gone out to them. We long to see the day come when they will be able to realize the more abundant life on this earth (Holley to Hazard, 1928). Third, there is no record that I can find that Holley thought otherwise. No private diary entry, no commentary from a peer, nothing. To the contrary Holley seemed to embrace white supremacy: A.C. Searles, a student at Holley's institution GNAC in the 1940s, occasionally served as Holley's chauffeur. Alone at one point with Holley, Searles asked, "Since there ain't nobody here but us, tell me the truth. You don't believe deep down in your heart all those things you say to white folks to raise money, do you?" Holley's reply disappointed Searles: "I certainly do, replied Holley, "The good white folks are the best friends the Negroes ever had" (Holley quoted by Searles in Fairclough, 2001, 34-5).

One could argue here that Holley was "wearing the mask" to sure up his relationship with his principal benefactors, and thus serve his people. Even alone with a black student, Holley may have chosen to reply as he did to keep his cover. But unlike other black educators of the time who functioned as double agents, the archival evidence suggests that Holley prized his own success over that of the black community he ostensibly served. His ultimate loyalties were to the status quo and to those who supported and promoted his enterprise. Holley had overcome tremendous odds in establishing a school in Albany, but Holley was convinced of the inferiority of the black race. He believed blacks to be defective personally, socially and culturally, uncivilized without Christianity, and in possession of lower intellectual capacity than whites. In reaching these conclusions, Holley made a grave mistake in confusing the conditions of poverty and oppression with the causes.

Accommodationism in the Jim Crow South assumed a variety of forms. Accommodationists "put on ol' massa" for the collective good of the blacks masses to win favors and concessions from whites in order to improve the education, health, and well-being of blacks. Accommodationists, such as Booker T. Washington, William Councilill, Beulah Rucker Oliver, and Lucy Laney, for example, believed very little of their own rhetoric, which was designed to mislead. While most accommodationists stressed economics over politics in their public rhetoric intended for whites, there was a political promise of a broad education that drove their actual activity "on the ground" (Butchart, 2004).

This study finds characterizations of Holley as an accommodationist—or even as an extreme accommodationist"—unsupported by the historical record. Holley publicly and privately believed fundamentally in white superiority and promoted a curriculum congruent with this belief for blacks. Holley's case helps clarify the term accommodationism. It also provides a useful counter-example to those black educators described in the literature who functioned with clarity of vision, operating for uplift and the common good of the black masses. In doing so, it puts in high relief the tough, cautious work of other black educators who sought equality and opportunity for those in their communities. Their work takes on even more meaning when we explore Holley's story (Butchart, 2004).

The Holley story also gives us insights into less praiseworthy educators, who, I feel, we must get to know well. Understanding educational misdeeds, some might argue, is an inefficient use of an educational historian's time and energy. The focus, some contend, should be on curricula that work, on "best practice," and on stories of success. In contrast, I suggest—in closing—that critiquing flawed human activity, and figuring out *how and why* they operated as they did, provides researchers, scholars, and policy makers with critical information about the obstacles to "what works" so they can act to not only to make progress possible, but to also make it more probable.

## References

- Blum, Edward, J. (2005). "Religion and the Sociological Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois." *Sociation Today*, Spring, 3(1), [www.ncsociology.org/sociationtoday/v31/blum.htm](http://www.ncsociology.org/sociationtoday/v31/blum.htm)
- Bond, Horace Mann (1939/69). *Negro Education in Alabama: A Study in Cotton and Steel* (New York: Atheneum).
- Butchart, Ronald, (2004). Private communication via email, July.
- Cell, John W. (1993) *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of The Way It Was in the South*.
- Fairclough, Adam (2001). *Teaching Equality: Black Schools in the Age of Jim Crow*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Harlan, Louis, (1983). *Booker T. Washington: Wizard of Tuskegee*. New York: Oxford.

- Holley, Joseph, H. (1948). *You Can't Build a Chimney from the Top*. New York: William-Frederick.
- Holley, Joseph, H. (1955). *Education and the Segregation Issue*. New York: William-Frederick.
- Holley to Hazard, (1928). Extract from letter of J.W. Holley, October 10, 1928. Carline Hazard Papers, Misc. A-H, Box 1, Folder 38, University of Rhode Island Special Collections.
- Gilmore, Glenda, E., (1996). *Gender and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Grant, Donald, L. (1993), *The Way It Was In The South: The Black Experience in Georgia*. (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1993), 241, 357-8;
- LeLoudis, James L. (1996). *Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self and Society, 1880-1920* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996
- Litwack, Leon F. (1998). *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Knopf.
- Missouri v. ex. el Gaines* (1938).
- Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)