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To TEACH the NEGRO

Maggie and Will Paterson found a cross-shaped scarecrow burning in their yard and a note giving the "nigger teacher" twenty-four hours to get out of town. The Patersons stayed.

By JUDITH HILLMAN PATERSON

BY THE TIME my great-grandparents, Maggie and Will Paterson, moved their missionary-inspired "college for Negroes" from Marion, Alabama, to Montgomery in the middle 1880s, the resistance to their work had hardened. Those who favored black education at all preferred industrial training to the traditional learning the missionary societies had believed in and fostered since the early days of the Civil War.

Over the years, the story of the family's move from Marion to Montgomery crystallized into a saga of family survival that went like this:

As soon as they could afford it, Maggie and Will built a plain wooden house on the grounds of the campus that would become Alabama State University. Although the house was not as big as the one they had left in Marion, it was sturdy, and they put a greenhouse behind it for growing flowers to help support the school and their five children.

And that is where they were living the night they awoke to find a cross-shaped scarecrow burning in the yard and a note left at the door giving the "nigger teacher" twenty-four hours to get out of town or have his house burned to the ground with his family in it. There they lay all night on the bare wooden floor and smelled the straw burning and saw the cross silhouetted on the wall and waited to hear the sound of boots hitting the porch.

Mission schools similar to this one in North Carolina sprang up across the South in the years following the Civil War. Founded in 1866 by nine former slaves and the American Missionary Association (AMA), the Lincoln Normal School in Marion, Alabama, was one such school. (Courtesy North Carolina Department of Archives and History)

MY GREAT-GRANDPARENTS had come to Alabama as part of the peacetime army of teachers, preachers, and organizers that fanned out across the South to establish schools and churches for the Africans denied education under slavery. Though Baptists, Methodists, Quakers, and Presbyterians joined in, this pioneer movement was dominated by Congregationalists organized by the American Missionary Association (AMA).

The AMA had been founded in 1846 for the purpose of uplifting and educating downtrodden people wherever it found them. Though interdenominational in spirit, the organization had close ties to the evangelical, reformist elements in the Congregational Church.

Oberlin College, which had been established in Ohio thirteen years earlier, had roots in the same traditions. Bearing a long history of radical abolitionism and an impressive record of black education during the war, the two institutions joined forces in the Reconstruction South, founding schools and carrying a gospel that joined education, discipline, hard work, thrift, temperance, and moral rectitude.

Cooperating with the Reconstruction government, the Freedmen's Bureau, and anybody else who would help them, the missionaries laid the foundation for black education in the South and established such colleges and universities as Hampton Institute, Fisk, Morehouse, Dillard, Talladega, and Alabama State University. But because they were Yankees who consorted with both the Negroes

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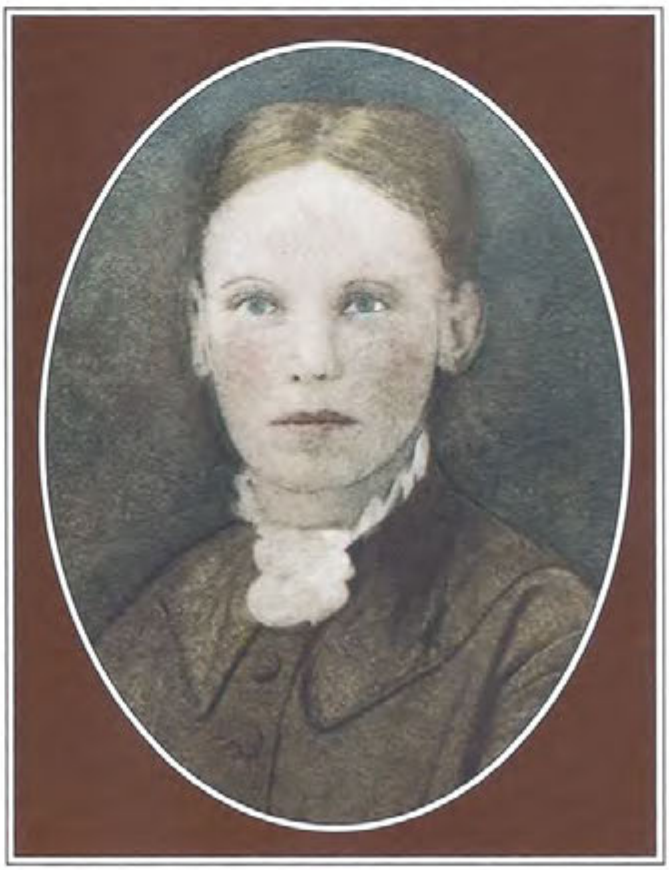
and the occupying army, the teachers and organizers were often ostracized by local whites. Many were driven out of the places they had come to serve. Their schools were often vandalized or burned to the ground, and sometimes their lives were threatened. Nevertheless, by 1867, the AMA had schools all across the South, including the Alabama towns of Athens, Demopolis, Girard, Marion, Mobile, Montgomery, Selma, Talladega, and Valhermoso Springs.

Writing in 1868 of the early struggles of the missionary teachers, Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Edwin Beecher, superintendent of education for the Freedmen's Bureau in Alabama, described the difficulties he had encountered in sustaining schools for "colored children." He had nothing but praise for the missionaries themselves, attributing the high standards in the schools to the "sacrificing spirit and patient perseverance" of teachers he described as "well qualified, upright in morals, devoted to their work, and determined to succeed" despite being "reviled, insulted, threatened, almost driven out of society."

My great-grandmother, Maggie, was one of those teachers.



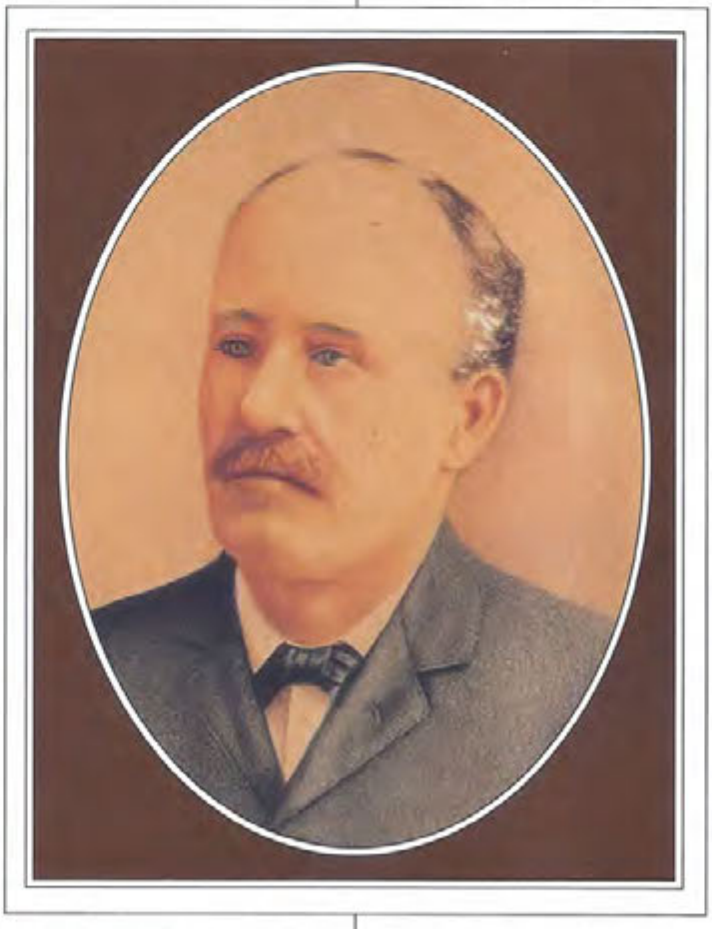
Maggie Flack Paterson (1853-1904), left, and William Burns Paterson (1850-1915), opposite, are recognized as the founders of Alabama State Normal School for Colored Students, which became Alabama State University in 1969. (Courtesy the Paterson family)

MARGARET (MAGGIE) FLACK was born in Canfield, Ohio, in September 1853, just weeks after her parents, Annie Bingham and James Porter Flack, arrived there from County Down in Northern Ireland. There must, I think, have been something in the history of poverty and oppression in Ireland that made them radical abolitionists in the New World, for as soon as they got to Ohio they joined a Congregationalist church connected to the Underground Railroad. And when the call came in August 1862 for volunteers to fight to free the slaves and preserve the Union, middle-aged James Flack joined Col. Emerson Opdycke's 125th Ohio Volunteer Infantry.

In September 1863, the 125th fought so fiercely on Snodgrass Hill at the Battle of Chickamauga that it lost a third of its men and earned the name "Opdycke's Tigers." The Tigers fought again in November at Missionary Ridge, Tennessee. In March 1864, Flack reenlisted and went home on a short furlough. On May 14, he took a minié ball "just above the eye" and died at the Battle of Resaca, Georgia.

Perhaps it was then that young Maggie made up her mind to fight the repercussions of slavery. I can hardly imagine how the decision was made and how much faith it must have taken my war-widowed, immigrant great-

great-grandmother to make it, but in 1870, Annie Bingham Flack, Maggie's mother, sold one-third of the little plot of land she owned, hired herself out as a domestic, put her young sons to work on the farm, and sent her seventeen-year-old daughter to study with the reformers at Oberlin.



Maggie was a diminutive young woman with ocean-blue eyes, a wide-open face, light brown hair, and a firm set to her jaw. Though she was earnest in her beliefs, she was easy-going in nature. At Oberlin she studied literature, music, and drama, but as graduation neared in 1874, she began writing to officials at the American Missionary Association about her desire to teach in the South.

"Sir," she wrote, "I wish a situation in the South as I am much interested in the Freedmen. Are there any vacancies in any of these schools?" By the time an answer came offering her a position at the Emerson Institute in Mobile, she had already committed herself to teach for one year in Ohio.

She wrote again the next year. This time her tone was more plaintive. "My great desire," she said, "was to teach the Freedmen. . . . Please inform me whether there are any [schools] without teachers. I am a member of the First Congregational Church and have some knowledge of music."

By the end of August, she had an appointment to teach music at the Burrell School in Selma. "My health is excellent," she wrote in acceptance, "and I feel ready for the duties which may devolve upon me."

By 1875, Burrell School, which had begun in 1867 with only fifteen students, had grown to 272. "If people in the North who think it a waste of money to send teachers to work in the South could see how greatly those are improved who come under their instruction," a teacher at the school wrote in 1872, "I think they would say 'Educate them as speedily and as thoroughly as possible.'"

Still, despite the success of schools like Burrell, the establishment of a poorly equipped and poorly staffed state school system for blacks brought change. By the time Maggie arrived in Selma in the fall of 1875, the AMA had decided to turn its common schools over to the local governing bodies and focus its efforts on normal institutions designed to train black teachers.

Even white Southerners could see that something important was about to be lost. "It is the duty of the school board to take over the American Missionary Association's schools," wrote a school board member in another Alabama town, "but in doing our duty, we shall do something I regret very much. . . . There is a quality of life in the old school which I cannot fathom, but which I know is there. I fear it will go out in the transfer."

Unlike some others, the Burrell School survived the transition well. Maggie moved into a house occupied by missionary teachers and worked long hours and weekends for the tiny salary the AMA still paid. By the spring of 1877, she had decided to spend the summer teaching in the normal department of the missionary school in Talladega.

The next summer, still dedicated to her work, she volunteered to go to Marion, Alabama, to organize a music department at the Lincoln Normal School, which was headed by William Burns Paterson, a young Scotsman, and pioneer of black education. Within a year, she and Paterson would marry.

BORN INTO A LARGE FAMILY of poor farm laborers and brewery workers in the rural village of Tullibody, Scotland, Will Paterson had been forced to leave school at age twelve to help support his brother and sisters. Nevertheless, by the time he was seventeen, he had educated himself well enough on his own to qualify

Will Paterson (right) and his brother John were photographed in Scotland c. 1864. After immigrating to the United States, Will returned to Scotland only once, having found his life's work teaching in Alabama. (Courtesy the Paterson family)

to teach in the public schools in his country. But what he wanted most was to go to Africa and follow in the footsteps of his hero, the Scottish missionary and explorer David Livingstone. Finding himself without enough money to do that, he had hired out as a deck hand on a freighter headed for New York.

There he worked in a mail-order house until the day he saw his boss take money out of an envelope and put it in his own pocket. With that, he quit his job and set out to see America. And see it he did, often walking long distances "with just a dog, a gun and a fishing line." For three years he worked at anything that paid, planning to travel until he had seen every state in the union.

Early in 1870—and just five states short of his goal—he followed Reconstruction railroad work north from New Orleans to Hale County, Alabama. Perhaps not knowing it, he had come to a cotton-dependent region still reeling from the Civil War. Local enmity toward the Federal occupation and the Reconstruction Republicans ran high. "Some Northern teachers came to different parts of the

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state," wrote Greensboro resident J. Nicholene Bishop, "but none came to this settlement." Another resident, John L. Hunnicutt, boasted of participating in a Ku Klux Klan raid to drive out "a Carpet-Bagger from Connecticut teaching a Negro school between Greensboro and Newbern."

At first, twenty-year-old Will Paterson saw the region as a place where he could rise socially and make money. Writing to his brother John in Glasgow in May 1870, he said, "People of all nations flock to this free country where there are no distinctions of race and color." He did note in passing, however, that in the South only white men were equal.

"No matter how poor [a white man] is," he added, "if he behaves himself as a gentleman he is treated as such. I have been introduced to nearly all the families in this County and some of them are very wealthy."

On November 7 of that year, Will became a naturalized citizen of the United States. A week later he wrote his brother again, boasting of his successes and the advantages of being an American:

I suppose you know well enough, that any man who stays in Tullibody has no chance of rising and that what he is now he will be twenty years hence. If I had stayed there till now I would still have been Wull Juck, Wull Paterson, or at best they might have said Wellum . . . and if I had endeavored to raise myself socially there would be much gossiping and they would be saying that my father was only a laborer and that I need not hold my head so high. . . . Now here I am Mr. Paterson and people judge me from my abilities and conduct, which is all I ask.

He had come a long way from the heartbroken boy he must have been when he had been forced to leave school to help his father tend roses in a nobleman's garden. In America, he told his brother, he could be anything but president, from which foreign birth barred him. He thought about making a career for himself in politics or going into business.

But the beginning of the end of Reconstruction brought political and economic turmoil to Alabama. Klan violence contributed to the election of both a Democratic governor and a Democratic legislature in 1870 and evoked an increased use of Federal troops and more Klan arrests. By the fall of 1871, the tone of Will's letters had changed. "The county is unsettled and everybody is dabbling in politics," he wrote. "There is no money in the county and all business is being done on credit. . . . Every man and boy goes armed and most of the ladies too. Then there is a sort of vigilance committee sometimes called Ku Klux Klan which does pretty much as it has a mind to."

As the nation headed into a major economic depression, railroad work dried up and cotton prices sank so low that even the white public schools in Alabama closed their doors. Suddenly, the idealistic young immigrant saw poverty, violence, economic turmoil, "rottenness, corruption and moral degradation" everywhere he looked.

It must have been during this dark time that black laborers began asking Will to teach them to read and write and do figures. For fifteen years, he had piled learning on top of learning. He had pored over school texts in a peasant cottage, borrowed books from strangers across America, carried a German dictionary and a grammar thousands of miles in order to read the Bible in that language, pursuing a peculiar urge long beyond any practical purpose, or so everyone said. Suddenly, he seemed to know what to do with his life and, as far as I know, he never looked back.

At first he taught the men, sitting in wagons under the trees, and then on the weekends in an abandoned slave cabin using hymnals and newspapers sent from Scotland. Soon he was teaching women and children too, with the congregations of two Baptist churches, one white, one black, helping him. Then two white planters pitched in—one to educate the four children born to him in slavery and the other to try to keep black laborers from leaving the county. By the fall of 1872—using money from many sources, including both the Freedmen's Bureau and the local school board—he built a long one-room schoolhouse in the county seat at Greensboro. Will called his school the Tullibody Academy for Negroes and modeled it after the one-teacher, each-one-teach-one schools of rural Scotland.

Of course, by then he would have known what the Northern missionary teachers in the surrounding counties were doing and would have known that their purposes were the same as his. Will, however, had no organizational

AND then suddenly, in a flicker of time on a dark night, a school carved out of political chaos by the good will, hard work and sacrifice of many people of both races went up in flames.

***Right:** The Forest Home in Marion, where the first Lincoln School teachers lived. (Courtesy Idella J. Childs, Marion)* ***Opposite:** The Patersons' house and gardens in Montgomery, with Tullibody Hall faintly visible. (Courtesy the Paterson family)*

backing at that point and no Northern funding—just his own drive and some "whim of my own," as he called it in one of his letters.

"I open school today," he wrote his brother in the fall of 1875, upon his return from the only trip he ever made back to Scotland:

It will be larger than ever it has been. . . . I teach common school 5 days, normal school on Saturday, Sunday School for two hours on Sunday besides attending Church two or three times that day, and six months every year I teach night school. . . . I could not describe the welcome the people gave me.

And so he lived and worked for another three years, "as contented as could be."

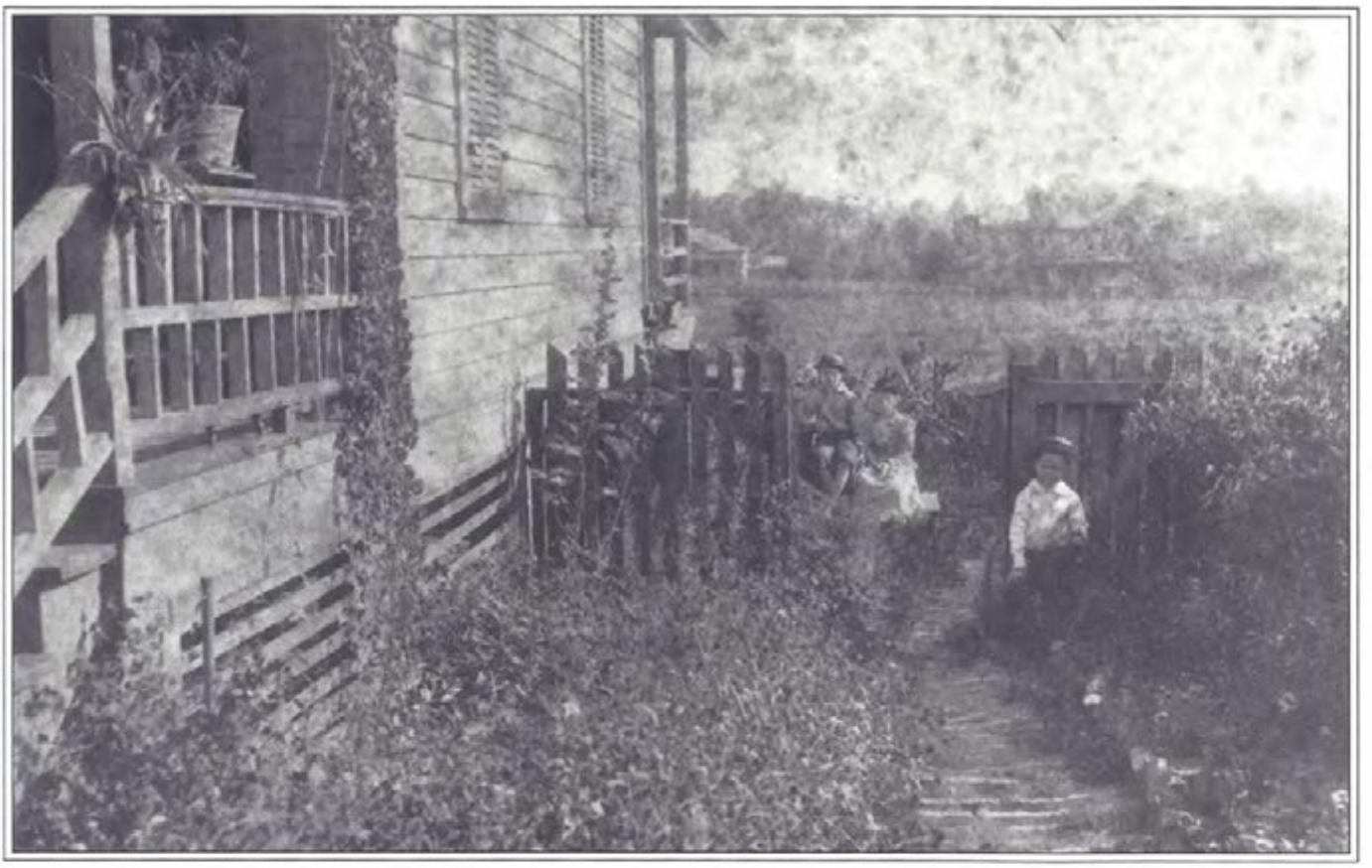
THANKS TO HIS SUCCESS as a teacher, organizer, and liaison between the black and white communities in Greensboro, William Burns Paterson was asked to head the state-funded normal school and university being established in Marion, Alabama, in cooperation with the AMA elementary/secondary school already there. The American Missionary Association's Abraham Lincoln School had been founded in 1866 by nine former slaves who had built a school for themselves and asked the AMA to send teachers. It was among the oldest and most successful of the mission schools.

In 1874, the legislature had contributed $4,000 to Lincoln's normal department and named the Missionary Association's George W. Card president of Alabama's first state-assisted black institution of higher learning. Four years later, following a period of displeasure with Card, the state, in cooperation with the AMA, chose young Will Paterson to head both the new normal school and the AMA's secondary school.

Will arrived in Marion the summer of 1878 with high hopes for the future of black public education in Alabama. He brought with him some of his best Tullibody students to add to the staff of white Northern teachers already there.

Maggie Flack, just a few months short of her twenty-fifth birthday, showed up at the school almost as soon as Will did. For several years, parents at Lincoln had been writing the AMA to send "more lady teachers; send someone to teach singing," and it may have been in response to that plea that Maggie was chosen for the post.

Will was twenty-eight, aggressive, outgoing and sturdily built with blue-gray eyes, a bushy mustache and a full head of reddish-brown hair. Both he and Maggie were



committed to education and reform and believed in the possibility of human betterment. Both looked back only one generation to peasant roots in the British Isles. Both believed in freedom and the American way.

I don't know what else happened that summer, but Will started building his school and Maggie established a music department. In the fall, she went back to the Burrell School for another year. The next summer, she and Will married in Selma and returned to Marion to continue their work together.

Drawing on shared values and different talents, they nurtured a remarkable institution that would one day become Alabama State University. For ten years they used state funds, Northern contributions, black former slaves and experienced white teachers to offer a rich academic curriculum combined with work-study and community service. Together they replaced the small Lincoln schoolhouse with a five-acre campus that included several school buildings and a sprawling, two-story plantation house they shared with the other teachers and as many of the teacher-trainees as they could house. For ten years, Will served as teacher, principal, fund raiser, lobbyist and promoter, traveling many miles each week to recruit students and preach the gospel of education in the black churches of rural Alabama. Maggie taught music, kept books, ran the library and supervised a large garden worked by teachers, students, and friends of the school.

When Northern philanthropists offered money for industrial training, they took it, and soon they had shops to teach sewing and cooking and carpentry. Soon they had a small dormitory to house students from across the state. Soon they had many friends, both black and white. And by 1886, five children (one being my grandfather) had been born to them.

By then the Lincoln School and Normal University together had close to 400 students, a well-run faculty, good facilities, and strong community support. Graduates were in demand everywhere as teachers. It looked as if Maggie and Will were going to have the college they dreamed of and the state of Alabama was going to nurture a progressive and innovative educational institution for blacks.

And then suddenly, late in December of 1886, in a flicker of time on a dark night, a school carved out of political and economic chaos by the good will, intelligence, hard work and sacrifice of many people of both races went up in flames. In a fire set by arsonists, the main building burned to the ground.

In the wake of this tragic fire, hostilities broke out between Lincoln students and students attending white, Baptist-owned Howard College, igniting smoldering ani-

"IT is not a college, only an elementary school with industrial features, though a good one."

mosity toward this center of communal living, racial integration, and black education.

By then, Booker T. Washington's Normal and Industrial Institute had begun to thrive at Tuskegee. Although Washington had been influenced by the American Missionary Association's traditional approach to black education, he had begun to advocate industrial training to a degree the Patersons never would. Both because their educational philosophies differed and because their schools competed for funds, Washington and William Burns Paterson often knocked heads. Nevertheless, they respected each other and corresponded regularly.

In a letter sent to Washington at Tuskegee on January 5, 1887, Paterson explained the hostilities that had developed between black and white students in Marion.

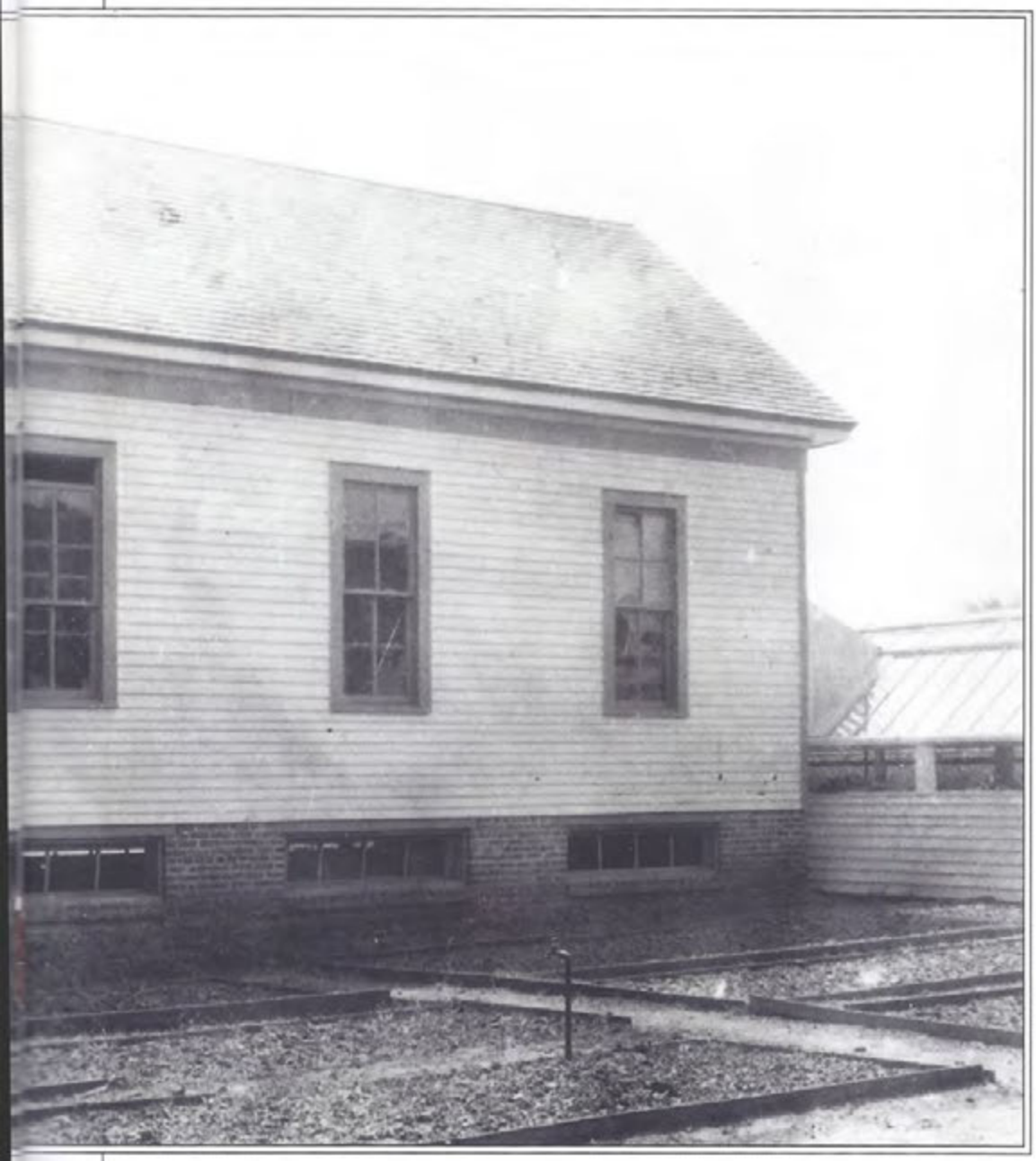
Dear Friend Washington,
I have been so busy and also sick that I do not know whether I answered your kind letter or not. The real facts are that twenty to thirty of the Howard cadets surrounded one of our students, because he would not get off the sidewalk to let them pass. They clubbed him and would have killed him, but for his agility and bravery. He defended himself heroically and no one knowing the truth can blame him. . . . This question of self-defense must be settled and the sooner the better. An educated man will not and can not take the abuse that an ignorant one will . . . it reminds me of fifteen years ago, and stirs up my desire to do more for your people.

After months of wrangling, the legislature voted to move the normal department of the school to Montgomery. The Patersons were hardly settled there when a new set of maneuvers aimed at removing the college from the capital and/or reducing it to an industrial school wiped out all state funding. Merging with the Missionary Association's Swayne School and relying on financial and moral support from the black community, Maggie and Will and nine unpaid teachers opened school in October literally without resources.

For two years they labored, meeting classes in black churches, paying their bills with contributions and dollar-a-month-per-pupil tuition. No one was turned away, and stories abound of young people arriving carrying all their possessions in gunnysacks, wanting only to learn and to teach. Somehow work to sustain them and places for them to live were always found.

In 1889, the legislature finally allocated funds to operate the school, reducing it, however, from a university to a normal and industrial training school. Money raised at mass meetings in the black churches went to buy a campus on the outskirts of town and build a spare, three-story building Will named Tullibody Hall.

Though the Alabama State Normal School for Colored Students (as the legislature called it) was now state-owned and -operated, it maintained its philosophical connection to the missionary traditions that had started it. Although the changes wrought by the move to Montgomery diluted its collegiate aspiration, the institu-



The Patersons' house in Montgomery, c. 1890. In the rear is their greenhouse, where they operated a nursery to help support the family and the school that became Alabama State University. (Courtesy Capitol's Rosemont Gardens)

tion continued to prosper as an industrial school and as a center for teacher training in the state. Within a few years, the Patersons had built a long shotgun house near the campus, put a tiny greenhouse in the backyard and started a nursery business to help support both their family and the school.

And that is where they were living the night they awoke to find a cross-shaped scarecrow burning in the yard. As my father told it, this is the way that story ended:

Creeping through the brush the next night to make good their promise to set fire to the house and the school if the teacher was still there when they returned, the Klansmen found Will sitting on the porch of his house rocking in a rocking chair, back and forth, back and forth, with a book in his lap. Coming closer they saw what they had missed in the dark—five Confederate veterans, some of the best shots in the county, sitting in chairs behind the teacher, their guns on their knees. So the cowardly vigilantes retreated much faster than they had come; and every year after that, for as long as the old Confederates lived, the Paterson family sent roses to them on their birthdays, doing it, my father said, long after Maggie and Will were dead and some of their descendants had forgotten why we honored this particular set of old men in this way.

In truth, the need to stick together and defend themselves against attack seemed never to end, and in 1904—the year Maggie died of Bright's Disease and was buried

Right: *William Burns Paterson, pictured not long before his death in 1915, died five years short of his ambition "to teach the Negro fifty years." (Courtesy Alabama Department of Archives and History)*

Opposite page: *One of Will and Maggie's sons, c. 1890, working in the florist shop in Montgomery. (Courtesy Capitol's Rosemont Gardens)*

across the line in the black section of the segregated Oakwood Cemetery (making a statement even in death)—the main building of the school went up in smoke and burned to the ground. "I cannot think it was set fire," the ever-sanguine Will later told a reporter; "rather the fire has revealed to me the great interest there is in our work and how many friends we do have." Classes began the next morning in other buildings, and two years later a sturdier Tullibody Hall stood in the place of the wooden structure that had burned.

By then the school had over a thousand students, but never in Will's lifetime would it claim to be either a four-year college or a university. "It is not a college, only an elementary school with industrial features, though a good one," he told the state legislature regretfully in 1911. Despite his pleas, Alabama was still giving priority to

THE music department Maggie started in 1878 is still winning prizes and still singing the "Blue Bells of Scotland" in honor of her husband.

industrial training over the liberal arts and still underfunding black education when William Burns Paterson died in 1915, just five years short of his ambition "to teach the Negro fifty years." It was not until the school became Alabama State University in 1969, almost one hundred years after the "university for colored people" was created at Marion, that it finally attained university status again.

Still, the high academic and behavioral expectations of missionary teachers like Maggie and Will Paterson continue to be seen in the traditions of Alabama State University and many other institutions of higher learning in Alabama and across the South.

Alabama State University commemorates those traditions every year by celebrating Will's birthday as its Founder's Day. The music department Maggie started in 1878 is still winning prizes and still singing the "Blue Bells of Scotland" in honor of her husband. Some of those missionary ideas about equal opportunity, personal responsibility, and civic duty no doubt had a part in forming the college community that played such a crucial role in organizing the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955.

The elementary and secondary departments of the Lincoln School at Marion remained in the capable hands of the American Missionary Association for another eighty years, becoming one of the country's leading black preparatory schools and producing several generations of political leaders, professionals, and scholars.

One cannot help wondering how different Alabama might have become had it followed—instead of repudiating—the lead of the state's missionary educators, outsiders though they were.