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Congressional District Schools: Forerunner of Federally Supported Vocational Agriculture

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Historiographers can look to many source for the philosophy of vocational agriculture that preceded and was ultimately expressed in the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917. Among examples noted by others are the Hatch Act of 1887, the secondary school of agriculture established at the University of Minnesota in 1888 (True, 1902), and the National Farm School in Doylestown, Pennsylvania started in 1896 (Stimson & Lathrop, 1942). These examples all provide a piece of the philosophical picture that became translated into the political reality of federally supported vocational agriculture. However, there is another example that provides a clear perspective on the beginnings of vocational agriculture and what it would ultimately become. The Congressional district agricultural schools--because of how they were established, their facilities, and their curricula--are, when taken together as a group, an important early example of vocational agriculture.

Beginning in the early 1800's, strong support was increasing nationally for more agricultural instruction in the educational system (Thompson, 1965). As an indication of this support, the first Morrill Act was passed in 1862 initiating the federal government's policy of support for agricultural education and the vocational education areas at the postsecondary level (A Compilation of Federal Education Laws, 1977).

A central focus of these efforts was to include agricultural instruction as part of the public school system in order to involve persons in the field at an earlier age. Both elementary school instruction and several versions of secondary instruction were proposed and attempted. However, with many small elementary school districts it was very difficult to get any uniformity or a cooperative effort organized for elementary school agriculture. On the high school level, though, Barrows (1919) reported that 19 public high schools established agriculture as part of their curriculum in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Between 1901 and 1905, 33 public high schools included agriculture in their curricula; and in the five years following, 413 more schools added agriculture to their curricula. By 1915, 4,665 public high schools and 253 private high schools incorporated agriculture as a part of their curricular offerings (Barrows, 1919). Instruction included both sexes, and these high schools were serving 95,148 students of whom 40,892 were girls (Barrows, 1919).

Though the public and political moods of the country at the time did much to foster the growth of agricultural instruction, the inclusion of agricultural instruction in high school curricula was facilitated by Congressional district schools publicly supported in Alabama, Georgia, and Virginia. The practical, day-to-day operation and administration of these schools provided lessons on how to adapt vocational agriculture to the programs, curricula, and clientele of public schools.

Purpose and Objectives

The major purpose of this study was to document the establishment and accomplishments of these Congressional district agricultural schools. The study accomplished the following objectives:

1. To document the statutory establishment of Congressional district agricultural schools.
2. To describe the programs of vocational agriculture implemented at Congressional district agricultural schools.
3. To describe the accomplishments of Congressional district agricultural schools.
4. To draw implications for contemporary vocational agriculture from Congressional district agricultural schools.

Procedures

Historical research methods were utilized to accomplish the objectives of the study. Both primary and secondary sources were utilized to obtain the information needed. Primary sources included

mass media publications, texts of state legislation, and reports by state departments of education. Secondary sources included United States Department of Agriculture publications, United States Office of Education publications, books, and journal articles. Information was collected at numerous libraries including the Library of Congress, United States Department of Education Library, and the National Agriculture Library.

Congressional District School Establishment

Three states (Alabama, Georgia, and Virginia) used essentially the same process to establish their Congressional district schools. Legislation started the schools and provided for their funding. However, each state had a slightly different perspective on what purpose the schools were to accomplish when the legislation was passed.

Alabama: The Alabama legislature passed the first Congressional district school legislation on February 28, 1889 (Acts, 1889). Act No. 579 established two branch agricultural experiment stations and agricultural schools in the state (Acts, 1889). Thompson (1965) gives a lot of credit to Alabama farmers and the state Grange for getting the enabling legislation passed. He also noted that in the 1880s, high schools were virtually non-existent for Alabama rural areas.

In his dissertation Thompson (1965) emphasized the importance of having the words experiment stations appear before schools in the act. In his opinion the legislature was more interested in agricultural experimentation than agricultural education at the time of the act's passage. Section 5 of the Act stated:

> ...that the board must cause such experiments to be made at the stations as will advance the interests of scientific agriculture, particularly on Tennessee Valley lands, and on red pine lands and lands of similar character in southeast Alabama, and to cause such chemical analyses to be made as deemed necessary; all such analyses, if requested, to be made under the supervision of the commissioner of agriculture by the chemist of the agricultural department without charge. (Acts, 1889, p. 1037)

In spite of an emphasis on the experiment station purpose, the Alabama legislation called the schools agricultural schools and appropriated six thousand dollars to be split evenly between two locations in north Alabama and southeast Alabama (Acts, 1889). By 1893, the Alabama legislature strengthened its commitment to the original agricultural high schools by appropriating additional funds and authorizing the purchase of additional land (Acts, 1893). The legislature also authorized additional agriculture schools (Thompson, 1965), such that by 1894-95 all additional Congressional districts without agricultural schools were authorized to have them (Thompson, 1965). A total of 11 Congressional district agricultural schools was established in Alabama (Stimson & Lathrop, 1942).

To oversee the administration of these schools, the Alabama legislature also established a special board composed or the commissioner of agriculture and the directors of the Agricultural Experiment Station at Auburn, Alabama and five progressive farmers, who are actually engaged in cultivating Tennessee Valley lands, and five progressive farmers who are actually engaged in cultivating red pine lands..." (Acts, 1889, p. 1036). The make up of these boards is reflective of the emphasis then placed in vocationally oriented areas on experimental learning (Camp & Hillison, 1984). How progressive was to be determined was not spelled out in the legislation.

Georgia: Georgia was the second state to establish Congressional district agricultural high schools. These were conceived and patterned after the plan of the Alabama schools (Thompson, 1965). Governor Joseph Terrell endorsed the concept of agricultural education when he addressed the Georgia General Assembly in 1905 (Thirty-fourth Annual Report, 1906). The same report further noted that rural areas needed high schools and that it was easier to bring the schools to the students rather than take the students to schools already established in towns and cities.

The Georgia legislature approved a law on August 18, 1906 permitting the establishment and maintenance of schools of agriculture and mechanic arts (Acts, 1906). Act No. 448 stated (Acts, 1906):

> That the Governor is hereby authorized to establish and cause to be maintained in each congressional district of the state an industrial and agricultural school in accordance with the further provisions of this Act. Said schools shall be branches of the state College of Agriculture, a department of the University of Georgia. (p.72)

The Act further emphasized that Georgia Department of Agriculture fees charged for the inspection of fertilizer, oils, and other inspection fees would pay the expense of operating the schools (Acts, 1906). True (1929) estimated this state contribution to be about $6,000 per year; approximately the same amount used by Alabama to establish its first schools. He further reported that localities had to "furnish not less than 200 acres of land and the necessary equipment of buildings, livestock, machinery, farm implements, etc." (p. 340). Stimson and Lathrop (1942) reported 11 district schools established by 1907; the schools had local pledges of $830,000 above the monies granted by the state.

Unlike Alabama, which created a new supervisory board, Georgia used an already existing group to oversee the establishment and operation of the new schools. The policy-making body for Georgia Congressional district schools was the board of trustees of the University of Georgia which "shall exercise such supervision as in their judgement may be necessary to secure unity of plan and efficiency in said schools." (Acts, 1906, p. 72)

Virginia: Shortly after Georgia passed its enabling legislation to establish Congressional district agricultural schools, Virginia followed suit. State agricultural leaders such as S.W. Fletcher, Director of the Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, encouraged agricultural instruction in public schools (Fletcher, 1909). Thompson (1965) reported that Virginia supplemented existing schools by developing agriculture and home economics departments rather than establishing new schools.

Virginia passed an appropriations bill in 1908 permitting agricultural education to be included in the public schools (Acts, 1908; Crosby, 1912; Kinnear, 1952). In 1910 the Virginia legislature was quite explicit in its support of the Congressional district schools.

> ...that at least one public high school to be selected by the State Board of Education in each congressional district of the state, a thorough course in agriculture, the domestic arts and sciences and manual training shall be given in addition to the academic course prescribed for such high schools, and at least one-fourth of the school time shall be devoted to these subjects. (Acts, 1910, p. 362-363)

The act authorized the lease, purchase, or donation of at least five acres of land "for the purpose of providing practical demonstration in agricultural science" (Acts 1910, p. 363). The legislation permitted the large sum of $30,000 (compared to Alabama and Georgia appropriations) to be spent and required that the members of the State Board of Education and the president of the Virginia College of Agriculture and Polytechnic Institute in Blacksburg, Virginia by the governing body of the schools. By school year 1910-11, there were 10 Congressional district agricultural high schools in Virginia (Annual Report, 1914).

In all three states, most Congressional district agricultural schools were established in a central area of the district. These central locations were chosen to permit the greatest number of students to attend each school. However, in an era when bus transportation was not readily available, it became clear that service areas could only be increased by having students stay at the school. Despite efforts to come up with convenient locations, all three states found that difficult decisions had to be made soon after enabling legislation was passed on what facilities should be like.

Facilities

The facility issue for public schools during this time included all physical aspects of schooling--from the building in which the school was housed to selection of individual student materials. There were concerns about not only what to provide but also how to facilitate disbursement of funds. J.D. Eggleston, Jr., State Superintendent of Public Instruction for Virginia (1908b), criticized one wealthy school division for using a log cabin for a schoolhouse when it had $2,300 surplus in the bank. Earlier in the same year, Eggleston (1908a) had argued, "that children should be taught in health-keeping and health-giving school rooms" (p. 1). There was even an issue over individual drinking cups for each student (Jennings, 1909).

Depending on legislative specification and local contributions and conditions, the specific facilities varied from one Congressional district school to another. A typical set of facilities consisted of a main building, two dormitories, several laboratories, and a school farm (Lane & Crosby, 1916). Usually the main building contained several classrooms and a dining room.

Most main buildings were two or three story structures. The Georgia Congressional district schools used the same architect and, consequently, had a great deal of uniformity in their structures (Lane

& Crosby, 1916). The Fifth Congressional District Agricultural High School in Elk Creek, Virginia circular of information (1917) modestly described its main building as:

> ...the embodiment of the most approved designs of modern school architecture. It is a three story brick building, lighted and ventilated in accordance with the most approved hygienic requirements, and contains eleven large classrooms, office, library, two music rooms, asplendid auditorium, three laboratories, cloak rooms, etc. Separate dormitory accommodations are provided for boys and girls. (p.9)

In the main, with adequate monies provided through legislation, buildings were quite sufficient for their purposes at each of these schools in all three states. To emphasize the importance of experimental learning, most schools contained several laboratories. Without laboratories the school work was considered to be bookish (An Educational Study, 1919), and less useful because its practicality was called into question. There was a great emphasis on hands-on learning and its utility in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For example, Alabama school students were given laboratory work in soils, farm crops, and horticulture (An Educational Study, 1919). When taking the basic sciences, students also had to perform in well-equipped chemistry and biology laboratories. Several schools had farm shops (Forty-Seventh Annual Report, 1919), most equipped with "... hand tools, gasoline engine, planer, band saw, rip saw, cut-off saw, anvil, forge, and a few other tools" (Lane & Crosby, 1916, p. 15).

Besides the main building and several laboratories, all Congressional district agricultural schools had school farms. Some were as small as give acres. Others included several hundred acres. Of the three states, Virginia tended to have the smallest farms while Alabama and Georgia both had larger school farms. The Second District Agricultural and Mechanical School in Tifton, Georgia, for example, reported a farm inventory of: "2 mules, 2 horses, 6 cows, 8 young cattle, 75 hogs, 100 chickens, $400 tools, 1 barn, 47 acres cultivated last year, 35 acres more cultivated this year, all farm work done by the students" (Thirty-Ninth Annual Report, 1911, p. 68).

School Personnel

With the Congressional district schools viewed as intermediary between rural elementary schools and the State college of agriculture (Lane & Crosby, 1916), a faculty had to be hired who could work successfully with the appropriate age clientele. At a 1912 meeting in Athens, Georgia of the Congressional district school principals, it was recommended that the faculty of agricultural schools be made up of the following key personnel (Lane & Crosby, 1916):

(1) the principal, who, the committee thinks, should be an educator with an agricultural training;
(2) a teacher of agriculture;
(3) a teacher of science, who should be a man capable of assisting the professor of agriculture;
(4) a teacher of mathematics and farm mechanics;
(5) a teacher of English and history;
(6) a teacher of domestic science; and
(7) a matron. (p. 9)

From this list, one can infer that the principals were attempting to provide their students with a broad base of learning, as well as specialized training in agriculture and farm mechanics. As was typical of the time, the instructors and the administrative leaders of the schools were assumed to be male, though a single matron was included to look after the females and to instill a sense of family responsibility in the students.

In the Alabama schools (Owens, 1909) the number of faculty members varied from 3 to 6 per school. Owens (1909) reported that the Alabama seventh District school had six faculty members and 282 students from 15 counties. By 1918, 3 of the 9 school principals in Alabama were also the agriculture teachers (An Educational Study, 1919). The same report noted that all of the agriculture teachers were graduates of the Alabama Polytechnic Institute except for two. The agricultural teachers received salaries of $1,800 to $2,300 per year (An Educational Study, 1919). These compare very favorably to the average annual salary of $635 for teachers in the U.S. during school year 1917-18 (Biennial Survey, 1919).

A surprisingly large number of teachers possessed bachelor's degrees during an era that did not yet have a college level major in agricultural education (Hillison, 1987). While writing about different

types of agriculture teachers in Virginia, Fletcher (1909) reported that the Congressional agricultural high schools had a corps of specialized teachers in agriculture.

Curriculum

One of the best ways to express the purpose of the Congressional district agricultural schools is to examine the curriculum taught by the faculty. While both named and described as agricultural high schools, they were in reality comprehensive high schools, as indicated by their facilities and their resident personnel.

One report noted that the name "agricultural school" is unfortunate as it causes both the educated and the uneducated to believe most of the school time is spent on strictly agricultural subjects (Thirty-Ninth Annual Report, 1911). The report further noted that only about one-fifth of study and recitation time was spent on agricultural topics; in reality, the coursework was broad-based, crossing several disciplines and competencies.

For school year 1915-16, for example, the Georgia-recommended curriculum for the district agricultural schools consisted of four years of classes in each of the following subjects: English, mathematics, history, science, agriculture, farm mechanics, and domestic arts and science. Sex-typed enrollments of today in many of the vocational science areas was evident even during the early part of the century. The boys enrolled in the agriculture and farm mechanics classes, while the girls enrolled in the domestic arts and sciences classes and occasionally some pedagogy classes preparing them to be teachers (Lane & Crosby, 1916). Typically, education of women was geared toward making them good mothers or good "mistresses of families" (Willard, 1987, p. 22).

The specifics of the agricultural curriculum in Georgia district schools were quite general in nature (Lane & Crosby, 1916):

> First year - general agriculture, poultry husbandry, agricultural laboratory, and seasonal laboratory. Second year - breeds of livestock, dairying, stock judging, dairy laboratory, and farm crops. Third year - feeds and feeding, elementary horticulture, feeding laboratory, and horticultural laboratory. Fourth year - soils, fertilizers, soil laboratory, farm management laboratory, and landscape gardening. (pp. 24-25)

The farm mechanics laboratory had instruction, for boys, in free-hand drawing, woodworking, forge work, mechanical drawing, and elementary surveying (Lane & Crosby, 1916).

The alabama and Virginia curricula were similar to the one implemented in Georgia. Under the general heading of agriculture, Alabama did include other topics such as botany, agricultural for southern schools, and practical work (Owens, 1909). A major part of the curriculum was the practical instruction provided at the school farm. Among the hands-on activities were clearing the farm of stumps, using a disc plow, mixing fertilizer, applying fertilizer, and milking cows (Thirty-Ninth Annual Report, 1911). Along with the use of school land for an experiment station, Alabama district schools also had practical farm experience for students. The students were encouraged to take individual care of certain plots and to conduct experiments and investigations (Owens, 1909). Thus, practical training was based on the fundamentals students had learned in these academic classes. Likewise, the life experiences helped to make classroom learning more visibly applicable to the students.

Conclusions and Implications

The Congressional district agricultural schools met with varying degrees of success. For example, Georgia's schools served 1,300 students in just the single school year of 1913-14 (Lane & Crosby, 1916). The schools, however, had to find appropriate faculty. Though the teachers of the academic subjects already existed, agriculture teachers had to be found and trained. Because of the initial paucity of teachers and possibly because of the precedent-setting curricula, these schools had both their benefactors and their critics.

A.C. True, director of the USDA Office of Experiment Stations and President of the American Association of Agricultural Colleges and Experiment Stations, expressed concern over the school farms at the 1914 Vocational Education Commission hearing. When asked by Charles Prosser if he opposed an experiment station at the high school such as provided in one of the drafts of the Page bill, True replied, "Yes, as a general rule" (Report, 1914, p. 212). True and the land-grant

universities became supporters of the Smith-Hughes Act only after it was obvious that Hatch Act Experiment Station funds would not go to high schools.

On the other hand, the practical experience obtained at the district school farms showed the importance of such activities for agricultural students. A very important part of the Smith-Hughes Act, sponsored by two Georgians where 11 of the Congressional district schools existed, was the inclusion of occupational work experience. The act required: "...that such schools shall provide for directed or supervised practice in agriculture, either on a farm provided for by the school or other farm, for at least six months per year..." (A Compilation, 1977, p. 649).

The curricula established at the district schools set many precedents. By combining academic subjects with laboratory and field work, the schools established a curriculum for a field that had just started. The district schools showed that both academic and vocational subjects could be taught in the same school, and that instruction in one could complement learning in the other. One of the major debates after passage of the Smith-Hughes Act was whether to have dual schools or comprehensive high schools. The Congressional district agricultural schools showed that comprehensive high schools could function successfully. In fact, the curriculum taught in the schools with agriculture for the boys and home economics for the girls continued to exist for many decades in small rural high schools.

Though the curricula helped provide precedents for vocational agriculture, facilities at the district schools do not directly translate into practice today. Though comprehensive, like many modern high schools, the district schools had to have dormitories to board students who were not within commuting distance. Modern schools rarely have their own school farms to provide supervised occupational experience. Laboratory facilities provided to enrich students' learning from books, are standard fare and a source of excellence at comprehensive high schools today.

While Congressional district agricultural schools only existed in three states and lasted a relatively short period of time, they showed the rest of the country that agriculture could be taught successfully in a comprehensive high school setting. The schools, through necessity, had to set precedents in facilities, administration, school personnel, and curriculum. They even set precedents in state legislation that was emulated in 1917 with passage of the Smith-Hughes Act, which ironically led to the demise of Congressional district agricultural schools. However, the schools that used Smith-Hughes funds for the establishment of their own vocational agriculture programs could follow the lead of the Congressional district agricultural schools.

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