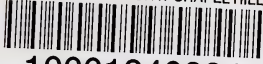


F 231
.R 84
P 43

William Henry Ruffner
by
Charles Chilton Pearson



UNIVERSITY OF N.C. AT CHAPEL HILL



10001840224

F23 F231
R84 R84
P43 P43

reel.
KD

reel
KD

William Henry Ruffner: Reconstruction Statesman of Virginia

By **C. CHILTON PEARSON**
Wake Forest College

(Reprinted from *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. XX, Nos. 1 and 2
January and April, 1921)



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2014

William Henry Ruffner: Reconstruction Statesman of Virginia

C. CHILTON PEARSON
Wake Forest College

I

The year 1920 marked the semi-centennial of the opening of the public schools in Virginia under the administration of William Henry Ruffner. In 1870 as now the problems of the day were problems of reconstruction. Since 1861 Virginia had seen both conquest and revolution. The new constitution and the special covenant under which the state had just returned to the Union constituted in effect a treaty, the intent of which was to render secure the results of the conquest and to fortify the processes of the revolution.¹ Most significant among the treaty's terms, to which effect had to be given through laws, institutions and customs, were the provisions for public education and the plan for protecting and developing an inferior race through education and suffrage. The story of the working of the suffrage provision is one of dismal failure. That the educational experiment proved a blessing to both races was due primarily to William Henry Ruffner, the "Horace Mann of the South."

Of direct and conscious preparation for his educational work Mr. Ruffner had practically none. He was born February 11, 1824, in Lexington, Virginia. From Washington College he received the B.A. degree in 1842 and the M.A. in 1844. After courses in theology at Union Seminary, Va., and Princeton and a period of two years as chaplain and student at the University of Virginia, he settled in 1851 as pastor of the Seventh Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia. Compelled to resign in 1853, the next sixteen years found him farming and preaching, rather irregularly, to the small churches of his native valley. If to this account we add his marriage to Har-

¹ Cf. Pearson, *Readjuster Movement in Virginia*, ch. 2. The bibliography of this book includes the bibliography for this paper. Particular reference, however, should be made to the voluminous collection of papers left by Mr. Ruffner in the hands of his son-in-law, Mr. R. F. Campbell, of Asheville, N. C., who very kindly placed them at my disposal. Unless otherwise indicated this study is based on these papers or on Mr. Ruffner's *Annual Reports*.

25-8365-

riet Gray, of Rockingham, the outstanding events of his first forty-five years have been chronicled.

None the less, during these years Ruffner was being fitted well for what was to be his great task. Heredity and early environment were favorable. Into the upper Valley of Virginia, the nation's first "melting pot," had come the westward moving English pioneers and southward-bound Scotch-Irish, along with a sprinkling of Germans. Some of them had passed on, but others had remained and mingled, generation after generation, with varying predominance of strain. Limestone water and bracing mountain air had made them tall, large limbed, vigorous. Of the best type were the Ruffners, all large men, German in the origin of their name, but Scotch-Irish in their intellectual independence, and English in their practical common sense. These characteristics were, accordingly, William Henry Ruffner's birthright.

Out of the Scotch-Irish instinct for education had early sprung Augusta Academy, built solidly out of the abundant native rock. With the Revolution it had become Liberty Academy, and the village around, Lexington. After a small gift from the admired Father of his Country, Liberty Academy became Washington College. But regardless of passing influences, the school had at all times been primarily the training ground for young Presbyterians of moderate means and good family. On its faculty was Henry Ruffner, the father of William Henry; later he became its president. Close by was another educational institution very significant for him who would understand the politics of our middle period, the Virginia Military Institute. Thus Lexington was a cultural center. In Franklin Hall its most eminent citizens read papers and debated to a decision the burning issues of the day; and since these were men of strong convictions and of wide and clannish connections in both the aristocratic east and the democratic west, their discussions and decisions were often of practical political consequence. In this work Henry Ruffner was a leader, contributing a very famous pamphlet on slavery and fathering a significant movement for public education. And the young Ruffner, busy as he was with classical studies and enticed into imitation of his father's occasional verses, re-

sponded to this stimulus to thought on social questions. Of his first three public efforts, one dealt with the importance of education, one with slavery, and one with the settlement of international disputes through a congress of nations.

From Lexington young Ruffner went first for a year (1842-1843) of business experience to the Kanawha country, as manager of his father's salt works.

Capital, he wrote his father from this developing country, was very poorly employed in the east while it demanded a high price in the west; one might reap a tidy profit by playing broker. But his instinct for business was not to have immediate play; instead he must seek theological training in the east. Of this seminary work at Union Theological Seminary and Princeton we have little knowledge, save such as may be inferred from a single sermon, well written, well reasoned, but to the modern mind heavy and dull. Apparently he himself counted as more valuable his course in Moral Philosophy at the University of Virginia under Professor W. H. McGuffey. Dr. McGuffey, he afterward declared, "converted my faculties into common-sense," and between the two thereafter existed a genuine, Presbyterian friendship such as Ruffner rarely felt for other men. One would like to think that the young chaplain also attracted the attention of John B. Minor, the University of Virginia's great law teacher; but this can only be conjectured from the readiness with which Professor Minor later came to his aid.

The University of Virginia of that day would hardly be influenced by a preacher of twenty-six years. But Ruffner must have displayed ability, for from there he went to the Philadelphia charge. One may fancy that life in a large northern city was illuminating to the village preacher. But one must guard against the modern tendency to assume that the countryman of that day was backward in his knowledge of important happenings. We know that he was not immune to the liberal intellectual influences of Philadelphia. Particularly valuable was the strong friendship which he formed with Stephen Caldwell, whom he frequently called "the economist," man of wide and correct historical reading and rather unusual insight into such problems as the free negro presented and was to present. On

the other hand Ruffner must have been able to help Caldwell, for he knew his father's view and activities in the matter of slavery. As long ago as his Kanawha year he had formulated and published ideas of his own from which he never receded. Slavery, he had written anonymously in the *Kanawha Republican*, was neither dishonorable nor contrary to God's Word, but it was an economic burden, and on that account should be gotten rid of. Later he had served as agent of the Colonization Society in carrying negroes from Christiansburg to Baltimore for deportation to Africa. Later still he had taken part in organizing and teaching a Sunday school for negroes in Lexington, a work in which Stonewall Jackson succeeded him after an interval. And now he could bring from the Mecca of the South's future rulers first-hand knowledge of opinion then in the making.

Soon, however, came ill health—a nervous affection of the throat, it seems. From the city pastorate Ruffner retreated to Rockingham County where he seems to have sunk into the work of occasional preacher as easily as he had taken up a colporter's task on leaving the Seminary six years before. One cannot easily live in the Valley without becoming a farmer, so fertile is its soil and so genial its climate. Possibly at Washington College Ruffner had attended lectures on Agricultural Chemistry—for such were given, the first in America, it has been claimed. At any rate he soon became not only a "practical" farmer but also a "scientific" farmer. From farming chiefly he derived his livelihood, and years later his "Tribrook" farm was one of the show places of Lexington, whither he returned in 1863. And never did he lose faith in Valley agriculture: even in 1891 he could write in *Suggestions for my family*: "Land will increase in value, and farming become more profitable." During these years, too, he became interested in the geological formations of the state, and many are the little note books that he filled then and later with first-hand observation. Characteristically, he attempted to put this knowledge to practical use, and one finds among his papers records of more than one commercial venture of his own and several stout volumes prepared for important corporations or the federal government. But this work was done chiefly after his superintendency. The most import-

ant immediate result of these pre-war days was the restoration of his health and a widening of his acquaintanceship. And only in the light of his varying activities at this time can we understand how responsible men could a little later speak so confidently of his business sense and executive powers.

The test of loyalty to one's own people imposed so rigorously during the Civil War and Reconstruction Ruffner met satisfactorily and yet with dignity. It was Lincoln's call for troops, he told Stonewall Jackson, that converted him, as so many other Virginians, to secession. Following the accepted custom for ministers, he remained at home and did his bit by visiting the distressed, writing letters to the front, gathering food and clothes for the armies, joining the Home Guards, and at least once preaching a sermon on the obligation of the oath of allegiance. During Congressional Reconstruction he shared the intense indignation of Professor John B. Minor over the "infamous Catilines at Washington." But he probably never joined the passive resistance group. Instead, after a decent interval and a brief anonymous re-assertion of the rightfulness of secession in the *Charlottesville Chronicle*, he dropped for good and for all the legalistic attitude of the South's old leaders, urged participation in national life, and set himself to study the state's practical problems. Once more debate was resumed in Franklin Hall. On the question, "Is it advisable for the state of Virginia, at this time, to adopt a system of Public Free Schools?" Ruffner took the negative, his side winning twenty-seven to none. Less than a year later, April 6, 1867, he championed the affirmative of the query, "Ought Virginia to adopt measures for the education of the colored people?" and again his side won, sixteen to six.

Embedded in the Virginia constitution of 1870 were provisions for the usual feature of a modern school system. This was revolutionary. For in the long run its meaning was to be democracy for the whites and opportunity for the blacks through the agency of an increasingly socialized state. Most of the accustomed leaders of the whites, however, envisioned the revolution in the light of the conquest. To them there was at best a "system prescribed by the constitution," or "this system of common schools which has been thrust upon us." And

the great mass of the whites, still stunned and apathetic, agreed. On the other hand some leaders felt with Mr. Ruffner that education ought to be provided, and by the state, for the negroes, so pathetic in their eagerness for schools and so ludicrous in their expectations. Moreover, the constitution was mandatory, and the governor insistent. Not from choice, therefore, but from necessity would the legislature take up early in 1870 the election of a state superintendent of public instruction, which was its first duty under the constitution. In recognition of the situation the *Educational Journal of Virginia* had been founded, and it perhaps reflected the best public opinion when in February, 1870, it said: The new superintendent must be "alive to. . . changes wrought by the war, and yet not a man to surrender in homage to that fashionable deity of New Virginia and purely material prosperity, all our time honored memories."

For this position Mr. Ruffner became a candidate in the fall of 1869. Though without technical training or experience in public education, he was not poorly equipped. He was, as we have seen, a minister; and the ministry and education had always been closely allied. His education was broad, his experience varied, his inclinations social. His record during Civil War and Reconstruction was satisfactory. From his letters of recommendation we learn that his belief in public education was sincere but tempered with the proper caution for the times. Especially prized and valuable was a letter written by Prof. John L. Campbell and signed by R. E. Lee, stating the belief that he "will give the system a fair and honest trial, and that he will be most competent to make what may be good in it available for the interests of education, and to suggest promptly such alterations and amendments as future experience may point out as desirable." Armed with this letter and with testimonials from such men as John B. Baldwin, J. William Jones, A. Leyburn, Edward L. Joyner, and William Preston Johnston, Mr. Ruffner invaded the state capital and enlisted the aid of friends and relatives there. Fortunately politicians were not much interested in the position. And so in the Conservative caucus "the Southwest, Richmond and the Valley carried me through," and the Legislature confirmed the nomination, 141 to

1, on March 2, 1870. "This is a jejune life I am leading," Ruffner wrote his daughters about this time, "but my conscience rests easy under it. My work is a great one—and I must about it."

The statesmanship of the new superintendent quickly received its first test. Under the constitution it was his duty to "report to the general assembly within thirty days after his election a plan for a uniform system of public free schools." This was no slight task. For to succeed, the system must be simple enough to be workable in the hands of an untrained force and yet so sound in principle and so flexible in detail as to admit of continuous development as conditions improved. Selection and adaptation rather than originality were obviously demanded. But which of the existing systems was best? And what adaptations were necessary to meet conditions peculiar to the South and the education of negro freedmen in mass? On these questions the slight antebellum experience of the southern states and the recent brief work of the Freedmen's Bureau shed but little light. Fortunately, the constitutional provisions were admirable. Fortunately, too, Dr. Barnas Sears, their inspirer and perhaps their author, was accessible. In his capacity as agent of the Peabody Fund Dr. Sears was proclaiming, "Free schools for all, neither more nor less." A New Englander who had been president of Brown University and secretary of the Massachusetts state board of education, he was soon to become a "citizen of Virginia" and to be recognized as such by general acclaim. To him Ruffner now turned for much technical advice and from him learned how to avoid division and dissension by letting some things work themselves out. Best of all, perhaps, Prof. John L. Minor, of the University of Virginia, tendered help. For Professor Minor was very learned in the law, knew the strength and weakness of his fellow Virginians, and was willing to give to the "cause," as he sometimes called public education, disinterested services whose value has not yet received adequate public recognition. Possibly Ruffner was unconsciously aided also by impressions derived from his father's plan of twenty years before, though he had not seen that plan for years.

But the enlistment of Sears and Minor, complimentary as it was to the discretion and good standing of Mr. Ruffner, did

not relieve him of the burden of the work nor of the responsibility for its quality. Elected March 2, by March 25 he had prepared a general outline or "Report," thus satisfying the constitutional requirement. "The main features," he said in presenting this document, "are either such as the constitution requires, or such as have been favorably tested by long experience in other states and countries. Doubtful questions have, as far as possible, been postponed to future considerations." Between March 30 and April 18 he drafted the law at his home, then took it to Minor "who during all this week. . . . devoted all possible time to the work of revisal." On April 24 Ruffner wrote his wife that he and Minor finished the "re-drafting at half past two. And as we were so pleased with our work, and so with each other, we chatted on until 4. Had it not been Sunday morning we should have continued until breakfast time. Tomorrow I go to Richmond with the best and most finished school law in America and I shall see that it is not butchered by the Legislature." From May 13 to July 8 the bill was before the Legislature. Fortunately members were much interested in other things. The House made few changes. The Senate cut the pay of county superintendents and "otherwise mutilated the system," Ruffner reported in temporary disgust. At the critical moment Governor Walker threatened not to sign because he understood prepayment of poll taxes was required of parents; but, wrote Ruffner in glee, "it wasn't there!"

II

Among the excellencies of the Virginia constitution of 1869 was the flexibility of its school provisions. Taking advantage of this Dr. Ruffner so drew the school law and its early amendments that the new system was in line with the best *ante bellum* practices and tendencies and yet presented the fundamental features of the system as it is today under another constitution.¹ There were to be schools in all the counties and these schools were to be free to all—subject, of course, to age qualifications which were made quite elastic in view of the

¹ Knight, "Reconstruction and Education in Virginia" in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, January and April, 1916. A similar conclusion, reached independently, is expressed in Pearson, "Readjuster Movement in Virginia."

unusually wide-spread illiteracy. These schools were to be financed by the fruitful combination of state and local taxation in addition to the income from the old Literary Fund. Local control was to be exercised through boards of district trustees, local supervision through county superintendents, who also licensed teachers. Special districts were not encouraged, except in the case of towns and cities: an effort to subdivide the districts (which coincided with the "townships," or magisterial districts) was vigorously combatted some years later on the ground that this attempt at popularizing would result in disorganization and demoralization. The appointment of county superintendents and district trustees rested with the state board of education, which consisted of the governor, attorney-general, and state superintendent. To the latter board was also given an important ordinance-making power. The subjects to be taught were the usual elementary ones of the day: secondary studies in the elementary schools and secondary schools in the towns and cities were permitted, but were not encouraged in the counties as the supply of private academies was quite adequate for the elementary school output.² There were separate schools, of course, for the whites and the negroes, but both were supported by the joint contribution (through taxation) of the two races, and control over both was vested in a single set of officers in whose selection race played no legal part.

As a model for a country just beginning its free school system, this law was sent by the United States Commissioner of Education to the government of Chile; and from that government Dr. Ruffner received a much prized medal. More important, perhaps, as evidence of contemporary expert opinion are the Commissioner's specific recommendation in his report for 1872 that other Southern states study the Virginia program and the definite statement of Dr. Sears in 1873 that Virginia led the South in respect to systems of public education. Yet in one respect the law proved bad: however useful the concentration of power in the state board might be in the beginning, such a policy thrust too heavy a burden upon the central office, it continually subjected the system to the dangers of political interference, and it did not foster public interest locally.

² Cf. U. S. Commissioner of Education, *Report*, 1872.

The advantages of decentralization, however, do not appear to have impressed Dr. Ruffner until general criticism of his power (though not of its use) appeared in 1873.³ Then, expressing pleasure at being "relieved" from the work and worry involved, he prepared a bill transferring the appointment of trustees to local boards, which became a law in 1874. This was followed by another law "restoring to local authorities power which should never have been taken from them" in the selection of text-books. And by 1881 he was convinced that the appointment of county superintendents should be transferred to local boards. In no other important respects, however, did it prove desirable in the opinion either of Dr. Ruffner or of the legislature to change the law as originally drafted. Additions were made from time to time—providing for the training of teachers, for example—and other additions would have been made had the superintendent been able to secure requisite funds.

In his "suggestions for my family" Dr. Ruffner set down as a conclusion of his mature years: "There is more in the right execution of any plan than in the plan itself." Perhaps he was thinking of why his school plan did not go the way of Jefferson's and Henry Ruffner's. Here was his second test. Recognizing that promptness was vital, he nominated superintendents for the hundred counties and secured their appointment before the Senate adjourned, forced his dilatory colleagues on the state board to elect nearly thirteen hundred district trustees by the end of the year, got some of the schools open during the fall of 1869, and by the spring of 1870 he had in operation more than 2,900 schools, enrolling 130,000 pupils and taught by 3,084 teachers, distributed among all the counties. This was a showing at least fifty per cent better than that of any previous year in the state's experience.

The momentum of this initial success was, of course, great. The doubtful and hostile were now confronted by an accomplished fact. But speed had not been achieved at the expense of thoroughness. With great energy Dr. Ruffner combined shrewdness and sound judgment. In making appointments he sought advice through circulars sent to prominent citizens in

³ See *Richmond Whig*, May, 1873, and *Richmond Dispatch*, January, 1874.

the several counties. "A perfect county superintendent of schools," he wrote, "would be a young man or middle aged man of successful experience as a teacher, pleasant in manners, irreproachable character, good speaking abilities, architectural taste, energy, talent, prudence, sound opinions, public spirit, zeal for education of the people and faith in the public school system." But as if doubtful of his ability to secure such a one for the average salary of two hundred and seventeen dollars, he added: "The man recommended for the office should be the one who combines the most of these qualities." In actual practice he sought men whose education and character would tend to remove the stigma of "common", which the schools at first bore. Insisting that their duties were "professional in character," he sought to render them expert through uninterrupted service. But although in 1880 nearly one half were original appointees, few were efficient according to modern standards. This deficiency, however, should not be charged against Dr. Ruffner: none of his successors for a generation was able to fill the positions more satisfactorily and none has set a higher standard of qualifications. In the selection of trustees he was more successful. For this office he sought especially "young men with families," whose direct personal interest would supplement their scanty experience in the unremunerated and thankless task of selecting teachers and managing school property. Of them he could write in 1880 that, despite the millions of dollars that had passed through their hands, none of them had been "even charged with malfeasance in office."

Appointments, however, consumed only a small part of the third of his time that Dr. Ruffner assigned to office work. Besides "the matter of text-books which worked and worried the Board onerously for the first six or seven years," there were blank forms to be designed, instructions to be formulated, a large correspondence to be handled, and accounts to be kept. It was not the custom then, even in the wealthy states, to maintain a large office force; Dr. Ruffner's usually consisted of one or two clerks. With assistance from the Peabody Fund he leased space in the *Educational Journal of Virginia* and had the superintendents and trustees supplied with copies. "No part

of my work tells better on the efficiency of the system," he said in 1874. But political Solons did not much like the idea and grew irate at a whisper that teachers were being urged to subscribe. A committee appointed to investigate the office in 1879 found nothing to report except evidence of impatience at petty bookkeeping. It was probably debarred from criticising the office as inadequate and unworthy of the system by the knowledge that the expense of a more elaborate office would have been difficult to meet and could never have been explained satisfactorily. And it must be set down as another testimony to Dr. Ruffner's grasp of the situation that he endured this waste of his time without complaint.

In fact the school revenues were continuously inadequate and precarious. At first the local tax levy gave trouble, but this quickly disappeared under skillful management. Then came the difficulty of securing the schools' quota of the state taxes.⁴ The root of this trouble lay in the fact that the constitution guaranteed both the state debt and the school funds and there was not money enough for both. In the contest Dr. Ruffner displayed his wonted foresight and energy. For example, when the taxes began to be paid very largely in depreciated coupons, he was able to produce a law, whose passage he had previously secured, requiring the auditor to turn over to the schools their quota *in money*. In the debate which ensued over this matter of "diversion" he quite unhorsed the auditor, who, however, continued to discriminate in favor of the state's creditors and the other governmental agencies until the matter was settled by compromises to be noted later. This contest was of the utmost importance. From the standpoint of public education the principle involved was the right of the schools to be deemed a permanent governmental agency entitled to support equally with other governmental agencies.⁵ This phase may be reserved, along with the effect upon Ruffner's personal fortunes, for later discussion. Fiscally, the net result was a total expenditure annually of considerably more than in any other state of the South proper—fourteen per cent. more than in Mississippi,

⁴ See Pearson, *op. cit.*, ch. 3, ff. and Knight, *op. cit.*

⁵ Cf. Heatwole, *History of Education in Virginia*, p. 223. I think, however, Dr. Heatwole is wrong in his suggestion that the chief motive of the state auditor (not "treasurer") was "to weaken and ultimately defeat the public school system."

twenty-five per cent. more than in Texas, and more than double the amounts in Georgia and Louisiana. At the same time expenses were kept down, and the report of 1880 disclosed that there had been "almost no increase in the cost of administration, and a decided reduction in the cost of education per pupil." Despite this comparative success, however, Dr. Ruffner was at all times impressed with the advisability of having a separate source of revenue for the schools, and so, at one time or another, he advocated a special tax on polls, a tax on dogs, and a consumption tax on liquors. Crude as these suggestions sounded then, they represent a point of view that may yet find legislative sanction.

One third of his time Dr. Ruffner spent in the field, traveling 55,657 miles, perhaps half of it in a buggy, and delivering three hundred and twenty-six formal addresses. Here was a test of physical endurance as well as of energy, of tactfulness as well as of judgment. But in no other way could the local forces have been kept in touch with the central office—even thirty years later there was much grumbling and wagging of heads when inspectors were introduced. How many heart-to-heart talks about buildings and teachers and text-books and grading and methods he had, we can not even estimate. These trips to the schools enabled Dr. Ruffner to test out his theoretical reading and thinking. They gave him a check on the reports of his subordinates. And they probably account in large measure for the affection with which he came to be regarded among the rank and file. Most important was his insistence that teachers attain "professional ability" through definite training in methods of teaching.⁶ By 1880 he was able to report that teachers' institutes were "becoming general, having been held the past year in all but eleven of the hundred counties." The immediate value of these was probably not great. But they so served to advertise the idea that it crystallized into an institution: in 1880 the first state summer normal schools were opened, and in 1885 the first full time state normal institute was established under the presidency of Dr. Ruffner. One may perhaps be pardoned the comment that however we may estimate the efficiency of these institutions as regards imparting "profes-

⁶ Cf. Heatwole, *op. cit.*, pp. 235, 236.

sional ability," this much can not be gainsaid: they have proven veritable intellectual and cultural life-savers to thousands of the state's almost despairing young women.

Upon Dr. Ruffner fell also the burden of developing a body of sound public opinion behind the school system. Peculiar circumstances rendered this task heavier, perhaps, than that borne by any other superintendent of his day. It will be remembered that the acceptance of public education in Virginia had been rather tentative. About 1875 the philosophy of education to which most of the older leaders subscribed began to attain formulation. Any extension of the functions of government beyond "the protection of individuals in all their just rights of person and property," it was said, tends to "relax individual energy and debauch private morality." For those engaged in menial duties, upon which society reposes, education is neither necessary nor wise: the exceptional child of unworthy parents can be taken care of by private charity. Uniformity in education is "utterly antagonistic to that individualism which it is the function of education to develop"; for "the law of nature is inequality, diversity." Moreover, the "public school is atheism or infidelity" because it substitutes state control over the child for the parents', which is a "negation of God's authority." Thus ran the argument of Professor B. Puryear, of Richmond College;⁷ that of Dr. R. L. Dabney, of Union Theological Seminary, was quite similar. According to Dr. Ruffner these views grew largely out of the old controversy over slavery, which had driven men "into a depreciation of the claims of working people, and a denial of the power of common schools to improve this class."⁸ This fact, of course, gave to such views a more cordial reception than was accorded elsewhere to the attack on the schools—an attack which some thought to be concerted and nation-wide. Moreover, the financial situation was acute and a general conservative reaction was under way in Virginia. Accordingly this philosophy, given wide publicity through the state press from 1875 to 1880, furnished a theoretic foundation for a rather definite movement in behalf of a cheaper and less comprehensive system of education.

⁷ *Religious Herald*, January and February, 1875.

⁸ *Educational Journal of Virginia*, March, 1880.

To the task of formulating the argument for public education Dr. Ruffner set himself with zeal and zest. The report which he presented to the legislature along with his "outline," early in 1870, was his brief. To the amplification and defense of this he devoted the greater part of the third of his time which he set aside for "study and writing." His appearance before the State Educational Association in the summer of 1870 marks the beginning of more than three hundred formal addresses in the state. And the beginning was propitious; for from this group of college teachers, writers and students he obtained an endorsement, albeit a qualified one, of the new system. His carefully prepared addresses before the National Educational Association and at Hampton Institute were reported promptly and fully in the state press. They reveal him as a thinker, liberal and progressive, yet balanced and practical. The number of his contributions to the press was probably known to few of his contemporaries. For, acting on Professor Minor's suggestion, he refused to let pass attacks on the system or any part of it, and he could not, or would not, "inspire" others to do the work for him, as Minor advised. He contributed frequently to the *New England Journal of Education* and occasionally to other magazines of wide circulation. He met the redoubtable Dr. R. L. Dabney in a newspaper debate that outlasted the patience of several editors, and came out without loss of honors.⁹ But most effective were his annual *Reports*. These he prepared with great care—reading widely, digging deeply into records, summarizing reports of subordinates, adjusting and readjusting his notes until there were developed arguments that were models of accuracy and dignity and yet permeated with the white heat of conviction.

To summarize the arguments of twenty years in a single paragraph is, of course, impossible; we may hope only to illustrate their variety and their direction. Seeking to offset the objection—with some serious, with others demagogic—that public education was peculiarly a New England idea, Dr. Ruffner endeavored to show historically that "the duty of providing

⁹ See *Richmond Enquirer*, July 29, 1876. Dr. Dabney began in the *Southern Planter*, February 21, 1876; Dr. Ruffner in the *Richmond Dispatch*. A good deal of acerbity lay behind this debate. Dr. Ruffner thought of Dr. Dabney as having turned against him for an unworthy reason and Dr. Dabney impugned Dr. Ruffner's sincerity on account of an early anonymous article.

means of education from public funds has never been seriously questioned in our state." The right of the state to do this he based primarily on the profitableness of the "systematic production of the most valuable commodity which can be possessed by a state or offered in the markets of the world—namely, trained mind." Education, he continued, both saved expense and increased the production of wealth "by drying up the sources of crime and pauperism and by quickening the mind and guiding the hand of every worker in the land." From the political viewpoint, universal suffrage simply necessitates universal education. But that "private enterprise never did, and never can, educate a whole people," he maintained was proven, first by the census statistics on illiteracy, and second by its excessive cost. While the schools were of "various degrees of excellence," they were "always equal to and often superior to those which had previously existed," in proof of which he sketched the old-time school and schoolmaster and pointed to the rapid disappearance of the private schools in the face of competition, even in the rural districts. Far from admitting the religious and moral objections, he claimed that "free schools do not diminish parental responsibility; on the contrary, they awaken it; they stimulate it to an ardent glowing zeal; and they supply the means to make it achieve the most valuable results." To the "graver objection—that the free school system inclines the people to religious error and impiety," he replied, "Is ignorance the mother of devotion? Moreover, the moral influence pervading every school will be just the influence pervading the neighborhood in which it is carried on. Every properly conducted school, itself, furnishes an admirable moral as well as intellectual discipline."

In his attitude toward the negro Dr. Ruffner combined breadth of view with definite, practicable policy. Arguing from the experience of Europe with the emancipated serfs, he believed that the "momentum in the direction of industry, order and docility, which slavery imparted," must be supplemented by Christianity and education. He had no illusions as to the morals of the negroes and their proneness to superstition and their credulity, "which may easily bring them under influences of all sorts." But he asserted their improvability, citing ancient

African history, the observations and opinions of Jefferson, the experience of the Freedmen's Bureau, and their Sunday dress, which he considered "evidence of thrift and aspiring taste." Like his father, he was at all times fond of collecting information as to exceptional negroes, the last being Booker Washington. As to the kind of education, he thought it should be "special and peculiar in its character—not substantially different" but with "an adaption in the selection and arrangement of studies and in the method of instruction to the character and wants of the people." The duty of the state in the matter he grounded upon the perils of neglect, as well as upon the advantages of negro improvement. In administering the laws he instructed his subordinates to be scrupulously fair, and he completely overwhelmed with the facts in the case a specific charge of unfairness to which the *Nation* gave prominence. While the results of the experiment in Virginia appeared encouraging, in supporting a resolution for federal aid which, as chairman of the committee on national legislation, he presented to the department of superintendents of the National Educational Association, he did not hesitate to say: "The kind and amount of education they are receiving, or can receive with our present means, is wholly inadequate to the great work of fitting them as a race for the duties laid upon them by the Federal Government."¹⁰ But assistance was not desired at the price of control. On this point he was very clear. The southern man, he pointed out, had studied the negro as no one else. He believed, as had his father, that interference from without had nipped in the bud very hopeful beginnings in *ante bellum* days:¹¹ this must not happen again. When Sumner's Civil Rights Bill, which required mixed schools, was pending in 1874, he wrote in *Scribner's Magazine* that although history seemed to foretell a gradual diminution of race friction, for the present "unless there is a due recognition of caste in public education at the South, the common school education in fifteen states will be a failure." Speaking at the commencement of Hampton Institute the same year, he drew a parallel between the negroes and Israel after the bondage and urged his hearers on to a consciousness and pride of race. Leaders of their own they must develop, especially teachers and farmers; but for these

"to take possession and to occupy positions, in advance of their personal fitness therefor," would be contrary to the "sound development of the race."¹² Two expressions in one of his last letters probably summed up his final views: disfranchisement through constitutional devices could not safely be avoided; and, "What a work Hampton is doing!"

In estimating the influence of these writings and speeches we must consider them as part of a general policy directed toward the formation of a sound public opinion in the matter of public education. Important men read the *Reports* and wrote of them with enthusiasm. "The most valuable volume ever published . . . in our state" and "an argument . . . which is unanswerable," were the comments made respectively by Robert W. Hughes and John W. Daniels, Republican and Conservative leaders. "Your report," said Minor, "is calculated to illustrate the immense value of a department of education even though there were nothing but a head to it." From the viewpoint of the General Agent of the Peabody Fund, Dr. Sears wrote in 1872 and 1873 that the *Reports* were in constant demand, were contributing a "powerful influence, especially among the conservative states of the South," that the one of 1873 was "the educational document for all the South," and that the Virginia system was constantly being studied and copied. From this viewpoint omissions, too, become eloquent. Thus Dr. Ruffner could not plead for the unfortunate because every friend of the new system earnestly desired that the stigma which had done so much to spoil the old system should not attach to the new. He did not use the doctrine of individual rights, probably because that doctrine had been over-worked during Reconstruction. The extensive and very important private and denominational interests he treated with the greatest discretion. Though he argued for the superiority of public over private elementary and secondary schools, he treated the latter as important auxiliaries, not enemies, of the former. As between state and denominational institutions of higher learning, his position was one of neutral-

¹⁰ *Educational Journal of Virginia*, March, 1880.

¹¹ Among his newspaper clippings is one describing a Lexington school which children of both races had attended.

¹² *Richmond Dispatch*, June 11, 1874.

ity. He did, indeed, once incorporate an article descriptive of the University of Virginia which Professor Minor had written; but this he regretted, and University friends found it difficult to induce him even to appear at their commencement. By command of the legislature he served for a time on the board of trustees of the state's new agricultural and mechanical college. The technical side of the school's work interested him: it was he that labored most earnestly to make it a real technical school and not just another college, and he once thought seriously of becoming its president. But the politics which attended the institution from its inception disgusted him and he eagerly sought relief from his trusteeship. Whatever may be the correct educational theory of the relations between the state's higher and its lower educational institutions today, the attitude of Dr. Ruffner was certainly correct in his time. Its significance was seen when the important Dover Baptist Association went squarely on record as favoring public schools and when influential journals like the *Methodist Christian Advocate* and the *Baptist Religious Herald* committed themselves to the new undertaking. Similarly, when the cry was raised that Catholic influences were behind a nation-wide attack on public education, he was quick to point out that some of the schools' best friends in Virginia were Catholics. Thus the wisdom of his policy found fruitage in the gradual disappearance of opposition from political and denominational interests. As for the masses of the people, the success of the system converted them to its support so that in 1877 it was accounted death for a public man to put himself in open opposition.

Politics was Mr. Ruffner's *bête noir*. Early in his superintendency he suggested through the *Educational Journal* "the propriety of endeavoring to secure supervisors who would provide the necessary accommodations for the schools." But warning came quick and sharp, and he heeded it. He even prepared a bill requiring the state and county superintendents to keep out of politics, but later became convinced that "the best law is a stern public sentiment." Politicians, however, would not let him and the schools alone. The Conservative party tried to make political capital out of the growing popularity of the system; the Republicans sought to drive a wedge be-

tween the superintendent and the Conservative party. Attracted by the possibilities of his office, a factional group that at one time included a member of the Board of Education, sought to prevent his re-election in 1874 by the action of a "snap" caucus and were defeated only by a filibuster of William E. Massey, who later succeeded to the superintendency. Repeatedly he headed off attacks on the system made under the guise of friendliness, or saved it from its politically ambitious friends. Irritated by such attacks, he laid himself open to charges of "bruskness"; it was in meeting such attacks that he printed anonymous newspaper articles, which of course returned to plague him. It was probably on account of disgust with this phase of his office that in 1874 he sought and obtained from the Lexington Presbytery an honorable demission from the ministry.

And politics were in the end to prove his undoing. About 1877 reaction against "radicalism" of all sorts, including the schools, was at its height. With the elimination of the negro voter the carpet-bagger and the scalawag had fallen, and then the compromiser. The offices were now held, and the dominant party's policies determined, by men of long established reputations for loyalty and stability. The sympathy of these later leaders went out strongly to the state's creditors who, long put off with partial payments, were organizing and pressing for their interest. On the other hand, the schools had become popular. Under these circumstances a new group, calling itself "Readjuster," was formed within the Conservative party, beginning about 1877. It sought to put the old leaders out; to liberalize party politics, break the bondage of the debt through partial repudiation, and develop the state's institutions in the interests of the common man. In this group were some of Dr. Ruffner's political pests, notably H. H. Riddleberger. But it also included important friends of the schools, among them John E. Massey and, especially, Elam of the Richmond *Whig*, of whom Dr. Ruffner said, "a better school man never put pen to paper." In the legislative elections of 1877 this group, aided by Dr. Ruffner's powerful arguments against "diversion" and by the pitiable plight of the schools, seemed to win an important advantage. They quickly passed

the "Barbour Bill" under which the schools' quota of state taxes was definitely apportioned to them, but which met a prompt veto. In the passage of this bill Dr. Ruffner coöperated. He soon saw, however, that public education could not afford to become tainted with repudiation or drawn into factional politics. Besides, he was too nearly an aristocrat and too much of a gentleman for permanent alliance with the "New Movement." Therefore, when the older group and the creditors, after a fight which at one time threatened the very existence of the school system, proposed concessions under which the interests of the schools appeared to be safeguarded and perhaps improved, Dr. Ruffner, in company with some of the more moderate Readjusters, declared in favor of the new arrangement, which thereupon was enacted into the law known as the "McCulloch Bill."¹³ This concession was of the utmost importance; for it marked the final recognition of the schools as an agency of the state entitled to financial support. But Dr. Ruffner's support of the McCulloch Bill had another consequence. This bill was the Readjusters' specific point of attack during the ensuing campaign of 1879. By his endorsement of it he incurred their hostility. In the elections they won a sweeping victory. Still Dr. Ruffner seemed to think that in view of his record and his effort at keeping the schools out of politics, he might be reëlected in 1882. Important influences were exerted in his behalf. Thus General S. C. Armstrong, of Hampton, wrote that he could "do more than any other man as superintendent," and from the United States Bureau of Education came word that the retirement of Dr. Ruffner would be a "calamity." These endorsements should have carried weight, as the Readjusters had come into power largely because of their advocacy of better treatment for the schools and were now about to unite formally with the national party to which General Armstrong and the Commissioner of Education belonged. But General William Mahone, the strategist of the Readjusters, was forming a new political machine, and Dr. Ruffner's office and its patronage were needed.¹⁴

¹³ Pearson, *op. cit.*, pp. 87, 123.

¹⁴ Heatwole, *op. cit.*, p. 225, is curiously wrong in his facts. I am indebted to him, however, for the clearness with which he points out the importance of the contest.

With his retirement from the superintendency Dr. Ruffner's constructive work came to an end. He had seen his people's needs with a clear eye, and in universal public education he had discerned the best way of meeting those needs. Time has proven his vision correct. To him had been entrusted the creation of the school system: contemporaries approved his work and the succeeding generation only increased the superstructure. Without the gifts that make men popular, he had been able to undermine demagogues as well as reactionaries and make his work so popular that the schools survived when weaker and less disinterested hands assumed their direction. The solution of the negro's primary problem he had seen to lie in education of the Hampton type; the solution which he advocated for the problem of race relations anticipated that of Hampton's most famous alumnus. To what extent he had influenced northern attitude toward the South we can not tell; but it seems worthy of record that he had been a pioneer among southern educators in meeting northern educators and philanthropists on a footing of mutual respect.

After a brief period as first president of the State Female Normal School, he devoted his working time to geology and historical writing, with headquarters at Asheville, N. C. But when leaders of the coming educational renaissance in Virginia turned to him for advice, they found his vision still clear and his interest unabated. Through them the educational statesman of Reconstruction days projected himself into the new century.

