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The 1906 legislature passed a law to establish rural schools. Classwork centered around preparing students to be professionals: lawyers, doctors, teachers, engineers. Although most Mississippians were farmers, there were no agricultural high schools until 1910. As late as 1914, there were only 8,500 students in public high schools. Only 29 schools in the state had four or more full-time teachers.

Public school systems had been set up during Reconstruction. Check Chapter 10, page 172, to recall what happened to them.

### Sharecropping Hurts Schools

The sharecropping system also crippled quality education. Children were encouraged to work throughout the year without regard for the importance of completing the school year. Many rural schools closed as early as February so children could work in the fields. Mississippi ranked last in the nation in average days of school attendance per child, with 98.1 days.

Mississippi also ranked at the bottom in over-all financial support for education. The state spent about the same proportion of its income for schools as many other states. But because its income was lower, the amount given to schools was smaller than in any other state.

Illinois ranked first with 163.2.

### "Governor of All the People"

One Mississippian who cared deeply about the schools and their problems was Paul B. Johnson, Sr. He was born on a farm in Scott County in 1880, and his own education began part-time in a one-room schoolhouse. Later he earned a law degree, ran for Congress against Governor Bilbo in 1918, and beat him. Twenty-two years later, now with Bilbo's support, he was elected governor, succeeding Hugh White.

Johnson's philosophy emphasized the "average man and woman." He supported relief funds for the old, free hospitalization for the poor, and anti-trust laws against business monopolies. He also believed that women should be allowed to hold political office.



Johnson takes the oath of office, January 16, 1940.

Placing great value on the need for education, Johnson said, "No educated man can be enslaved, for he knows his rights and is willing to fight for them." During his term of office he signed the free-textbook law, which was to provide textbooks equally to all students in the state. Because of it, many black families, who had watched the state government pass many previous laws for white benefit only, developed a deep respect for Johnson.

Johnson also helped bring Jackson College, now Jackson State University, under state control. Otherwise this institution, in financial trouble during the Depression, would have gone out of existence. Because of these actions, blacks presented him with a portrait of himself with the citation:

PRESENTED TO THE HONORABLE PAUL BURNEY JOHNSON,  
GOVERNOR OF ALL THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI,  
BY THE NEGRO CITIZENS OF MISSISSIPPI.

Governor Johnson once stated his aim in life: "It is my ambition to build for myself a lasting monument in the hearts and minds of the people of Mississippi, that I may be remembered as a useful citizen." He died before finishing his term of office. But his ambition has been fulfilled.

### Segregated Schools

Black children received especially poor treatment in Mississippi's school systems. Under the guise of "separate but equal" accommodation, the state required black children to use separate schools that were much poorer than those for white children.

Private schools helped fill the gaps. The best-known black private school was (and is) Piney Woods, founded in 1910 by Lawrence C. Jones. Schools were also founded in Clinton, Mound Bayou, Meridian, and other towns. Several

*White school  
(left) and  
black school  
(right) in  
Tishomingo  
County about  
1935.*

