

READING

Improving Education in South Carolina

Freedman Samuel J. Lee was elected to the South Carolina House of Representatives in the elections of 1868, the first elections in which African Americans voted. He became Speaker of the House in 1872. In 1874, he reported on the improvements to the state education system made by the Republican legislature during Reconstruction.

Permit me, now to refer to our increased educational advantages. It is very pleasing, gentlemen, to witness how rapidly the schools are springing up in every portion of our State, and how the number of competent, well trained teachers are increasing. ...

Our State University has been renovated and made progressive. New Professors, men of unquestionable ability and erudition, now filled the chairs once filled by men who were too aristocratic to instruct colored youths. A system of scholarships has been established that will, as soon as it is practically in operation, bring into the University a very large number of students. ... The State Normal School is also situated here, and will have a fair attendance of scholars. We have, also, Claflin University, at Orangeburg, which is well attended, and progressing very favorably; and in the different cities and large towns of the State, school houses have been built, and the school master can be found there busily instructing “the young idea how to shoot” [a quotation from poet James Thomson, who uses *shoot* to mean “grow” or “advance”]. The effects of education can also be perceived; the people are becoming daily more enlightened; their minds are expanding, and they have awakened, in a great degree, from the mental darkness that hitherto surrounded them.¹

¹ Excerpt from Final Report to the South Carolina House, 1874, *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of South Carolina, for the Regular Session of 1874–1874* (Columbia, 1874), 549–553. Reprinted in William Loren Katz, *Eyewitness* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995). Available at [American Experience](http://www.americanexperience.org).