

Coleman College: First African American college in North Louisiana

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GIBSLAND, La. ([KTAL/KMSS](#)) – Coleman College was established in [Gibsland](#), Louisiana in 1887 and became the first college for African Americans in North Louisiana.

Here is a brief history of the educational institution that was instrumental in educating the first generation of freedmen and freedwomen in the lower Mississippi River (and [Red River valleys](#)).

Oliver Lewis Coleman was born into slavery in 1857 Mississippi, and he was just a child when Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

After the Civil War, Coleman witnessed African Americans in his community signing their names with an X. He didn't like to see his people suffer because of a lack of education, so he decided to take action.

Coleman attended high school in Livingston, Mississippi, before graduating from Alcorn A&M College. He attended the University of Chicago and spent summers at [Chautauquas](#). He received an honorary Master of Arts degree from Leland College, and he opened a college (and a broom and mattress factory) for African Americans just after the Reconstruction Era ended.

But Coleman didn't open the college near his hometown in Mississippi. Instead, he opted for Louisiana.

Coleman found a businessman from the north who was willing to donate ten acres of timber land and jumped at the chance to build the school near a railroad junction known as Gibsland.

Coleman chose the spot for the school because of a railroad (the Vicksburg Shreveport and Pacific) that passed through the little town. He knew transportation was key to attracting new students.

Oliver Lewis (Louis) Coleman's education

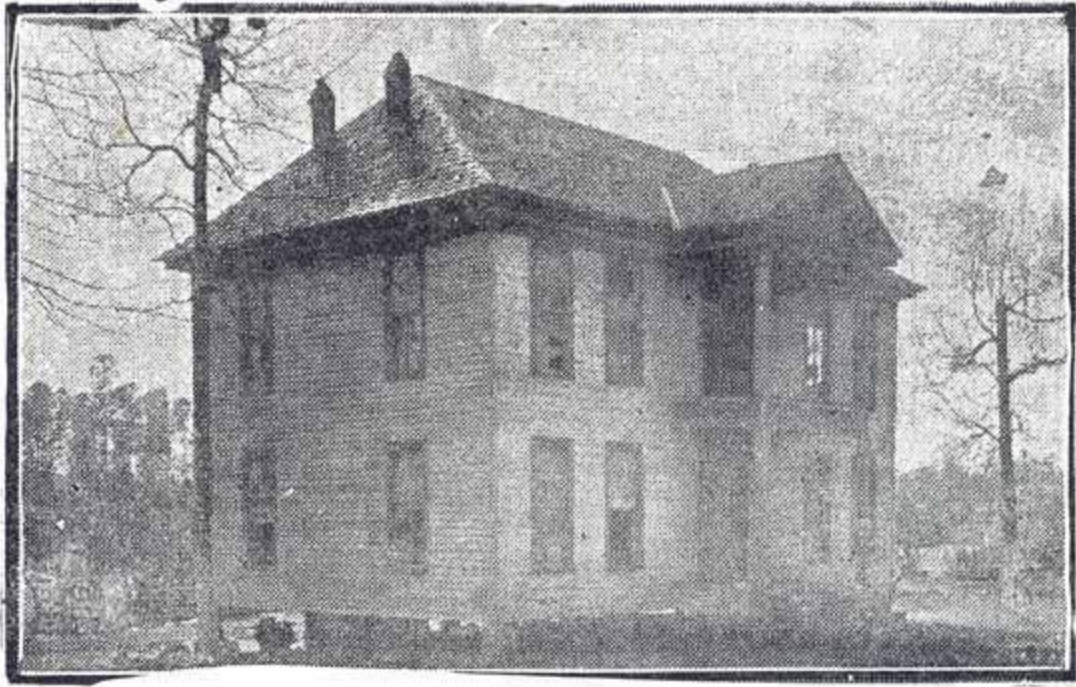
Although the educational institution's early records were destroyed when a fire destroyed the main building on the campus on Apr. 8, 1926, it is possible to learn much about the college through other sources.

Oliver's wife, Mattie (Perkins) Coleman, was a professor at Coleman College. She wrote the following in *Baptist Missionaries and Pioneers Sketches*:

"President Coleman came to Louisiana in 1887. He found all of the northern part of the state a territory two hundred miles wide and three hundred miles long, in which there were no teachers or preachers in the true sense for his people. In fact, the only school that looked forward to intellectual and Christian training in the state outside of New Orleans had been organized at Baton Rouge by Sister Moore. I came to the state about 1889, from Jackson, Miss., and joined Mr. Coleman as his music teacher. Being in a dark and strange land, young and inexperienced, we needed counsel, encouragement, inspiration, comfort and prayer. We got all of these from Sister Moore. During his second year in the state, Mr. Coleman got his first and greatest inspiration from a ten days' Bible Institute conducted by Sister Moore at Simsboro, La. He thought that her Biblical instruction and Christian Light were the greatest he ever felt from a human being. He returned to his work with new vigor and inspiration. She was a constant visitor to Coleman College until she left the state. In fact, she held the torch light of Christianity by which we moved during the first five years of the institution. I remember very vividly a day of fasting and prayer that she set apart for Coleman College. We met in the old church where the College was founded by Dr. Coleman. She had us read the Bible, talk and pray from 9:00 a.m. till dark. Then the Holy Spirit seemed to overshadow us, and we continued in prayer till ten at night. I caught new inspiration from this meeting which proved to be my greatest asset as a coworker with Mr. Coleman in the establishment of the school."

At first, Coleman taught students beneath a brush arbor or at Palestine Baptist Church if it was raining. When the school began, he had five students. The local Baptist churches formed the Springfield Baptist Association in support of the school, and farmers donated crops and made lumber.

Three wooden dormitories, a home for the principal, and a two-story chapel were erected first.



INTENDED THEOLOGICAL DEPARTMENT, COLEMAN COLLEGE.

Theological Department at Coleman College in Gibsland, La. (Source: [History of Louisiana Negro Baptists from 1804 to 1914](#), by William Hicks)

By 1914, faculty members included O. L. Coleman, President; J. D. Stewart, Associate President; A. L. Yates, A.B.; O. W. Gray, C. R. Dickerson (Principal District Department), T. J. Jordan, Bishop P. B. Lewis, Mrs. Mattie A. Coleman, Mary Clay, Rosa Lewis, and Katie Smith.

Bernice Bailey stated in 1899 that the college taught algebra, geometry, rhetoric, Latin, English, music, chemistry, and Bible classes. The college began class every morning with Bible study and prayer.

When Dr. Booker T. Washington visited the campus, a student named Essie Simms was paying close attention.

“When Booker Washington came to Coleman a platform was built on the outside because the chapel was not large enough... People were everywhere, they came from many places; both Black and White,” she recalled.

Essie also said that the school sessions were eight months long—from October to May—in 1899. Students could complete elementary school, high school, and two years of college-level work at Coleman College.

The girl's dormitory (Reynolds Hall) at Coleman College in Gibsland, La.
(Source: [*History of Louisiana Negro Baptists from 1804 to 1914*](#), by William Hicks)

In 1899, tuition was \$1.60 and room and board was \$5.50 a month. By 1932, tuition had increased to \$1.75.

The students of Coleman College served as missionaries in the local area.

Mrs. Nulon Williams stated that students “would visit various churches and get permission to speak on behalf of the college. We would tell about the good work being carried on by the college. When we had finished the Pastor would ask the congregation for contributions to aid in fostering the good work of Coleman College”

In 1918 there were four hundred students, half of them living on campus, and a staff of sixteen teachers.

The school continued to grow until the African American Baptists in the area could not support it on their own. Caucasian Baptists in New York and New England helped to support the school financially, and when funding from locals wasn't enough northern foundations began to subsidize Coleman College's efforts.

Sources of funding for the college were appropriated from the American Baptist Home Missionary Society, the Home Mission Society of New York, the Home Mission Society of Boston, and the United States Government Bureau of Agriculture.

The American Baptist Home Mission Society in Boston, Massachusetts, gave Coleman College yearly grants.

Coleman's son (Monroe McVicker Coleman) later wrote of the beginnings of Coleman College: “Poor God-fearing people out of their meager holdings gave liberally; sometimes all they possessed. Individuals who had no money to contribute gave their time and labor to aid in erecting buildings... Many Baptist ministers gave; those who had no money used their influence to get people to help.”

Coleman College did not grant degrees. The staff focused exclusively on educating students, and they were wildly successful in their efforts.

Recreational games were popular at Coleman College, where a student athletic association met regularly. The school had no fraternities or sororities, but it did have a general literary society, a music lovers' club, a glee club, and several quartets.

During the school's heyday, the Coleman Bulldogs' biggest rivals were the Grambling Tigers.

The main building at Coleman College in Gibsland. (Source: [History of Louisiana Negro Baptists from 1804 to 1914](#), by William Hicks)

“Coleman College is easily one of the greatest (African American) Baptist Schools not only in Louisiana, but in the South,” wrote William Hicks in the History of Louisiana Negro Baptists from 1869-1954. “It is beautifully located at Gibsland, La., on one of the most picturesque hills in the state. The ridge on which sits two three-story brick buildings; one two and a half story brick building; and two two-story frame buildings, is nearly a complete horse shoe made by the hand of nature’s God. This institution is the life-work of Professor C. L. Coleman who founded it in 1888.”

The campus covered approximately 10 acres.

In the early years of the educational institution, Coleman College’s theological department was held in his home. Non-religious classes were conducted in a two-story wooden frame building with an auditorium on the second floor. Dormitories for the co-ed students were initially wooden frame structures, and the dining hall (plus kitchen) was a separate one-story wood building before buildings on the campus were replaced with a brick building.

There were no catalogs to advertise college classes, so the entrance and graduation requirements were lost to history. But high school students attended Coleman College for their eighth to 12th grade courses.

College classes were not offered until the 1926-27 school year.

The boys’ dormitory at Coleman College in Gibsland, La. (Source: [History of Louisiana Negro Baptists from 1804 to 1914](#), by William Hicks)

Coleman College was partially owned by the Baptist Church, which controlled it through a board of 15 trustees. Most faculty members were devoted to teaching high school students, and many teachers were well-trained. Some of the staff members graduated from Fisk University, and one of the instructors attended a white medical college in Chicago.

Instructors used simple instruments for physics and other science classes.

In 1918, Coleman College had 232 elementary students and 42 secondary students. By 1924 there were 315 students, 47 of which were listed as college students.

But after the loss of the founder and the college’s main building, Coleman College suffered tremendously. The buildings fell into disrepair and the Department of the Interior recommended that the college consolidate with another college or, at the least, use the

building materials from the older buildings on the campus of Coleman College to rebuild the campus.

Memories of Coleman College

After the rough-hewn and hand-constructed buildings on Coleman College's campus began to deteriorate because of age, Oliver Lewis Coleman went to Maine to spend the summer with the Women's Missionary Society of Boston. He came home and taught students to rebuild the worn-out school campus from bricks they made themselves from local clay. Tuskegee University did the same thing in Alabama.

Administration and dining hall at Coleman College in Gibsland, La. (Source: [History of Louisiana Negro Baptists from 1804 to 1914](#), by William Hicks)

Many Coleman students were able to pay their school fees by helping to build structures on the campus.

"Professor Coleman taught student(s) how to mix, shape, and cure bricks. The bricks were cured in a kiln which he had helped students build," recalled Mrs. Essie Sims long after she graduated from Coleman College.

According to legend, Coleman's faith in his maker was so strong that when a drought hit the region and the well at the college dried up, he and others prayed hard for rain. But instead of rain as an answer to their prayer, water began flowing out of a hill where there had been no spring before, and it became the new source of water for the college.

Historical records tell us that O. L. Coleman had a tree he often visited in Gibsland. Coleman spent a lot of time there in meditation, praying to God. It is said that the tree began to take on a new shape, leaning to one side. It looked like it was praying, and it became known as the "tree of prayer."

Why Coleman College mattered

In The Survey of Negro Colleges and Universities, United States Department of the Interior, we learn that a survey of African-American colleges in Louisiana in 1929 produced six results: Straight College and Xavier College in New Orleans; Southern University in Baton Rouge, and Coleman College in Gibsland.

The survey by the United States Department of the Interior stated that geographic distribution of Louisiana's educational institutions for African Americans did not meet the requirements of the large (African American) population scattered over the entire state.

In the introduction of the survey, it was noted that “4,000,000 former bondsmen were thrown upon their own resources to fight the battle for existence, to adjust themselves to a radically changed order, and to make a place for themselves in a kaleidoscopic civilization growing more complex and complicated with the passing of time.”

The survey uncovered that fewer African Americans in Louisiana, percentage-wise, were enrolled in college courses than in other Southern states. The African American population in Louisiana was just below 700,000, and only 490 were enrolled in college. Of the Caucasian population, which was approximately 1.2 million at the time, more than 41,000 were enrolled in Louisiana colleges.

The disparity in enrollment figures was attributed to a lack of secondary schools in Louisiana’s African American communities. The figures show why Coleman College in Gibsland, Louisiana, was critically important to Louisiana’s educational system.

Coleman College was a rare gem in the U.S.

Coleman College was one of only 17 colleges in the United States owned, administered, and financed by African Americans. Contributions from church conventions or conferences supported these institutions.

The other colleges on the aforementioned list included Miles Memorial College, Birmingham, Alabama; Selma University, Selma, Alabama; Shorter College, North Little Rock, Arkansas; Edward Waters College, Jacksonville, Florida; Morris Brown University, Atlanta, Georgia;; Paine College, Augusta, Georgia; Simmons University, Louisville, Kentucky; Kittrell College, Kittrell, North Carolina; Livingstone College, Salisbury, North Carolina; Wilberforce University, Wilberforce, Ohio; Allen University, Columbia, South Carolina; Morris College, Sumter, South Carolina; Lane College, Jackson, Tennessee; Roger Williams University, Nashville, Tennessee; Paul Quinn College, Waco, Texas; and Texas College, Tyler, Texas.

It may seem strange to see a college in small-town Bienville Parish on the above list of only 17 African American-financed colleges in the United States. But Baptist African Americans in North Louisiana dominated in positions of church leadership in the state during the early 20th century.

What happened to Coleman College?

Coleman College founder and president O. L. Coleman died as a result of a car accident in 1927. His son Monroe McVicker Coleman was chosen as the new president of the college, but the college experienced difficulty staying open. By 1934, Reverend Dr. Roy A. Mayfield became the new president of Coleman College.

Mayfield was a Baptist minister who preached in Homer, Louisiana, for decades while simultaneously opening and running a school.

(The segregated, African American public school in nearby Homer (Claiborne Parish) was later named Mayfield High after Dr. Roy Mayfield.)

Parish training schools in Arcadia and Minden would eventually supersede Coleman College's location in Gibsland. But for many years, Coleman College was the only educational institution that African Americans could attend in Northern Louisiana.

In 1944, Coleman College (under Roy Mayfield's command) closed in Gibsland and reopened in Mooretown, Louisiana. Once in Mooretown, the college ceased training teachers and exclusively specialized in training ministers until it closed.

It is rumored that many of the streets in Mooretown, which has since become a neighborhood in Shreveport, were named after professors from Coleman College.

A few of Coleman College's graduates

Many Coleman College graduates became successful in their endeavors. Most stories about the school's alumni have been lost, but it is understood that Coleman College trained many teachers who later founded and/or worked in some of the earliest educational institutions for African Americans in the state of Louisiana.

Eleanor E. Coleman is an excellent example of Coleman school spirit. According to The Fisk University News in Nashville, Tennessee (Oct. 1922) Eleanor was from Lake Charles, where her father was a physician and her mother was a teacher. She graduated from Coleman College in Gibsland, where she was active in the Young Women's Christian Association.

Eleanor graduated with a sociology degree from Fisk University in 1922. She taught literature and physical training at the Thorny Lafon School in New Orleans, the largest elementary school for African Americans in the United States at that time. She also created a playground for children in her hometown of Lake Charles. She became the director of social and religious activities at St. Mark's in Boston, Massachusetts.

Joseph S. Clark, a Coleman College graduate, was born on a plantation in Bienville Parish. He entered the college when he was 19 and supported himself by teaching and working as a janitor, barber, and student assistant. He then attended Leland University and earned a degree in 1901. He became the principal of Baton Rouge Academy, and in 1915, he became the first Black president of Southern University.

J. S. Jones graduated from Coleman, taught at Baton Rouge Academy, and became a dean at Southern University.

J. S. Jones' son, *Ralph Waldo Emerson Jones*, became the president of Grambling State College in 1936.

R. E. Jacobs graduated from Coleman College and later organized the Sabine Normal and Industrial Institute in Converse.

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