BENEDICTINE MISSIONARIES AND THE INTERSECTION OF RELIGION AND RACE ON SKIDAWAY ISLAND, GEORGIA

by

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(Under the Direction of Diane Batts Morrow)

ABSTRACT

In March, 1877, two Benedictine monks, Father Oswald Moosmueller and Father Maurice Kaeder arrived in Georgia with the hope of establishing a successful school and monastery for freedmen and women. The ensuing struggle of the Benedictine missionaries in their endeavors and the eventual closure of the school and monastery in 1889 shed light on the Catholic Church's relationship to race and the position of Catholics within postbellum southern society. Furthermore, this examination of the short-lived Benedictine mission on Skidaway Island reveals the ways in which religion and race impacted African Americans' fight for autonomy over their education and their livelihoods following emancipation.

INDEX WORDS: Skidaway Island; Benedictine monks; education; Oswald Moosmueller

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

Located off the coast of Savannah, Georgia, Skidaway Island is home to the Landings Community, an ever growing luxury real estate development characterized by large houses, tennis courts, and pristine golf courses. Adjacent to this community is the Skidaway Island State Park where sandy trails wind through 538 acres of oaks and salt marsh. Today, a visitor to the island can go shopping, take a bike ride, or walk through a beautifully preserved state park. However, amidst the visitors and current residents enjoying the island's amenities, there is a reminder of what existed almost 140 years earlier. Between this burgeoning residential community and the winding park trails, are the ruins of a Catholic monastery and school that struggled to remain open between 1877 and 1889. When Fathers Oswald Moosmueller and Maurice Kaeder, Benedictine Catholic monks, arrived on the island in the late 1870s from a Benedictine monastery in Pennsylvania, they surveyed a drastically different landscape than what is present today. Following the Civil War, Skidaway Island was home to a majority African American population, almost all of whom worked on plantations as slaves before the War and afterwards struggled to make livings as sharecroppers or fishermen. The Benedictine school and monastery on Skidaway Island and the challenges the monks faced in operating such institutions provide a lens through which to understand the relationship of the Catholic Church to conversion, education, and race in the post-War South.

By establishing a school for African American boys on Skidaway Island, the Benedictine monks were answering the call of the Second Plenary Council to educate and convert recently

emancipated men and women in the South. From October 7th to October 21st in 1866, the American Catholic Bishops held a national or plenary council in Baltimore to discuss a myriad of issues facing the American Church. One of the issues on the council's agenda was the spiritual and pastoral care of African Americans. However, the council ultimately failed to develop a nationwide policy that addressed the religious and educational needs of African Americans. Instead, the council encouraged bishops who had black people in their dioceses to decide how to proceed with this issue on an individual basis.[1] While some bishops such as Savannah's Augustin Verot and William Gross made efforts to establish black Catholic churches and schools, ultimately these efforts did not prevail. Individual bishops faced obstacles they were unable to overcome without the financial and institutional support the council failed to provide. As a result, the Catholic response to emancipation foundered. By the Third Plenary Council in 1884, the Catholic Church accomplished little in the way of pastoral care of American freedmen.[2] Despite the minimal success of these initiatives across the South, a deeper examination of these efforts such as those of the Benedictine monks on Skidaway Island shed light on the position Catholics held in the South, their views on race, and the nature of freedmen's schools.

Historians of U.S. Catholicism and of education in the post-war South cite numerous factors for the limited success of these Catholic endeavors. Therefore, many scholars frequently dismiss these efforts as failures inconsequential to African American education and religious life in the South. These factors include a lack of resources, a lack of will on the part of many American bishops, and a lack of desire on the part of African Americans to convert. Ultimately,

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[1] Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), 118–20.
[2] Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, 132.

schools and churches established by Protestant northern missionaries were far more numerous and northern benevolent societies successfully gained a prominent foothold over education in the South. As a result, much scholarship on postbellum African American education focuses on northern teachers and benevolent societies. Ronald Butchart's book, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862-1875*, analyzes the efforts of white northerners to define the educational landscape for freedmen and the contrast between the ideology of these educators and the vision of African Americans. He contends that the resulting education system acted as a poor substitute for the economic power denied to freedmen and helped re-inscribe white authority in a new form. Butchart does briefly mention Catholic efforts toward freedmen's education but only in relation to a Protestant fear of Catholicism gaining a foothold in the South. He asserts that these fears were baseless because of the limited results of Catholic work with freedmen. Instead, northern denominational societies exaggerated the success and extent of Catholic schools in order to stimulate contributions for their own efforts.

Another prominent work focusing on freedmen's education in the South is Jacqueline Jones' *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873*. Jones's book is a case study of the American Missionary Association in Georgia. Similar to Butchart, she provides a detailed picture of white northerners' work to educate freedmen and the ways in which these efforts ultimately served to subordinate African Americans in the post-War South. However, Jones's narrative adds a dimension missing from Butchart's work. She brings out the black voices and experiences in this story by delving into the desires and efforts of black people to open up and operate their own schools. Jones traces the power struggle over education between northern benevolent societies and African Americans. By doing so, she returns a degree of agency to freedmen and women and paints a more holistic picture of African American

education. Much like Butchart, Jones only briefly mentions Catholic efforts to educate freedmen and does so in order to discuss northern missionaries' fears of Catholicism corrupting African Americans. While the works of both Butchart and Jones significantly furthered the scholarship regarding freedmen's education, by leaving out a deeper examination of the Catholic initiatives on this front, they fail to analyze fully the ways in which the educational work of Protestants and Catholics, northerners and southerners, whites and blacks intersected, overlapped, and diverged. The incorporation of Catholic schools' role and impact within the story of freedmen's education has great potential to illuminate the intertwining of religion, race, and education in the post-war South.

Works focusing specifically on the history of black Catholicism provide needed background and context to understand fully the operation of Catholic evangelical and educational endeavors in the South. Cyprian Davis' *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* gives a broad overview of the history and the national framework of black Catholicism. Throughout his book, Davis articulately reveals the ways in which racism operated within the Catholic Church hierarchy despite stated goals opposed to this reality. Particularly helpful is his discussion of the Second and Third Plenary Councils and the ultimate failure of these Councils to address the spiritual and educational needs of American black people. Davis argues that despite the efforts of individual bishops and laypeople to provide for freedmen, they could not overcome the racism and the lack of will on the part of many others within the Church. His examination of the limited success of Catholic schools for freedmen, however brief, successfully demonstrates how these schools contributed to a broader pattern within the Church of excluding African Americans from full participation.

Gary McDonogh's *Black and Catholic in Savannah, Georgia* also provides an analysis of the history and experience of black Catholics. Unlike Davis, he focuses on a specific community, Savannah, and therefore, helps to illuminate the experience of black Catholics in the South. McDonogh's book mainly relies on the oral histories he collected from black Catholics still living at the time he was researching and writing. Because many of his sources come from oral histories, this book mainly focuses on black Catholics in the 20th century and beyond; however, he does have a chapter dedicated to the development of black parochial schools in Savannah. This chapter is exceedingly useful in presenting a timeline for the origins of these schools. However, similar to Davis, McDonogh's examination of these schools is brief and therefore, necessarily isolated from the broader narrative of African American education in the South. Instead, both Davis's and McDonogh's discussions of this topic focus more on explaining why these efforts did not bear the desired results. While their analyses of a failed Catholic outreach to freedmen do shed considerable light on the relationship of the institutional Church to race, there is room for future scholarship to provide a more in-depth examination. Catholic schools for freedmen have the potential to provide numerous more insights when analyzed within the broader context of the post-war struggle over African American education as well as the larger history of Catholics' position within southern society.

A collection of essays edited by Randall Miller, *Catholics in the Old South*, helps to address the historiographical gap of Southern Catholicism and provides a picture of how Catholics fit into southern society before the Civil War. In the book's introduction, Randall Miller states that historians of southern religious history do not address southern Catholicism and instead focus mainly on the mainstream Protestant experience. On the other hand, American Catholic scholarship focuses almost exclusively on the development of Catholicism as an

immigrant religion in the North. In his essay, "A Church in Cultural Captivity", Miller argues that southern white Catholics gained an accepted place within southern society by defending slavery and later supporting the cause of secession. According to Miller, the Catholic Church's cooperation with the South's social order gave southern white Catholics a space free from nativism to cultivate their unique religious traditions, rituals, and culture. This antebellum defense of slavery would continue during the Civil War and Reconstruction in white Catholic support for the Confederacy and later the Lost Cause. Miller's work helps provide the bigger picture of Catholicism in Southern society needed to understand fully the place of Catholic missionary efforts in the South.

The Ph.D. dissertations of Andrew Stern, Edward Shoemaker, and Thomas Thigpen build upon Miller's arguments in "A Church in Cultural Captivity." These dissertations delve into southern Catholic-Protestant relations from the antebellum period to Reconstruction. Stern in his dissertation, "Southern Cross, Southern Crucifix: Catholic-Protestant Relations in the Old South", argues that Catholic southerners bought an accepted place in southern society by supporting slavery. Stern's thesis and conclusions overlap with those of Shoemaker and Thigpen who also examine Catholic-Protestant relations but specifically in Savannah, Georgia. These three scholars focus on the question of why there was relatively little sectarian violence against Catholics in the South when compared to the North. They cite several reasons for this including a Catholic minority status in the South. However, the main factor attributed to this lack of conflict was a Catholic ability to balance a dual identity of Catholic and southern, an identity achieved through their support for slavery. By upholding the South's peculiar institution, southern white Catholics gained a safe public space of tolerance in which to build their faith communities. While discrimination and tension did exist, ultimately Protestants and Catholics were able to

overcome religious and ethnic divides in order to unify over race.[3] White Catholics' accommodation with slavery would later develop into support for the Confederacy during the Civil War. This history of Catholicism's place in southern society and acquiescence to racial inequality can provide a clearer picture of how Catholic schools for freedmen fit within postbellum southern society.

The Catholic Church doctrine and practice accepted the institution of slavery. The Church taught that slavery did not violate either divine or natural law but it did demand that slaveholders treat slaves well and make accommodations for their physical and spiritual welfare.[4] In this way, the Church's teachings on slavery reflected general southern ideas about slavery and the reciprocal nature of bondage. In this conception, masters had a duty to care for their slaves while slaves had a duty to be obedient servants. The Church's urging for slaveholders to treat their slaves well fell within contemporary southern notions of the nature and legitimacy of slavery. However, the Church's censure of slaveholder abuses did not result in improved conditions for the slaves of Catholic masters in the 19th century.[5] The Church's stance toward and relation to slavery and the enslaved during the antebellum period is telling of the Catholic Church's response to emancipation following the war. While on the surface the official Catholic doctrine spoke to the human dignity of slaves, ultimately the Catholic Church's position and practice supported a social order that denied basic human rights to African Americans. This inherent paradox would continue in southern Catholic attempts to evangelize and educate freedmen in the postbellum period.

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[3] Andrew Stern, "Southern Cross, Southern Crucifix: Catholic-Protestant Relations in the Old South" 2008; Edward Matthew Shoemaker, "Strangers and Citizens: The Irish Immigrant Community of Savannah, 1837-1861" 1990; Thomas Paul Thigpen, "Aristocracy of the Heart: Catholic Lay Leadership in Savannah, 1820-1870" 1996.

[4] Miller, *Catholics in the Old South,* 14.

[5] Miller, *Catholics in the Old South,* 14.

Several of the secondary sources discussing the Catholic response to emancipation such as the works of Cyprian Davis, Ronald Butchart, and Gary McDonogh mention briefly the efforts of the Benedictine monks in the diocese of Savannah. These scholars almost exclusively cite the research and writing of the Benedictine monk, Jerome Oetgen, who wrote several articles about the Benedictine industrial school during the late 1960's and 1970's. Oetgen's articles draw upon the archives of the St. Vincent Archabbey in Latrobe, Pennsylvania and provide a timeline for the origins and trajectory of the industrial school. Oetgen contends that the school ultimately failed due to the lack of effort on the part of the monks to adapt the curriculum's monastic regimen to the needs and wants of their students. However, he isolates his examination of the Benedictine Order in Georgia from the broader history of Catholicism in the South and the post-war struggle over control of African American education. To understand how southern white Protestants, northern benevolent societies, and African Americans received these Catholic efforts to educate and convert requires more research. Such an analysis not only further illuminates the Catholic Church's relationship to race but also the ways in which race and religion impacted African Americans' fight for education following emancipation.

The Catholic diocese of Savannah provides a useful window through which to examine these Catholic schools and the Catholic response to emancipation within this broader context of African Americans' struggle for education. The Bishops of Savannah following the Civil War, specifically Augustin Verot and William Gross, made concerted efforts to establish schools and churches for African Americans. In addition, Savannah was the only diocese in the South that had an established and reputable school system that could provide a foundation for these

initiatives.[6] In 1867, Bishop Verot recruited the Sisters of St. Joseph from Le Puy France and established the first school for African Americans in Savannah. By the 1870s, many of the students would drop out and the school would close.[7] The efforts of the Sisters of St. Joseph would prove to be more successful in St. Augustine, Florida. At this time, both Georgia and Florida were part of the Diocese of Savannah and therefore, Verot sent the Sisters of St. Joseph to establish schools in both Savannah and St. Augustine. While their efforts in Savannah were short-lived, the Sisters of St. Joseph remain an active order in Florida today.[8] In 1870, the Catholic Church elevated Florida to its own diocese and Verot left Savannah to become the Diocese's first bishop. Perhaps because the French Sisters of St. Joseph in Savannah lost their most ardent advocate when Verot left, their school floundered while their sister school in St. Augustine flourished.

Despite the relatively brief presence of the French Sisters in Savannah, Verot's efforts in this city would lay the foundation for the establishment of several more Catholic schools for freedmen in the coming years such as the Benedictine Skidaway school. In 1874, Bishop Gross requested missionaries from the Benedictine Order to come to Savannah and establish schools and churches for African Americans. The result of the Benedictine monks' initial efforts was the

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[6] Michael Gannon, *Rebel Bishop: The Life and Era of Augustin Verot.* (Bruce Pub. Co., 1964), 138.

[7] Gannon, *Rebel Bishop: The Life and Era of Augustin Verot,* 133–34.

[8] Barbara E. Mattick, "Ministries in Black and White: The Catholic Sisters of St. Augustine, Florida, 1859-1920," January 1, 2008. In her dissertation from Florida State University, Mattick explores the work of the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of St. Joseph in St. Augustine, Florida. She argues that the work of these Catholic Sisters often reinforced more American and Protestant ideas of domesticity and the proper role of women even though the very nature of their work went against these ideals. In particular, she compares and contrasts the work of these Catholic Sisters with the Protestant missionaries of the American Missionary Association to reveal the ways in which these gender ideals were present within the Catholic Church. The legacy of these Catholic Sisters' work in Florida provides a stark contrast to the Catholic endeavors to convert and educate African Americans in the Savannah area.

establishment of an industrial school on Skidaway Island.[9] While the Benedictine industrial school only remained opened for a span of about 12 years, examining the struggles the Benedictine fathers confronted when establishing and maintaining this school and monastery leads to a better understanding of the Catholic Church's position within southern society and the Church's uneven response to emancipation.

[9] Jerome Oetgen, "The Origins of the Benedictine Order in Georgia," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (1969): 165–83.

PART II

ANSWERING THE CALL: THE FOUNDATIONAL WORK OF SAVANNAH BISHOPS

The sermons and pastoral letters of Augustin Verot, the bishop of Savannah from 1861 to 1870, demonstrate how the Catholic Church's support for slavery influenced the efforts of Catholic clergymen to convert and educate African Americans following the Civil War. On the eve of the Civil War, January 4, 1861, and just months before Rome appointed Verot the third Bishop of Savannah, he gave a sermon outlining the rationale behind Catholicism's defense of slavery. Newspapers both in the North and in the South published and widely distributed his sermon which earned him the title 'Rebel Bishop' for his explicit support of slavery and states' rights. Following the Civil War and directly preceding the Second Plenary Council in 1866, Verot published a pastoral letter to the people of Georgia discussing how the Catholic Church needed to address and serve the newly freed slave population. Both in his 1861 sermon and in his 1866 letter, Verot presented a contradictory view of African Americans both as valued children of God and as inherently inferior due simply to the color of their skin.

The first part of Verot's 1861 sermon, in keeping with official Catholic doctrine, carefully argued for the lawfulness of slavery, claiming it did not violate either divine or natural law. The latter half of his sermon explicated the conditions under which slavery was legitimate and just. These conditions mirrored the arguments of slaveholders who claimed that slavery was beneficial to African Americans. The first of Verot's conditions was that slave owners repudiate the slave trade. Following Pope Gregory XVI's 1840 pastoral letter, Verot made a distinction

between domestic slavery and the slave trade. He stated that it was only domestic slavery that was lawful and just. In contrast, the slave trade or 'African trade' went against all laws, divine or natural, as it included the kidnapping of Africans, a crime Verot stated was only below murder in violation of justice and humanity.[10] The other conditions included respecting the rights of freedmen and women, encouraging and protecting slave marriages, and providing slaves with food, clothing, shelter, and the means to know and practice religion.[11]

These proposed conditions rested upon Verot's assertion of the human dignity of the enslaved. Slavery necessitated conditions for legitimacy because "a man , by being a slave, does not cease to be a man, retaining all the properties, qualities, attributes, duties, rights and responsibilities attached to human nature, or to a being endowed with reason and understanding, and made in the image and likeness of God."[12] His assertion of the dignity of slaves and the promotion of their welfare was part of his larger protection of an institution that actively worked to relegate African Americans to an inferior position. Like many southern Protestant preachers at the time, he urged slave owners to improve the conditions of slavery as a way to uphold a social order based on the bondage of African Americans. Verot's defense of slavery intertwined a call for slave owners to treat their slaves as children of God with the explicit maintenance of the status quo. These contradictions in the Catholic Church's outreach to African Americans would lay the foundation for the Church's evangelization and education efforts during the postbellum period.

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[10] Rt. Rev. A. Verot, D.D., Vicar Apostolic of Florida, *A Tract for the Times. Slavery and Abolitionism, Being the Substance of a Sermon Preached in the Church of St. Augustine, Florida, on the 4th Day of January, 1861, Day of Public Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer* (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1861), 10.
[11] Verot, *A Tract for the Times*, 10-13.
[12] Verot, *A Tract for the Times*, 10.

In 1866, Verot published a pastoral letter that discussed the Catholic Church's new purpose and duty to freedmen and women. While Verot stressed a new mission regarding African Americans, much of the argument in his pastoral letter was reminiscent of his 1861 sermon defending slavery. Abolition of slavery was the irreversible conclusion of the Civil War and following the principles of truth and justice, African Americans now freed from bondage must be given "the opportunity of obtaining instruction and knowledge, which are the necessary appendages of the human mind." Thus, the Catholic Church's new purpose in the post-war period was to provide freedmen the benefits of Catholic schools.[13] While Verot advocated for the Catholic education of African Americans and for Catholics to accept the abolition of slavery fully, he continued to condemn abolition in principle. In fact, he stated that "in advocating this course to be followed with regard to the colored race, let no one imagine that we embrace and adopt the doctrine of those false philosophers and hypocritical philanthropists who under the name of abolitionists have done so much mischief."[14] Verot urged the Catholic Church to provide education for freedman; however, he did so while failing to reverse his previous defense of slavery.

Verot believed that the immediate emancipation granted to slaves was unjust. While not agreeing with the means or result of emancipation, Verot still pressed his parishioners to fully accept the conclusion that the former state of slavery could never be justly reinstated. Taking into consideration the irreversible nature of emancipation, he called upon Georgians to "put away all prejudice, all dislike, all antipathy, all bitterness against their former servants."[15] If any conciliar degree regarding the dignity of freedmen was to succeed, Verot believed that white Catholics

[13] *Daily News and Herald*, September 13, 1866.
[14] *Daily News and Herald*, September 13, 1866..
[15] *Daily News and Herald*, September 13, 1866.

would need to let go of prejudice in order to address the needs of a newly freed people. However, the basis of Verot's demands for the Catholic education of freedmen differed little from his 1861 defense of slavery. These new duties to freed African Americans were strikingly similar to the duties of slaveholders to the enslaved outlined in Verot's 1861 sermon. He did not reverse his argument for the lawfulness of slavery but instead placed the Church's new mission in the same context of a duty to uplift African Americans from an inferior position. Verot's recognition of African Americans' dignity and rights, both during slavery and following emancipation, rested upon the assumption of African American subordination.

Reverend William Gross built upon the foundation Verot laid in Savannah. Gross encapsulated many of the same contradictions inherent within the Catholic Church's efforts to educate and convert African Americans in the South. As the Bishop of Savannah from 1873 to 1885, Gross invited several religious orders, including the Carmelite nuns, the Jesuits, and the Benedictine monks, to aid him in his evangelization efforts in Georgia. He believed the Diocese of Savannah presented a fitting opportunity to convert both white and black Georgians to Catholicism. In fact, Gross himself traveled throughout Georgia giving zealous sermons and lectures to help accomplish this goal.[16] Within this evangelization work, Gross was particularly concerned with the souls of freedmen and women. Therefore, in 1874, he requested missionaries from the Benedictine Order to come to Savannah in order to establish schools and churches for African Americans. Many Catholic bishops in the U.S., such as Bishop Gross, as well as the Catholic religious who established and worked in these schools and churches, expressed a genuine desire to serve and care for African Americans following the Civil War. However, the

[16] Brendan J. Buttimer, *New South, New Church : The Catholic Public Schools of Georgia, 1870-1917*, 2001, 51–52.

limitations of the Catholic Church as an institution and the limitations of Catholic men and women as individuals complicated their desire to convert and educate former slaves.

Perhaps because of his experience overseeing the Benedictine mission in Savannah, when asked to address the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884, Bishop Gross gave a sermon entitled "The Missions for the Colored People." The Third Plenary Council came almost 17 years after the call of the Second Plenary Council and about a decade after the Benedictine fathers arrived in Savannah in response to this call. Between the Second and Third Plenary Councils, the American Catholic Church had made little headway into their stated mission to convert and educate freedmen and women.[17] By 1884, the Benedictine Georgia mission had continually struggled against low enrollment, financial woes, disease, and death in their attempt to provide for the spiritual and educational needs of African Americans. Bishop Gross's sermon highlights the contradictions inherent in these Catholic missionary efforts and therefore, points to the constraints and hindrances of the Benedictine school and monastery.

In his sermon, Gross described the situation of African Americans following emancipation as dire and stressed the ways in which the Catholic Church, and only the Catholic Church, could uplift freedmen and women. In his appraisal of the needs of people of color, Bishop Gross presented two contradictory images of African Americans similar to those Verot presented in his sermons and letters. On the one hand, Bishop Gross began his sermon stating that "in their native country, Africa, they were sunken from time immemorial in barbarism" and that while some parts of Africa were enlightened, "our colored people came from that part of Africa where the light of Christianity has never penetrated."[18] According to Gross, African

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[17] Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States,* 132.
[18] *The Memorial Volume, a History of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, November 9-December 7, 1884* (Baltimore : The Baltimore Publishing Co., 1885), 71.

Americans were ill-equipped to use the rights afforded them from emancipation. Therefore, he believed the task before the Catholic Church was to "elevate them morally" so that they could take advantage of their new-found social and political influence for the common good.[19] Gross, then, approached his missionary work with the assumption that African Americans were uncivilized and morally inferior. He argued that not only did the Catholic Church have a duty to "make them honest men, chaste women, obedient, law abiding citizens" but that the Catholic faith was the only path to accomplish this end.[20] Bishop Gross stressed the urgency of this task citing the increased political and civil influence African Americans were supposed to hold as a result of emancipation. However, while he did not oppose and, in fact, advocated for African Americans to wield the rights of freedmen and women, the basis of his argument for these Catholic missions rested upon the racist belief of African heathenism and Christian superiority.

In opposition to this belief of moral inferiority, Bishop Gross ended his sermon discussing the dignity of African Americans in the eyes of God. He called upon Catholics to remember why they should be concerned with the welfare of the African American people. First, every citizen should be concerned with African Americans' welfare because of their newfound influence arising from emancipation. However, Gross stressed that the most important reason was that "they were created by the same God, are children of the same common father and mother – Adam and Eve – and were destined to see God and possess Him for all eternity."[21] This seeming genuine desire to affirm the equal humanity of African Americans contradicted the beginning of his sermon in which he described people of color as morally inferior. Bishop

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[19] *The Memorial Volume, a History of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, November 9-December 7, 1884*, 72.
[20] *The Memorial Volume, a History of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, November 9-December 7, 1884*, 72.
[21] *The Memorial Volume, a History of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, November 9-December 7, 1884*, 74.

Gross's reasoning for the urgent spiritual and educational needs of African Americans undercut any statement or attempt on his part to uphold the equal human dignity of the people he advocated serving. Reverend Gross clearly believed that God created African Americans with the potential to achieve goodness, morality, and salvation when given the proper guidance. However, it is also clear from his 1884 sermon, that he believed this potential was not the same as or equal to the inherent morality of white Christians.

Bishop Gross' praise of the Oblate Sisters of Providence further complicates his view of African Americans, their place within the Catholic Church, and therefore, his request for Benedictine missionaries in 1874. Founded in Baltimore in 1828, the Oblate Sisters were the first community of black Catholic Sisters in the United States.[22] According to Gross, the Oblate Sisters of Providence were "a colored convent where women make vows of perpetual virginity and rival their white sisters by going among their race to educate the young, to take in the poor little orphan and help the sick and dying."[23] This exemplary appraisal of a black congregation of women religious was uniquely progressive given the racial attitudes of the time and ran counter to the common, false stereotype of African American women as sexually impure and promiscuous. By placing the work of the Oblate Sisters on par with and even above the work of their white counterparts, Gross was making a strong statement regarding the ability of black women to live up to the same standards of feminine morality and purity as white women. While Gross's brief praise of the Oblate Sisters spoke to the human dignity of African Americans, this praise was once again intertwined with his belief in the moral inferiority of African Americans.

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[22] Diane Batts Morrow, *Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828-1860*, New edition (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002). For an in-depth analysis of the Oblate Sisters during the antebellum period, see Dr. Diane Batts Morrow book cited above.

[23] *The Memorial Volume, a History of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, November 9-December 7, 1884*, 73.

He described the Oblate Sisters as examples of how "the Catholic Church can elevate the colored woman" so that "she can bring blessings on her race equal to the beneficent influence which the white woman as a wife, mother, sister and holy nun has conferred upon the white race." [24] Therefore, his laudatory comments regarding the Oblate Sisters built upon many of the same racist notions of African American inferiority present throughout his 1874 sermon. While the Oblate Sisters were living proof of African Americans' moral possibilities, Bishop Gross believed that only with the help of the Catholic Church could African Americans overcome their inherent immorality and achieve the same moral standards of whites.

The contradictions within Gross's sermon point to the broader problems within the Catholic Church's missionary efforts in the South. While there was certainly a lack of will for these missions in some parts of the Church hierarchy, the incongruities inherent within this call to convert and educate constrained even those such as Bishop Gross who ardently advocated for the welfare of African Americans. This is not to say that the Catholic Church failed to provide access to education and needed services in all their efforts. However, as was the case with the Georgia Benedictine mission, even individuals with a sincere belief in the Catholic Church's ability and duty to uplift African Americans failed to recognize that the wants and needs of African Americans did not necessarily align with the Benedictines' missionary goals. The five African American Catholic Congresses which occurred from 1889 to 1894 provide a counter to the views and arguments of Verot and Gross. These congresses offer the voices of black Catholics clearly articulating their view of race and racism within the Catholic Church. All five congresses were national in scope and therefore, did not specifically address the regional concerns of Georgia and the Skidaway Island mission. However, they did give the small black

[24] *The Memorial Volume, a History of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, November 9-December 7, 1884*, 73.

Catholic community in America the opportunity to express their wants, needs, and grievances with the Catholic Church. More importantly, they gave the delegates the space to discuss the role the Catholic Church should and did play within the lives of African Americans.

From January 1st to the 4th of 1889, African Americans from across the country came to D.C. for the first African American Catholic Congress. The same year, the Benedictine monks on Skidaway Island withdrew from their mission and closed their school and monastery, following a 12-year-long struggle to win over the African American residents. The coincidence of these two events brings into sharp clarity the contrast between the American Catholic Church's aspirations to provide education to freedmen and women and the tension-fraught reality of these endeavors. This first congress consisted of 85 delegates, most of whom came from D.C., Maryland, and Pennsylvania. However, some delegates came from more distant locations such as Massachusetts, Ohio, Georgia, and even South America.[25] The sole Georgia delegate was Andrew E. Robinson who served on the Committee on Credentials. While he did not formally address the congress with a speech like many others, his presence and participation show that the congress's proceedings included the views and concerns of black Catholics in the South. The speakers for this congress included both white clergy and African American delegates, most of whom focused on the work of the Catholic Church to uplift blacks in the United States through evangelization and education. These speeches followed along the stated purpose of the congress which was to discuss the ways in which the African American laity could cooperate with the Catholic clergy in the conversion and education of African Americans as well as to collect information on the population of black American Catholics.[26] Therefore, both the Catholic clergy

[25] David Spalding, "The Negro Catholic Congresses, 1889-1894," *The Catholic Historical Review* 55, no. 3 (1969): 340.
[26] Spalding, "The Negro Catholic Congresses, 1889-1894," 341.

and African American delegates to the 1889 congress expressed a desire for the Catholic Church to pursue missionary work among non-Catholic African Americans. However, disagreements arose regarding the leadership and involvement of black Catholics in this pursuit.

Dan Rudd, the editor of the African American newspaper, *American Catholic Tribune*, and the main organizer of the African American Catholic Congresses, discussed in his address to the 1889 congress what the Catholic Church could offer African Americans and the purpose of their meeting. He stressed the need for African Americans to have a leading role in this process and stressed that the work of the delegates was to "consult together as to the best means to be adopted to advance the Colored people in the scale of civilization."[27] Furthermore, Rudd emphasized that it was African Americans who "must solve what there may be of the great race problem about which people talk so much."[28] Black Catholics such as Rudd believed in the power of their faith and Church to uplift their people and wished to take an active part in the Church's policies regarding race. Rudd held an optimistic view of the Catholic Church and its role in resolving racial inequality within the broader U.S. society. He firmly believed that racial inequality did not exist within the Catholic Church especially when compared to white Protestant churches.[29] This assertion mirrored the views of many within the Catholic Church. In Cardinal James Gibbons' opening sermon for the 1889 congress, he stated that the Catholic Church "knows no north, no south, no east, no west, no race, no color" and that their "savior broke down the wall that divided men and made us one family."[30] While Rudd adhered to this notion that

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[27] Congress of Colored Catholics of the United States, Augustine Tolton, and Lincoln Charles Valle, *Three Catholic Afro-American Congresses* (Cincinnati, Ohio. : American Catholic Tribune, 1893), 25.
[28] *Three Catholic Afro-American Congresses*, 26.
[29] Joseph H. Lackner, "The American Catholic Tribune: No Other like It," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 25, no. 3 (2007): 8.
[30] *Three Catholic Afro-American Congresses*, 10.

there was no color divide within the Catholic Church, he was still aware that many Catholic individuals and institutions discriminated. According to Rudd, such prejudice did not reflect the true principles of the Catholic Church but instead a rupture of the faith's practice.[31]

The call of several speakers for black vocations to the priesthood encapsulated this distinction between Catholic doctrine and practice regarding race. From its inception, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, founded in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV to oversee the Church's missions around the world, maintained the importance of establishing a native priesthood in all its proselytizing efforts. Despite this official policy from Rome, the idea of an African American priesthood was generally unacceptable within the United States Catholic hierarchy at the time.[32] Therefore, the speakers who called for black priests were opposing the status quo and advocating for a correction of a discriminatory practice within the U.S. Catholic Church. Reverend Augustus Tolton, the first black American priest, attended and spoke at the 1889 congress regarding this issue of African American vocations. After Tolton celebrated the first mass of the congress, he gave an address discussing his own journey to the priesthood and the great need for African American priests. Tolton pursued the priesthood after asking himself "why can we not have one of our people to say mass and to administer the sacraments?" Following his ordination, he was sent to America "for Rome had heard that no one of us could be found here to preach the Gospel."[33] Tolton's struggle to fulfill his vocation and his subsequent call for more African American priests speaks to black Catholics' desire to take an active role in their Church as well as to have their equal human dignity reflected at the pulpit and on the altar. His speech and the story of his experiences as a black priest point to a severe break between the

[31] Lackner, "The American Catholic Tribune," 14–15.
[32] Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, 145–46.
[33] *Three Catholic Afro-American Congresses*, 18.

Catholic Church's doctrine and practice in the United States. The call for African American priests was a call for the American Catholic Church to practice its doctrine of the equality of all people in the eyes of God.

The first African American Catholic Congress in 1889 and the speakers' focus on an active, equal role for black Catholics in their Church provide needed context for the Benedictine school and monastery on Skidaway Island. Considering the conflict and opposition to an African American priesthood at this time, the Benedictine monks' inclusion of a monastery in their Georgia mission was unique and progressive. While the Benedictine monks' establishment of both a school and a monastery point to an underlying belief in the inherent dignity and moral potential of African Americans, at the heart of the monastery's purpose was the long-lasting conversion of the island's residents to Catholicism. The Benedictine missionaries' hopes to ordain black brothers followed the official policies of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome as well as the Benedictine Order's traditional methods of evangelization. The Benedictine Order had a long history of sending missionaries throughout Europe to establish stable and enduring religious communities.[34] They continued this tradition with their missionary work in the United States when in 1846 Abbott Boniface Wimmer founded the first American Benedictine abbey, the St. Vincent Arch Abbey in Pennsylvania. In keeping with the Benedictine Order's centuries old missionary practices, Wimmer firmly believed that both education and the cultivation of a native clergy ensured the perpetuity of conversions to the Catholic faith.[35] The Skidaway Island industrial school and monastery followed an exceedingly similar structure and

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[34] Jerome Oetgen, *Mission to America: A History of Saint Vincent Archabbey, the First Benedictine Monastery in the United States* (Washington, D.C: Catholic Univ of Amer Pr, 2000), 57.

[35] Paul G. Monson, "Monastic Evangelization? The Sacramental Vision of America's Early Benedictine Monks," *American Catholic Studies* 124, no. 3 (2013): 48–50.

model to these previous Benedictine missionary efforts. This model served the overarching goal of creating permanent religious communities of monks who would ensure the longevity of the Catholic faith through education and vocations to the priesthood.

The goals and model of the Benedictine school and monastery on Skidaway Island mirrored the purpose and calls of the 1889 African American Catholic Congress. Charles H. Butler, a prominent black Catholic leader in Washington D.C. and a delegate to the congress, succinctly declared the main goals of this meeting in his opening address, saying "that it is our duty as Catholics to do all in our power to aid in the conversion and education of our people."[36] As expressed in Rudd's address to the congress and in many of the delegates' speeches, African American Catholics not only called upon their Church to convert and educate freedmen but wished to fully cooperate with this missionary work. The establishment of both a school and monastery for freedmen on Skidaway Island answered black Catholics' call for an equal and active role within their Church. However, the Benedictine missionaries on Skidaway Island were attempting to convert and educate a mainly Protestant African American population who had inherently different wants and needs than black Catholics. African American Catholics wished to overcome racism within their Church and to bridge the rupture between Catholic doctrine and practice. The Skidaway Island residents were more concerned with gaining autonomy over their schools, their land, and their livelihoods than with fighting for equality within a faith and a church that was not their own.

[36] *Three Catholic Afro-American Congresses*, 13.

PART III

ARRIVAL AND RESISTANCE: BENEDICTINE MISSIONARIES AND THEIR STRUGGLES ON SKIDAWAY ISLAND

Shortly after becoming Savannah's bishop in 1873, Reverend Gross applied to the Abbot General of the Benedictines in Subiaco, Italy for missionaries to work among African Americans.[37] The speed with which Bishop Gross applied for missionaries speaks to the importance missionary work among the African American population held for him. Two Benedictines, Reverend Gabriel Bergier, of the Monastery Pierre-qui-vive in France, and the Reverend Raphael Wissel, of the Ancient Abbey of Subiaco in Italy, arrived in Savannah on May 13th, 1874. Within weeks Bergier and Wissel built a frame church on Harris Street and opened a parish school. Shortly after the opening of the church and school, the Benedictine brothers received several candidates to be clerics and lay brothers within the order. Encouraged by this initial success, Father Bergier accepted the offer of a Dr. Dupon to purchase land on the Isle of Hope, off the coast of Savannah, and establish a novitiate and monastery specifically for African Americans. Father Bergier was able to build a suitable residence and chapel on Isle of Hope and maintain it due to the financial support of friends in the city of Savannah.[38]

The support Bergier received from white city residents indicates the centrality of Catholics in Savannah society by the 1870s. White Catholics in Savannah avoided much of the anti-Catholicism Northern Catholics faced partially because Savannah Catholics provided

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[37] Oetgen, "The Origins of the Benedictine Order in Georgia," 167.
[38] *Savannah Morning News*, May 16, 1878.

needed services such as health care and education.[39] Father Bergier and several of his fellow Benedictine brothers fit within this trend and even lost their lives in service to the Savannah community. During the 1876 yellow fever epidemic, Father Bergier, D. Gregory Enright, and J. McDonald stayed in Savannah in order to care for the sick and dying and ultimately, all three succumbed to the disease as well.[40] While there most likely were Savannah Protestants who opposed these Catholic missionary efforts, Savannah newspaper articles addressing the Benedictine Georgia mission often offered support of their endeavors instead of opposition. This seeming lack of opposition within the newspapers speaks to the cooperative nature of Catholic-Protestant relations in Savannah.

One of the ways Father Bergier and the Benedictine monks who succeeded him helped to support the mission was by selling tickets to various excursions to locations such as the Isle of Hope or Schuetzen Park. The *Savannah Morning News* frequently advertised these excursions and wrote reports commenting on their success and attendance. For instance, after the excursion to Schuetzen Park on June 8th, 1876, the *Savannah Morning News* commented that the event was a "grand success" and that "the attendance was very large and the day being pleasant, a most delightful occasion was the result."[41] These excursions for the benefit of the Benedictine Fathers helped support the mission, particularly in its first few years and point to the support Savannah residents were willing to give to the mission. However, the 1876 yellow fever epidemic and the subsequent deaths of Father Bergier and several of his peers brought disruption and change to the Benedictine mission on the Isle of Hope. Following the epidemic, Father Eckert, a diocesan priest, took control of the Benedictine parish and school on Harris Street and the Benedictines of

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[39] Thomas Paul Thigpen, "Aristocracy of the Heart: Catholic Lay Leadership in Savannah, 1820-1870", 1996.
[40] *Savannah Morning News*, May 16, 1878.
[41] *Savannah Morning News*, June 9, 1876.

the St. Vincent Archabbey in Latrobe, Pennsylvania took charge of the Isle of Hope mission.[42] The Abbott and founder of this abbey, Boniface Wimmer, responding to Bishop Gross's request, sent some of his Benedictine fathers to continue what was left of the Georgia mission. In early March, 1877, Father Oswald Moosmueller and Father Maurice Kaeder arrived in Savannah and began their attempt to fulfill the Catholic Church's call to serve the needs of African Americans.[43]

Upon arriving at the Isle of Hope monastery, Moosmueller found the residence and accompanying buildings unsuitable for their work believing the buildings to be contaminated from the yellow fever epidemic, they requested they move the mission to Skidaway Island.[44] This was a simple request considering the close proximity of the island to the original monastery. As Skidaway River is all that separates the Isle of Hope from Skidaway Island, the island's coastline is visible from the Isle of Hope. In response to his request, Bishop Gross provided the monks with property the Savannah Diocese owned on the island. In May of 1859, the then Savannah Bishop, John Barry, had purchased the former plantation, Hampton Place, with the intent of converting its mansion into an orphanage for young boys. However, the building was destroyed during the Civil War and the property remained unused in the ensuing years.[45] Shortly after Bishop Gross approved the Benedictines' move to Skidaway Island, the brothers applied for and received a charter under the title of the 'Benedictine Order of Georgia' with $10,000 invested in real estate for the purpose of educating youth.[46] Moosmueller wished to build not only a monastery and chapel on Skidaway but also an agricultural school for African American

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[42] *Savannah Morning News*, May 16, 1878
[43] *Savannah Morning News*, March 5, 1877
[44] Oetgen, "The Origins of the Benedictine Order in Georgia," 170.
[45] *Savannah Morning News*, May 16, 1878
[46] *Savannah Morning News*, March 30 1877; *Savannah Morning News*, May 1, 1877.

boys. The Benedictines envisioned a self-supporting community on Skidway and the agricultural school was integral to this plan. Writing to the President of the Ludwig Mission Society, Gregory Scherr, Abbot Wimmer expressed his hope that "the institution, as well as the people living in it, will be supported from the produce of this land" and that their young students would work to support themselves and the school.[47] However, these agricultural efforts had minimal success and Abbot Wimmer often had to provide financial support for the mission.[48]

The model of a self-sustaining agricultural school and monastery proved to be a poor fit for Skidaway Island and its residents. However, Moosmueller and his fellow Benedictine brothers persisted with this failing model, perhaps due to its roots in Abbot Wimmer's vision for the Benedictine Order's missionary presence in the United States. Wimmer, as the founder of the first Benedictine abbey, school, and monastery in America, had a tremendous influence on the structure and operations of subsequent Benedictine communities, including the short-lived endeavor on Skidaway. He stressed the malleability of the Benedictine Order's founding principles and as a result the Benedictine schools in America amended the classical liberal arts curriculum found in European Benedictine schools and seminaries.[49] These modifications stemmed from the limited resources available to the American Benedictine communities. Due to a lack of qualified professors, many of the American Benedictine schools, including the one on Skidaway, could only include a limited number of subjects in their curriculum.[50] Furthermore, Wimmer's vision of a self-supporting community was most likely in response to these inadequate funds. In order to ensure the sustainability of the first Benedictine community, St.

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[47] Boniface Wimmer, *Boniface Wimmer: Letters of an American Abbot*, ed. Jerome Oetgen, 1 edition (Latrobe, Pa: Saint Vincent Archabbey Publications, 2008), 423.
[48] Oetgen, "The Origins of the Benedictine Order in Georgia," 171.
[49] Joel Rippinger, "Adapting Benedictine Monasticism to Nineteenth-Century America," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 3, no. 4 (1984): 295–7; 302.
[50] Oetgen, *Mission to America*, 84.

Vincent, Wimmer incorporated manual and agricultural labor into the students' and seminarians' daily schedules. Subsequent American Benedictine communities replicated the curriculum and daily schedules implemented at St. Vincent.[51] Thus, the agricultural focus of the Skidaway Island school and monastery was simply adhering to Wimmer's vision and goals. Moosmueller and his brothers struggled to make this vision a reality on Skidaway Island due to obstacles such as resistance from the residents and the inhospitable terrain of the island.

The initial opposition of the African American residents to the Benedictine mission's dedication ceremony spoke to the incompatibility of a self-sustainable, agricultural school for the population and environment of Skidaway Island. As the construction of the buildings on Skidaway proved to be slow, the monks remained living on the Isle of Hope until the spring of 1878. While the Skidaway school and monastery were under construction, classes commenced temporarily at the old Isle of Hope complex.[52] The dedication and blessing of the Skidaway Island school and monastery, initially scheduled for May 30th, took place on June 16th due to delays in construction.[53] The Skidaway dedication ceremony was a prominent event for Savannah Catholics and the *Savannah Morning News* reported that 600 guests chartered a boat to take them to the island for the event.[54] However, while many Savannah residents supported the Benedictine efforts, they received little praise from the African American residents of Skidaway Island, the very people the Benedictine Fathers aimed to help. A Catholic and German-American newspaper in Baltimore, the *Katholische Volkszeitung*, reported on July 6th, 1878 that "the founding of this Industrial School which was begun on a small scale, has not received the

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[51] Oetgen, *Mission to America*, 80-81.
[52] Oetgen, "The Origins of the Benedictine Order in Georgia," 172.
[53] *Savannah Morning News*, May 16, 1878; *Savannah Morning News*, May 28, 1878
[54] Fellner, Felix, "A Manual Labor School for Negroes in Georgia" from *Abbot Boniface and His Monks*: 561. Savannah Diocesan Archives.

encouragement it deserved, especially from the better class of negroes."[55] This early opposition to the Benedictine school from Skidaway residents, a majority of whom were African American, foreshadowed the struggles the monks would have recruiting and keeping students in their school. The highest enrollment the school ever reached was twenty in 1883 and during the tenure of the school's operation, the Benedictines continually struggled to attract students to their school.

The persistence of the island's black residents in fighting for economic independence after emancipation sheds light on this early opposition to the school and monastery as well as the school's lagging enrollment. Located off the coast of Savannah, Skidaway Island is part of the Low Country, a geographically and culturally unique area along the Georgia and South Carolina coastlines which includes the states' sea islands. Therefore, Skidaway Island followed many of the same economic, agricultural, and environmental patterns of neighboring Lowcountry areas such as the Isle of Hope. Historian Drew Swanson's environmental history of Wormsloe plantation on the Isle of Hope, *Remaking Wormsloe Plantation*, provides an enlightening point of comparison to Skidaway Island, giving needed context to understand the economic and environmental layout of the island and its population. During the colonial era, Noble Jones, the first owner of Wormsloe Plantation, struggled to find crops that would thrive in the sandy, coastal land and southern climate of the Isle of Hope. However, Jones found success with cotton and by the American Revolution Wormsloe Plantation turned a large enough profit to participate in the burgeoning global cotton market.[56] Skidaway Island was home to multiple plantations during this antebellum period, including the eventual location of the Benedictine mission,

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[55] Quoted in Fellner, "A Manual Labor School for Negroes in Georgia", 562.
[56] Drew Swanson, *Remaking Wormsloe Plantation: The Environmental History of a Lowcountry Landscape* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 4.

Hampton Place.[57] Similar to Noble Jones, the plantation owners of Skidaway Island confronted many of the same obstacles as Wormsloe in finding a crop that would generate a profit. In all probability, the Skidaway Island plantations grew mostly cotton like many of the plantations on the Georgia Sea Islands. However, unlike Wormsloe, the Skidaway plantations failed to overcome the island's sandy terrain and remote location to achieve any significant success entering the global cotton trade.[58] During the most productive period of plantation life on Skidaway Island, the population reached only 2,000 people, most of whom were slaves. By the beginning of the Civil War, the population would drop by half due to the continual challenges of the inhospitable soil.[59]

The Civil War and the emancipation of slaves fundamentally transformed the economies and labor relations of the Lowcountry and cotton plantations. Following the Civil War, Lowcountry cotton ceased to be profitable on the world market. In response to the naval blockades of the Civil War, British textile manufacturers found new cotton supplies in India, the Nile Delta, and along the Brazilian coast. As a result of the increased supply and competition, the prices of cotton dropped significantly.[60] Thus, places such as Wormsloe Plantation no longer possessed the same commercial ties to international markets they had before the Civil War. The economic focus of Wormsloe shifted to regional markets as the plantation switched from growing staple crops to a more diversified agriculture.[61] Wormsloe Plantation was not alone in these postbellum changes. In much of the Lowcountry, including Skidaway Island, such as

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[57] V. E. Kelly, *A Short History of Skidaway Island* (V.E. Kelly, 1980), 45.
[58] Kelly, *A Short History of Skidaway Island*, 45.
[59] Kelly, *A Short History of Skidaway Island*, 46.
[60] Swanson, *Remaking Wormsloe Plantation: The Environmental History of a Lowcountry Landscape*, 107.
[61] Swanson, *Remaking Wormsloe Plantation: The Environmental History of a Lowcountry Landscape*, 97.

subsistence crops and the small-scale production of vegetables soon replaced Sea Island cotton.[62] While shifts in the global supply and demand for cotton began to dismantle the antebellum agricultural routines on Lowcountry plantations, emancipation was the most influential in transforming the economic and labor relations on these plantations. Toward the end of the Civil War, General William Sherman issued Special Field Order 15 granting former slaves and African American Union veterans the right to own former plantation land in the Georgia Lowcountry. This order included all of Skidaway Island and a coastal portion of Wormsloe Plantation.[63] However, Sherman's Order did not last long. On January 19th, 1867, the Freedmen's Bureau issued Special Order 6, restoring all confiscated land on Skidaway Island to the former owners. Around the same time, the confiscated portion of Wormsloe Plantation was also returned to its former owner, George De Renne.[64]

Despite the reversal of Sherman's Field Order 15, freedmen and women living in the Georgia Lowcountry continually fought for economic independence and autonomy over their livelihoods. In fact, African Americans along the Georgia coast proved to be more successful at purchasing and owning land during Reconstruction than black farmers in other parts of the South. By 1879, 57 percent of African Americans in the Georgia Lowcountry owned land, a feat historian Drew Swanson attributes to a variety of factors but first and foremost to the resilient pursuit of African Americans to purchase land.[65] Even for the many African Americans who could not buy their own property, freedmen and women used their knowledge of the coastal

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[62] Swanson, *Remaking Wormsloe Plantation: The Environmental History of a Lowcountry Landscape*, 128.
[63] Swanson, *Remaking Wormsloe Plantation: The Environmental History of a Lowcountry Landscape*, 101.
[64] Swanson, *Remaking Wormsloe Plantation: The Environmental History of a Lowcountry Landscape*, 103.
[65] Swanson, *Remaking Wormsloe Plantation: The Environmental History of a Lowcountry Landscape*, 104-105.

environment to maintain a degree of economic independence. Whether freedmen and women owned land or entered into tenant farming contracts, many were able to tend their own gardens and fields, hunt, fish, and gather oysters not only for subsistence but also as a source of supplemental income.[66] Selling surplus vegetables and meat regionally in Savannah, former slaves in the Georgia Lowcountry claimed a modicum of control over their livelihoods.

A conflict between the freedmen and women of Skidaway Island and the white residents of Savannah's mainland shows clearly the measures African Americans were willing to take in order to retain some sense of economic independence. In December of 1868, a group of African Americans living on Skidaway took charge of an old abandoned fort in order to prevent white fishermen from using the waterways surrounding the island.[67] The *Charleston Daily News* reported that an "organized body of lawless negroes on Skidaway Island have declared their purpose to obstruct the rivers, and kill and murder every white man who shall dare pursue his avocation of fishing and oystering."[68] Following the incident, the *Savannah Morning News* called for a stop "to these Negro outrages in this county" and claimed that "the exigencies of the times call for the organization of a strong patrol force to preserve the peace of the county."[69] According to local newspapers, a group of lawless, unruly, and dangerous African Americans perpetuated a violent crime against the rights of white men to use Skidaway Island's waterways and marshes. However, this prevention of white fishermen's use of the island's coast was also the protection of what freedmen and women saw as their right to the provisions and subsistence of the island's marshes.

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[66] Swanson, *Remaking Wormsloe Plantation: The Environmental History of a Lowcountry Landscape*, 110-111.
[67] *Savannah Morning News*, December, 18, 1868; *Charleston Daily News*, December 24, 1868.
[68] *Charleston Daily News*, December 24, 1868
[69] *Savannah Morning News*, December, 18, 1868.

The 1868 conflict over the Skidaway Island waterways mirrored similar struggles over the marshes and coast of the Isle of Hope. George De Renne, the owner of Wormsloe Plantation, continually guarded against illegal fishing along his plantation's coast during the postbellum period. The oyster banks and marshes had for centuries been an important source of food for the Isle of Hope residents.[70] According to Georgia oyster laws, however, oysters and shellfish were the private property of whoever owned the neighboring river banks. While De Renne did have official and legal control over these marshes, many poor local residents were more than likely unaware of these property laws. During the antebellum period and the few years freedmen owned the coastal portion of Wormsloe, these oyster beds were public spaces and only became private property in 1867 when the Freedmen's Bureau returned full ownership of Wormsloe to De Renne. The restoration of land ownership to plantation owners such as De Renne turned into crimes the common, everyday subsistence practices that many local residents firmly believed were a part of their rights.[71] Considering this context, the 1868 shooting incident on Skidaway Island takes on a deeper meaning. This incident points to a freed black population that possessed a strong sense of ownership of Skidaway Island and a willingness to protect their land and livelihoods from white outsiders. While only a brief episode and one occurring years before the arrival of the Benedictine missionaries, this takeover of an old fort provides insight into how the Skidaway black residents might have perceived a group of white and foreign Benedictine monks. In all likelihood, many of the island inhabitants would have seen the Benedictines as white intruders instead of helpful missionaries.

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[70] Swanson, *Remaking Wormsloe Plantation: The Environmental History of a Lowcountry Landscape*, 117.
[71] Swanson, *Remaking Wormsloe Plantation: The Environmental History of a Lowcountry Landscape*, 118-119.

One of the main reasons African American residents on Skidaway showed little interest in the Benedictine school was because the curriculum solely focused on farm work. Writing to Abbot Wimmer on August 18th, 1878, Moosmueller stated that many opposed his plan for a "Manual Labor School for colored boys" because Skidaway residents had a "horror of farm work" and instead they wanted "their boys to get an education which fits them for positions of clerks, bookkeepers, anything else but farming."[72] Oetgen attributes this aversion to farm work to African Americans' experience as an enslaved labor force. According to Oetgen, the lack of interest in farming stemmed from African Americans' wish to avoid any type of work that was reminiscent of slavery.[73] Moosmueller's and Oetgen's explanations for the students' apparent dislike of farming do possess a degree of truth. In all likelihood, the desire of some to pursue professions or some students' memories of slavery resulted in their resistance to the school's manual labor curriculum. However, the antipathy to the agricultural focus of the Benedictine school could have emerged less from an aversion to farm work and more from a desire to gain control over their land and livelihoods. This type of autonomy would have been difficult to achieve under the strict monastic regimen and daily schedules of the school. While lacking sources from the students themselves regarding this issue, the struggle of freedmen and women to retain economic independence in the years following emancipation provides needed context to understand Moosmueller's report to Wimmer regarding his students' 'horror of farm work'.

The interactions between the Skidaway Island residents and the Benedictine monks as reported in Moosmueller's correspondence with Wimmer further clarify the residents' perception of their missionary visitors and vice versa. In his August 18th letter, Moosmueller explained to Wimmer that the residents' request for a regular college preparing students for professions was

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[72] Quoted in Fellner, "A Manual Labor School for Negroes in Georgia", 562.
[73] Oetgen, "The Origins of the Benedictine Order in Georgia," 182.

not possible because the Benedictine mission did not possess the buildings or qualified teachers for such a school.[74] Instead Moosmueller attempted to elevate the profession of farming. The "Prospectus of Manual Labor for Colored Boys", described the school as providing the student with "a scientific as well as practical instruction for his pursuits" as well as "prepare the students for a successful management of a farm, by putting him in possession of knowledge of the most improved methods of cultivation."[75] Similar to Wimmer and the Benedictine monks who founded St. Vincent in 1846, Moosmueller was limited by a lack of personnel and resources. Despite Moosmueller's own report of discontent with the school's focus on farm and manual labor, he continued to pursue a curriculum and school model that did not answer the needs of the Skidaway Island population or the demands of the surrounding environment.

Moosmueller's view of the students partially explain his insistence on a curriculum that reaped little success or approval from the African American residents. Moosmueller was initially encouraged when 12 students registered in the fall of 1878; however, this number fell to almost half by late November. In a November 27th letter to Abbot Wimmer, Moosmueller reported that of the 12 students who had enrolled, he dismissed four and one left of his own accord. As a result of this rocky start for the Skidaway school, he believed that they "should not take any [students] older than 12 or 13, because they are so lazy and unruly, that they cannot be controlled."[76] The disconnect between Moosmueller's vision of the Skidaway school and what the residents actually wanted and needed resulted in the lagging enrollment. However, Moosmueller seemingly failed to recognize the problems inherent within the school's structure and when the students did not adhere to his expectations or hopes he labelled them 'unruly' and 'lazy'. For

[74] Kelly, *A Short History of Skidaway Island,* 79.
[75] Quoted in Fellner, "A Manual Labor School for Negroes in Georgia", 562-3.
[76] Quoted in Fellner, "A Manual Labor School for Negroes in Georgia", 564.

Moosmueller, the problems with the school stemmed from the students and not from the very nature of the school and the mission itself.

The students' schedules further point to the conflict between the hopes for the Skidaway school and the needs of the island's residents. Following a school model rooted in the European monastic tradition, the boys' schedules better fit Benedictine monks or seminarians than school students perhaps with the intent of cultivating vocations to the religious order. Every day they woke up at five A.M., attended Mass, worked on the farm for four hours, attended class for two hours, and recited the rosary with the Benedictine brothers.[77] Given the agricultural focus of the Benedictine school and the strict schedule, it is no wonder that the Benedictine monks struggled to maintain enrollment. Moosmueller attempted several different strategies to overcome this challenge and win the support of the island's residents. First he attempted to organize a brass band for the residents with the hope that doing so would help bring people to the Catholic faith. In a December 31st, 1878 letter to Abbot Wimmer, Moosmueller explained that his inspiration for such a band came when several of his students went "around the house all day and made an awful noise" after finding drums and fifes to play. While still retaining only the Gregorian chant during the church service, Moosmueller proposed that a brass band to entertain worshippers before and after the service would inspire conversions.

The brass band never became a reality. In his letter, Moosmueller asked Abbot Wimmer to send instruments and an instructor for this brass band; however, while Wimmer supported the idea, his fellow Benedictine brothers in Pennsylvania did not wish to spend the resources to do so.[78] Even if Wimmer had fulfilled Moosmueller's request, it is unlikely that his strategy of using musical entertainment as an attraction before and after mass would have produced true and long-

[77] Oetgen, "The Origins of the Benedictine Order in Georgia," 175.
[78] Fellner, "A Manual Labor School for Negroes in Georgia," 564-565.

lasting conversions to the faith. Moosmueller also proposed improving the climate of the island in order to gain the trust and support of African Americans. In order to improve the climate and decrease the occurrence of disease and malaria, Moosmueller planted Eucalyptus trees and drained marshy land. He also tried growing various fruit trees and grapevines in hopes they would improve the quality of the land. Not surprisingly, these efforts saw few results. Because Moosmueller and the Benedictine brothers had little experience or knowledge regarding these matters, Moosmueller reported in a June 9th, 1879 letter to Abbot Wimmer that the monks had to enlist the help of the island's residents who did know which trees and crops would best grow.[79] This particular situation shows the irony at the heart of the Benedictines' schooling endeavor. While they established this school to improve their students' agricultural skills, the brothers lacked the very skills and knowledge they aimed to teach.

Another reason the Skidaway Island residents opposed the Benedictines' school was the fathers' main motivation to convert the island's inhabitants, almost all of whom were Protestant. For Bishop Gross and the Benedictine Fathers, the missing presence of Catholicism in the South was one of the main attractions of establishing a school and monastery near Savannah. In a letter to Abbot Wimmer shortly before Fathers Oswald Moosmueller and Maurice Kaeder arrived in Savannah, Bishop Gross expressed gratitude to the Benedictines' for their service and stated he always believed that the "Benedictines would of all religious be the most eminently adapted for the work of civilizing and educating the immense number of negroes in my diocese."[80] At the very core of this goal to 'civilize' and 'educate' was conversion to the Catholic faith. As Bishop Gross went on to write in his letter, the purpose for which he called upon the Benedictines was "to form schools for blacks and whites, instruct and teach the Gospel to these multitudes who

[79] Fellner, "A Manual Labor School for Negroes in Georgia," 565.
[80] Quoted in Fellner, "A Manual Labor School for Negroes in Georgia", 557.

know nothing of the true religion."[81] A desire to convert African Americans to Catholicism also strongly motivated Father Moosmueller as the superior of the Skidaway school. In a letter to Abbot Innocent Wolf, Moosmueller discussed that he did not believe he was making any sacrifices despite the difficulties of his work because he thought his goals were ultimately attainable. For Moosmueller the primary object for the Skidaway mission was "the founding of a monastery with the chief aim of having colored members especially Brothers" while the secondary objectives was "to establish some kind of Manual Labor School of Agriculture for colored boys."[82]

For Moosmueller and his fellow Benedictine brothers, the main purpose of their mission was to convert, not to educate. This focus of conversion over and above education led to Moosmueller and the other Benedictine monks ignoring what African Americans themselves said they needed or wanted during this post-War period. Bishop Gross, Father Moosmueller, Abbot Wimmer, and their Benedictine colleagues measured their success in serving African Americans in terms of souls converted. When the agricultural school struggled to obtain consistent success, Moosmueller blamed the poor behavior of the students. Likewise, at the outset of Father Moosmueller's and Father Kaeder's efforts on Skidaway, Abbot Wimmer predicted Moosmueller would confront many challenges due to the African American residents being "mostly bigoted, ignorant Methodists and Baptists."[83] Bishop Gross and the Benedictine fathers had genuine desires to serve African Americans in this community. However, their central goal of conversion did not match the vision African Americans held for their lives as freedmen and women. This evangelizing aim and the methods which the Benedictine fathers

[81] Quoted in Fellner, "A Manual Labor School for Negroes in Georgia", 557.
[82] Quoted in Fellner, "A Manual Labor School for Negroes in Georgia", 561.
[83] Wimmer, *Boniface Wimmer*, 423.

used to accomplish it, namely the agricultural school, did not align with the wants of those they wished to serve. The result, then, was a disconnect between the Benedictine mission and the African American residents of Skidaway Island.

While little documentation directly from the students and black residents exist, census records, the Benedictine monks' correspondence, and the history of the island can give insight into the culture and economy of Skidaway and therefore, how these residents perceived the Benedictine mission. At the time the Benedictine fathers took ownership of Hampton Place on Skidaway, several black families were living on the property and the island had around 500 residents, almost all of whom were African American. However, none of these residents were Catholics except for the three black Benedictine brothers who lived in the monastery at the founding of the school in 1878.[84] These three brothers included Siricius Palmer, Philip Cassidy, and Rhabanus Cononge, a black monk from New Orleans who had only recently arrived at St. Vincent Archabbey. Palmer, Cassidy, and Cononge assisted in the teaching of the students and in the agricultural work of the monastery's farm.[85] However, Cassidy and Cononge soon left as the 1880 Federal Census no longer lists them. However, the 1880 Census does state that 14 individuals lived at the Skidaway school and monastery. The Census lists only three priests, O. Moosmueller, M. Reichert, and S. Palmer as well as two black male servants, B. Cannong and A. Mason, and eight students ranging in age from 12 to 17. While many of these students were born in Georgia, two of the students came from Maryland, Henry Cook and Robert Davis, and John Hayes came to Georgia from New Jersey.[86] With the exception of Cook, Davis, and Hayes, most of the students attending the Benedictine school came from families who experienced the

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[84] Kelly, *A Short History of Skidaway Island*, 81.
[85] Oetgen, *Mission to America*, 163.
[86] 1880 U.S. census, Chatham County, Georgia, population schedule, the islands, p. 26, dwelling 264, family 319; digital image, Ancestry.com.

changes and tumult of the Civil War and its aftermath in Georgia, if not on Skidaway Island itself. While the census fails to provide details beyond the basics such as gender, age, and birthplace, this information gives a fuller understanding of those who lived at the Benedictine mission either as monks or students and their actions.

The clearest rejection of the Benedictine school came simultaneously with the school's opening on Skidaway Island in the fall of 1878. The Benedictine school opened simultaneously with a public school for the 80 African American school age children. The people of Skidaway Island successfully petitioned and received a public school from the City of Savannah government.[87] This public school offered immediate and damaging competition to the Benedictine school and monastery. However, such a setback did not deter Father Moosmueller in his determination to convert the people of Skidaway Island. In hopes of establishing a Catholic influence in the public school, he asked Siricius Palmer, an African American candidate for the Benedictine order born in Washington, D.C., to apply for a teaching position at the school. Palmer had previously helped Moosmueller do most of the teaching at the temporary school on the Isle of Hope. Due to his qualifications, the public school appointed Palmer as a teacher making a salary of $25 a month.[88] Moosmueller's reasoning behind moving Palmer as a teacher to the competing school was that Palmer would be able to bring those students into the Catholic faith. In a letter to Abbot Wimmer on December 9th, 1878, he wrote that "if Siricius is a good teacher, he has the chance to convert the children and with them the whole population of the island to the Catholic faith."[89] However, this plan, much like Moosmueller's plans to establish a band or improve the climate, did not provide the desired result. Palmer remained teaching at the

[87] Fellner, "A Manual Labor School for Negroes in Georgia", 82.
[88] Oetgen, "The Origins of the Benedictine Order in Georgia," 175.
[89] Quoted in Fellner, "A Manual Labor School for Negroes in Georgia", 564.

public school for some years and in 1882 he applied to Abbot Wimmer for a dispensation from his simple vows which came at the beginning of 1883.[90] While it is not clear why Palmer left the Benedictine order, the dispensation of his vows combined with the residents' request for a public school serve as evidence of the contrast between what the Benedictine fathers thought the African Americans needed and what these individuals wanted.

Historian V.E. Kelly claims that the resistance to the Benedictine mission did not only come from the African American residents but also from white Protestants on the mainland of Savannah. He argues that white Protestants were worried about Catholic influence over the Skidaway population and wished to prevent any Catholic success in conversion. Therefore, according to Kelly, when they learned about the Benedictine school and monastery, they were the ones who applied to the city government to approve a public school for Skidaway.[91] However, Kelly does not cite any evidence for this claim. More probable, considering the recorded opposition of the African American residents and the seeming lack of opposition in the *Savannah Morning News*, was that the residents themselves made this request. The 13th annual report for the Savannah's public schools, for the 1877-1878 school term, briefly mentioned the Skidaway Island request. In the section discussing "country schools" or schools operating outside of city limits, the report mentioned that "urgent calls are made for schools at White Bluff, Skidaway, and Ossabaw Islands, which must be responded to by the board."[92] The annual report did not explicate why these calls were urgent and thus, leaves the question of whether the request was in response to an opposition of Catholic influence. However, considering that the report lumped this request for a Skidaway public school with those for other locations where Catholic

[90] Oetgen, "The Origins of the Benedictine Order in Georgia," 178.
[91] Kelly, *A Short History of Skidaway Island*, 82.
[92] Georgia Historical Society, "13th Annual Report of the Public Schools of the City of Savannah and the County of Chatham for the Year Ending July 12, 1878".

schools were not present, these "urgent" calls better support the conclusion that this request was not motivated by white Protestant anti-Catholic fear.

White Protestants' earlier support for Catholic ventures also belies the notion that anti-Catholic fears motivated the call for a public school on Skidaway. When the Benedictines first arrived in 1874 and Fathers Bergier and Wissel established a mission on the Isle of Hope, the *Savannah Morning News* printed excerpts from Catholic newspapers that praised the efforts of Bishop Gross and the Benedictines. This initial show of support in one of the main newspapers for Savannah counters Kelly's claim that white Protestants on the mainland of Savannah ardently opposed the Benedictine efforts. Furthermore, these excerpts shed light on how Catholic efforts such as the Benedictine mission fit within many white southerners' perceptions of African Americans and their education. The *Catholic World* reported a visit by Bishop Gross during which he appealed to northern congregations for financial aid. According to this article, Bishop Gross claimed that the Benedictine fathers had already succeeded in baptizing many adults on the island. Furthermore, he described the African American residents "as good-natured, docile, but very ignorant" and "ripe for conversion."[93] Bishop Gross's comments underlined his ardent desire for conversion but also his belief in the inferiority of those he worked for and with. He used these racial stereotypes of African Americans as "docile" and "ignorant" to argue for the need of a Benedictine presence and thus, to convince others to support their endeavors. Such racialized perceptions as the basis for Catholic efforts in the South were, in fact, detrimental to Bishop Gross's stated goal of helping African Americans. They fed the misconception that African Americans could not have agency over the people and the curriculum that taught in their schools.

[93] *Savannah Morning News*, October 12, 1874.

An excerpt re-printed in 1874 from the *New York Freeman's Journal*, a Catholic newspaper, falsely described a prosperous Georgia in which former slaves and their masters possessed cooperative and mutually beneficial relations. The article placed the Benedictine efforts within this context as contributing to this allegedly prosperous situation. According to this publication, Georgia's successful recovery since the Civil War was due to the amiable relations between African Americans and their former masters as well as African Americans' rejection of northerners' help. The article claimed that former slaves better trusted "the white men that they have been brought up among, than the 'carpet-baggers', who belong to the same race that, in times of slavery, when one of them lit on a plantation, was recognized as an inexorable and cruel master."[94] The newspaper's description of peaceful race relations in Georgia inaccurately conflates the motivations of freedmen and women with those of their former masters. These claims of racial unity in opposition of white northerners serves to uphold the Benedictine mission as an accepted and even wanted counter to an unwelcome northern presence in the South. While the newspaper described carpet-baggers as would be cruel masters, Catholic priests were described as the "best friends" of the lately emancipated in their laudable mission of "training them for the condition so unpreparedly thrust on them by political demagogues."[95]

The article, then, cast the Benedictine fathers as preferable to any Yankee and argued that both blacks and whites in the South saw the monks as less foreign or intrusive in comparison. However, this claim and the false conception of racial harmony in Georgia falsely assumed former slaves held the same interests as southern whites, many of whom ardently opposed any northern intervention in southern society. Similar to white northern missionaries, the monks themselves were not from the South and in fact, many had immigrated to the United States from

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[94] *Savannah Morning News*, June 27, 1874.
[95] *Savannah Morning News*, June 27, 1874.

Europe. In this way, the Benedictine monks were more foreign than their northern missionary counterparts. However, Bishop Gross invited the Benedictine monks. Gross was a native of Maryland and in many of his ideas regarding African Americans, he supported the broader racial hierarchy being re-established in the post-War South. Previous scholars have argued that white Catholics bought an accepted place in southern society by supporting slavery, the Confederacy, and after the Civil War, the re-making of white supremacy in new forms.[96] Thus, it is possible that many white southerners viewed the Benedictine mission as more acceptable than northern benevolent societies due to the Catholic Church's complicity in southern society's unequal race relations. For this same reason, it is probable that former slaves did not welcome the Benedictine missionaries despite the claims of the *New York Freeman's Journal*. Given this context, the strongest resistance to the Benedictine Georgia mission would not have come from white southern Protestants but instead from the very individuals Catholics hoped to convert.

The opposition and tension the Benedictine fathers faced on Skidaway paralleled in many ways the hostility northern Protestant missionaries received from Savannah blacks. Shortly after General William T. Sherman made his way through Savannah during his 1864 March to the Sea, a group of black clergymen established the Savannah Education Association (SEA). Voluntary subscriptions funded this organization and revealed the desire on the part of Savannah blacks to establish control over institutions such as schools. While at first northern education officials were excited about African Americans' interest in education, this excitement waned when they realized the SEA wanted blacks and not whites to teach in and administer these schools.[97]

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[96] Shoemaker, "Strangers and Citizens"; Stern, "Southern Cross, Southern Crucifix"; Thigpen, "Aristocracy of the Heart."

[97] Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873*, Fred W. Morrison Series in Southern Studies (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 73.

Across the post-War South, freedmen and women came together to establish schools; however, minimal resources limited what they were able to accomplish. For this reason, African Americans often sought and received the help of northern benevolent societies. This financial help came at the cost of relinquishing control over their institutions, the very thing freedmen and women wanted.[98] The interests and goals of educated freedmen and women in Savannah cannot be conflated with those of rural black farmers in the Georgia Lowcountry. Due to the differing economic and education situations of these areas and populations, the opposition to white missionaries on Skidaway Island would not transpire in the same way as in the city of Savannah. However, a comparison of these situations does bring out the intricacies of black agency within education and illuminates the different ways freedmen and women fought for autonomy over their schools.

In Savannah, the American Missionary Association (AMA) gained a monopoly over freedmen's education despite the desire of Savannah blacks to maintain autonomy over their schools. In order for the SEA to be able to operate schools for their children, they needed financial aid from the AMA; however, by accepting this aid the SEA gave up control over these schools and the result was the ultimate failure of the SEA.[99] While the AMA secured control over black education in Savannah, the consequence was the recalcitrance of the black population. In 1866, the AMA superintendent even compared the opposition of Savannah's blacks to the AMA with white southerners' hostilities toward the North.[100] Similarly, the desire of the African American residents to exert control and autonomy over their educational institutions explains the opposition to and the overall lack of interest in the Benedictine Georgia mission. Instead of

[98] Jones, 4.
[99] Jones, 75.
[100] Jones, 76.

attributing the "urgent call" for a public school on Skidaway to white Southern protestants' religious opposition, more likely this call came from African Americans as they tried and succeeded in determining for themselves what curriculum and school most fit their needs. Education provided resources and opportunities for advancement; however, the struggle over the control of educational institutions point to the duality of education for African Americans. Education in the hands of whites often served as another means for power over freedmen and women; however, education could also provide a source of choice and autonomy for African Americans.

Despite the opening of a competing school and lagging enrollment numbers, Bishop Gross, Abbot Wimmer, and Father Moosmueller remained optimistic about the fruits of their labors. In fact, they were so hopeful of the ultimate success of the Benedictine mission that in 1879 they met and decided to open a new parish and school for African Americans in the city of Savannah. The Benedictine Order planned to build this parish and school, both named Sacred Heart, on Habersham Street and Father Moosmueller volunteered to act as pastor. However, despite these early hopes, the Benedictine Order established Sacred Heart parish in an area with few African Americans and by 1886 Sacred Heart would become an all-white parish.[101] Abbot Wimmer replaced Father Moosmueller with Father Melchior Reichert from Pennsylvania to take charge of the school and monastery on Skidaway. Father Reichert, the very same M. Reichert listed in the 1880 Skidaway Island Census, was less enthusiastic about the work on Skidaway; however, he was more systematic about the administration of the school and monastery than Father Moosmueller had been. As a result, he was able to increase the enrollment to 20 students

[101] Oetgen, "The Origins of the Benedictine Order in Georgia," 177.

by 1883.[102] This spike in enrollment failed to prevent the closing of the school and monastery just a few short years later in 1889.

Perhaps because of this increase in the number of students, when the *Savannah Morning News* reported a vespers service held on Skidaway in July of 1884, the Benedictine mission was described as thriving. According to this report, the Benedictine fathers were "the direct instrument of God in this mission since 1877" and they "exerted a good influence on the colored people, not only giving religious instructions, but assisting and directing them in their labors and in the product of the land."[103] Furthermore, Bishop Gross in his sermon for the service "expressed himself greatly pleased with the condition and the progress of the colored people on the island as well as with the institution of the Benedictines."[104] While Bishop Gross and even outside observers provided a laudatory assessment of the Benedictine mission, in reality the mission was failing financially. Moosmueller's early hopes of a self-supporting school never reached fruition and both the school and monastery operated on aid from Abbot Wimmer as well as the little money Father Reichert could fundraise on his own. Reichert traveled throughout Georgia in an attempt to raise money; however, these journeys almost always proved unsuccessful. Abbot Leo Haid, the successor to Abbot Wimmer, considered closing the Georgia mission in 1885 but decided against it as aid was still trickling in from Wimmer in his old age. Because of the importance of Wimmer's aid, his death in 1887 combined with a tidal wave shortly thereafter in 1889 resulted in the ultimate withdrawal of the Benedictines' from Skidaway Island and the end of the evangelization and education efforts there.[105]

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[102] Fellner, "A Manual Labor School for Negroes in Georgia", 566.
[103] *Savannah Morning News*, July 21, 1884.
[104] *Savannah Morning News*, July 21, 1884.
[105] Oetgen, "The Origins of the Benedictine Order in Georgia," 180.

PART IV: CONCLUSION

Father Moosmueller remained pastor of Sacred Heart in Savannah until 1887. At that point, the Benedictine Belmont Abbey in North Carolina took charge of all Benedictine establishments. Reverend William Mayer from Belmont became the new pastor of Sacred Heart and Father Moosmueller returned to Pennsylvania where he was appointed prior of St. Vincent. He only stayed at St. Vincent for a few years before making his way to Illinois in 1892 to found the monastery of New Cluny where, in 1902, he passed away. However, before he left Savannah in 1887, Moosmueller began negotiations to establish another new parish for African Americans, this time in an area that was majority African American. The Benedictines founded this parish with the hope that, unlike Sacred Heart, it would find success in providing spiritual and pastoral care to the African American population.[106] Father Moosmueller's last effort in Savannah did, in fact, bring forth the success so long sought after by the Benedictine fathers in Georgia. The St. Benedict's parish was established on East Broad and Gaston streets in 1889 and the parish, today known as St. Benedict the Moor, still serves the majority of Savannah's black Catholics. Father Moosmueller's last endeavor before leaving Savannah speaks to a genuine determination to establish a lasting institution for the care of Savannah's African American residents. However, in Moosmueller's and his Benedictine brothers' struggles on Skidaway Island, their determination stood in opposition to the will of Skidaway's inhabitants revealing the limitations of individuals such as Moosmueller to fulfill the Catholic Church's call to serve freedmen and women.

[106] Oetgen, "The Origins of the Benedictine Order in Georgia," 180.

Today visitors and residents enjoy and appreciate Skidaway Island for its natural beauty; however, the sandy trails and marshy coastlines of the island act as reminders of previous residents' struggles and successes in making a living and a life on this difficult land. The short-lived endeavors of Benedictine missionaries can help bring into clarity African Americans' contest for control over their educational institutions, their land, and their livelihoods in the years following emancipation. Despite the monks' genuine intentions of saving souls and educating, their school and monastery proved to be a poor fit for the goals and interests of Skidaway's black residents. The white and foreign Benedictine monks and their mission served as an outside force threatening to limit the choices available to freedmen and women. The closure of the school and monastery in 1889 was the result of freedmen's and women's lack of interest in the Benedictine mission and their choice to pursue other options that could provide a greater degree of independence. The story of the brief presence of Benedictine missionaries on Skidaway Island reveals two fundamentally different ideas of uplift. Moosmueller and his fellow brothers believed that conversion to the Catholic faith and the salvation only the Catholic Church offered would elevate former slaves from their current positions. Freedmen and women, however, saw uplift in the freedom and rights the abolition of slavery had promised. Ultimately, the Benedictine missionaries' vision of uplift through the Catholic faith did not provide the equality the Catholic Church taught in doctrine and that freedmen and women desired.

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