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Delinquents, Deviants, and Dependents: A Comparative Study of Young Black Females at the Missouri State Industrial School for Negro Girls and the Virginia State Industrial Home for Colored Girls

Lauren Henley

Washington University in St Louis

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ABSTRACT

At the dawn of the twentieth century and at the height of Progressivism, numerous institutions for wayward black youth opened throughout the United States. Concentrated in the South, many of these facilities separated youth by gender. Through examining archival records, articles, and books, this study compares the Virginia State Industrial Home for Colored Girls and the Missouri State Industrial School for Negro Girls. While the former facility was considered a model reformatory dedicated to rehabilitation of its pupils, the latter was a deplorable prison-like structure, underfunded and neglected by the state. This investigation compares these two institutions by looking at four points of differentiation: creation, logistics, discipline, and inmates. The creation of these reformatories set the foundation for their opposite trajectories in subsequent years. Similarly, the logistics at both institutions, ranging from staffing to food rations and chores, contributed to their successes and failures. Both schools created plans for behavior which incentivized the girls to act appropriately in order to achieve parole, yet the differences in the policies had noticeable effects. Lastly, the differences in inmates sent to both facilities were minimal but worthy of discussion. By comparing these two institutions, it is possible to uncover hidden truths about what went on behind the closed doors of youth reformatories and the plight of young black females growing up in urban environments in the early twentieth century.

KEY TERMS

- Juvenile Delinquency
- Black Females
- Juvenile Reformatories
- Progressivism

FACULTY MENTOR: SOWANDE’ MUSTAKEEM, PH.D., ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AND AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES.

Professor Mustakeem’s research include middle passage studies, gender and slavery in the Americas, diaspora/black atlantic studies, medical history, violence, maritime history, sexuality, and historical memory. She is currently working on a book entitled Routes of Terror: Gender, Health, and Power in the Eighteenth Century Middle Passage.

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Rowing up in an era of lingering Victorian ideals and strict social class, many juveniles’ attempts to exert a semblance of freedom were mistaken for unacceptable acts of criminality in the United States. As the nineteenth century came into focus, the values of the Progressive Era trickled into conversations concerning the welfare of the country’s most vulnerable population, the children. Adults began to realize the malleability of the younger generation, which often made youth susceptible to a variety of influences, both positive and negative. Many reformers organized under a child-saving mission, seeking to better the lives of disadvantaged, poor, and wayward youth.

While the “child savers” of this era worked tirelessly to promote the general welfare of all children, it must be noted that the definition of a delinquent child versus a dependent one was often blurred. Although dependent children were initially seen as victims of circumstance and delinquents were considered to have criminal intentions, oftentimes youth floated between these two categories due to their urban environments. Moreover, issues of race and gender are often overlooked when applauding the efforts of these once revolutionary and selfless individuals. Despite progress made during the early twentieth century in juvenile justice and the triumphs of the child savers, many black children were forced to turn inward, “rely[ing] on their own people” for various forms of support, and encouragement. Even so, the model of “state-as-parent” became the most common way to handle both delinquent and dependent youth, and by separating them by gender and race, inequality and segregation were inevitable.

Young black females were particularly marginalized under this new system, committed to subpar facilities based on crimes which were often vague and unfair. As Steven L. Schlossman notes, “When girls appeared in juvenile courts and were committed to reformatories, however, one factor was always present: sexual promiscuity, real or suspected.” While the idea of promiscuity was usually associated with delinquent females, dependent girls often faced similar discrimination and sentencing practices. Although dependency frequently stemmed from overworked and underpaid parents, overcrowded living conditions, and racial segregation, many young black girls who suffered this fate were deemed as socially undesirable as their sexually deviant counterparts. By no means do these two labels encompasses the breadth of cases which passed through the juvenile courts in the early twentieth century, but these distinct yet overlapping categories can help to unravel some of the truths regarding the treatment of black female juveniles from the courts to the reformatories.

This study presents a comparison of two industrial schools for black girls in the early 1930s. The first school, located in Tipton, Missouri, was considered a pitiful, yet functioning segregated reformatory. Located far from many resources and obviously underfunded, the Missouri State Industrial School for Negro Girls provided a challenging home for the one thousand girls who passed through its doors, often unsure of their sentence and even more unsure of their futures.

In contrast, the Virginia State Industrial Home for Colored Girls was the first such school to have been built in America, prized for its ideal location, commitment to virtues, and successful rehabilitation. Mrs. Janie Porter Barrett, one of the most prominent black females in Virginia during the early twentieth century, worked with the Virginia Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs to establish and maintain this model reformatory until it was handed over to the state in 1925. Despite this logistical change, the Barrett School continued to excel, allowing its students to reach
high academic standards while turning wayward girls into socially admirable young ladies.

Interestingly, based on the child savers’ principles established at the turn of the century, both of these schools should have flourished, providing safe havens for delinquent and dependent young African American females, supposedly equal in every way to the reformatories created for their white counterparts. However this research finds that the ideal dreams of these schools were never fully realized. By examining the Missouri State Industrial School for Negro Girls and the Virginia State Industrial Home for Colored Girls in terms of their creation, logistics, methods of discipline, and the girls who were committed as inmates, this study seeks to identify the similarities and differences between these two reformatories. Through this comparison, it is possible to conclude that black female juveniles were more successfully rehabilitated based on the standards of Progressivism in the Virginia school as opposed to the one in Missouri.

CREATION

While both the Missouri State Industrial School for Negro Girls and the Virginia State Industrial Home for Colored Girls were created to serve the same purpose for their respective populations, the reality which governed their establishments put these institutions on separate pathways, one headed towards success and the other doomed towards failure. By revealing how both schools were established and emphasizing the challenges they faced, it is possible to better understand the unequal realities suffered by young black females who were labeled as delinquents, dependents, and wards of the state.

Tipton, Missouri

Opened in 1916, “The Missouri Industrial Home for Negro Girls at Tipton housed more than one thousand black juveniles” over the forty years it was in operation.4 This state-run school was initially designed and implemented to rehabilitate otherwise unsalvageable black females, particularly after the shocking rumor that “a twelve-year-old girl was reportedly committed to the state penitentiary in 1908.”5 While wayward white girls were whisked away to Chillicothe, in Livingston County, “the legislators who voted to create Tipton were frankly troubled over the question of what to do with black female juvenile delinquents.”6 The struggle to establish this reformatory began at least as early as 1909, but the delay in the project’s completion stemmed from the fact that the site was originally determined unsuitable by nearby residents due to racial prejudices. When it was finally determined that the school be built in Moniteau County, the issue of funding caused yet another roadblock, clearly foreshadowing the struggle the school was soon to face.

With Tipton officially opening its doors for the reception of inmates on May 15, 1916, many in the state thought the issue of where to house delinquent black females had finally been solved and reasonably far from the public eye as well.7 At first, the legislature was proud of its achievement, rattling off deceptively impressive figures including, “its building and wing is capable of caring for 120 girls” and “the home has its own power house and light plant.”8 While these facts might have been true at the inception of Tipton, they quickly crumbled under the stark reality that there was
neither adequate space nor sufficient resources to handle the wide array of girls who were soon to be committed. In fact, “in order to even hold school for the girls, the institution was forced to salvage chairs and small tables from vacant rooms around the facility because there was no money allocated by the state to purchase furniture.”

The industrial school at Tipton was, almost from the very beginning, Missouri’s attempt to put the issue of wayward black females behind closed doors and hidden from public view. It was located at a physically disadvantageous site and also suffered because “political patronage determined who would govern the institution, leaving well-meaning but ineffective leaders...to deal with an often too large number of girls.” All of these problems manifested themselves with greater ferocity as the years went by, but the basic symptoms can be traced to the establishment of the school.

Peakes, Virginia
Contrastingly, the Virginia State Industrial Home for Colored Girls started off with a bright and eager future ahead, backed by private funds and the Virginia State Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs. Mrs. Janie Porter Barrett, founder of the school, quickly recognized that “the thing most needed in Virginia was a home school for young colored girls who, falling into the hands of the law, were being sent to the jails in company with older and hardened criminals.” After three years of dedicated fundraising from the Federation, the land of Mill Farm was secured at Peakes (also known as Peake and Peaks Turnout) in Hanover County. A very lucrative plot of land and full of useable soil, the farm consisted of “one hundred and forty-seven acres,” as well as a functioning mill and well water. The resourcefulness of the area and the support from the local community helped the school to flourish in its opening years.

Although girls were received at Peakes only a few months before Tipton’s first inmates arrived, the underlying support for the former institution was both more financially stable and more easily controlled by privatized sources. While Tipton received minimal funding to construct its first building, the land at Peakes already contained a useable farmhouse, which would house girls until additional buildings could be erected. The almost immediate construction of new facilities at Peakes, as opposed to dismal conditions at Tipton, helps to underscore why the Virginia State Industrial Home for Colored Girls was revered as one of the most successful facilities of its type.

Lastly, perhaps the most noticeable difference in the prosperousness of both schools can be traced back to the support, or lack thereof, from the white community. In Missouri, while the state legislature was supposed to be nonpartisan, the reality was that of a segregationist philosophy. Many people did not want wayward black girls living in their community, based on preconceived beliefs in inherent criminality, suspicious behaviors, and dangerous tendencies. Yet in Virginia, Mrs. Barrett’s opinion was respected throughout the state due to her association with the white community. Moreover, the organizational support from the Federation provided credibility to the cause, giving the state even more reason to allow privatized building, rather than the inevitable establishment of a state-run institution. Though never explicit in the creation of either school, the influence of the white majority over the black minority had significant consequences, which worked favorably at Peakes, and rather unsatisfactorily at Tipton.
LOGISTICS

While it would be possible to compare the schools from their creation until their closings decades later, this paper seeks to give a brief snapshot of the experiences at Tipton and Peakes focusing on the early 1930s. Both institutions saved many records from this decade and the period is extremely rich in historic context in that the Great Depression put severe pressure on many families. Additionally, the values of the Progressive Era were firmly established. By using state government records, critical analysis, and a general understanding of the time period involved, this work leaves room for consideration of facts and opinions. It is important to note that many sources are contradictory, which is helpful in recognizing the varied perspectives on such institutions, but also burdensome when trying to recreate narratives which capture lived experiences.

Tipton, Missouri

Before the 1930s, the Missouri State Industrial School for Negro Girls was placed under the control of the Department of Corrections. As a result, the years following Tipton's opening were a mix of external pressures attempting to utilize the facilities like a traditional state penal institution and select individuals within the school who tried to push back, often through basic attempts at self-sufficiency with the few resources available to them. The day-to-day living conditions at the school hindered many girls from learning how to be reintroduced into society even though they often mastered domestic skills, vocational training, and feminine habits. They lived in conditions of perpetual hunger, cold temperatures, and overcrowded facilities and many girls truly struggled to survive.

Based on the biennial report from 1931, it appears that Tipton functioned much like any other reformatory for young black females of the time. All girls were seen by a doctor upon admittance. On the surface, this reflection on a girl's health seems to paint a positive picture of Tipton's facilities, though it entirely omits the pressing issue of why girls entered the school "physically rundown" in the first place and then were "nursed back to health." When girls were whisked away to serve time at Tipton, few attempts were made to find alternative placement facilities first.

Academically, the reformatory was supposed to teach up through 10th grade, though there were only two teachers in the entire school. Along with classes, attempts to make the girls well-rounded included music lessons for those so inclined, as well as other fields of study including typewriting and beauty culture for inmates who met certain criteria.

Much like at a traditional prison, recreational time was mandatory. As Superintendent Shelby explained, "the girls are permitted to spend three hours daily at recreation, and one-half a day on Sunday on front lawn." Though it appears the girls were given quite a bit of free time to spend as they chose outside, in reality they were often placed into organized sports or drills. Additionally, attempts to keep the girls healthy probably influenced their extended outdoor recreation, where fresh air and open space were thought to prevent the spread of diseases.

Despite being a state-run and publicly-funded institution, a large component of the girls' day-to-day experience was religious observances. As Superintendent Shelby explained, "these [religious] services lend encouragement to inmates to go to God
direct and be not afraid.” 16 By using Christianity as the ideal faith of virtuosity, regardless of prior religious affiliation, girls found themselves immersed in religious beliefs almost as soon as they entered the doors at Tipton. Through religious training, academic growth, physical well-being, and vocational mastery, the staff at the school worked to offer the girls a chance at rehabilitation, though these efforts were often undermined by the dismal living conditions and the lack of state support and funding.

The reformatory in Missouri, unlike its counterpart in Virginia, frequently had to fight for state funds. Requests for much-needed improvements were frequently denied or deferred; therefore the bare minimum became the standard. Tipton might have had sewing classes and training in domestic arts, but these extracurricular activities attempted to mask the financial strain on the institution. Very little of anything was purchased for use at the school which resulted in the girls having to make their own clothes and linens, can the scarce produce grown in the garden, and even milk the dairy cows used to serve the student body. Although some of these skills were thought to be necessary for making a future living, the responsibility of having to survive in this environment certainly created tension at the institution.

Peakes, Virginia

Less than five years after it opened, the Virginia State Industrial School for Colored Girls came under state control; however this shift in leadership had little effect on the institution’s successful operation. The transition from private to public control was a very smooth one in which the daily functioning of the school remained as solid as ever. Moreover, the principles on which the school was built promoted both well-rounded excellence and a commitment to individuality. In contrast to Missouri, special care was taken to make sure the school was the last resort possible for the girls: serious attempts were made to place them in foster homes and with other family members before they were ever admitted to Peakes. Mrs. Janie Porter Barrett’s explanation of the school’s purpose is perhaps the best way to describe exactly what transpired at the institution. She called it a “moral hospital where each girl is studied and given individual treatment, with the hope of removing the cause of her delinquency and of building character.” 17 Knowing that this focus drove the operations at the school, it should come as no surprise how girls were treated from their very first day.

As at Tipton, girls were seen by a doctor when they were sentenced, simply as a matter of formality. Next, “upon arrival, each girl was assigned to Virginia Cottage for social assessment.” 18 The purpose of sending the girls to Virginia Cottage was not only to give them a place to stay until they earned the privilege of living in one of the nicer buildings, but also gave them the chance to start anew. Mrs. Barrett was adamant that her girls be given the opportunity to forget their pasts and be welcomed into a loving and devoted community of adult supporters and adolescent companions. From the very beginning the girls at Peakes were treated with a certain level of respect and were hence expected to show such respect in turn. Using this philosophy, the daily experiences at Peakes were similar to Tipton in their basic premises, but very different with regard to intention and purpose.

Much like at its Midwest counterpart, academics played a significant role in daily life at Peakes. The difference, however, was that Peakes had ample resources to ensure
scholastic and vocational success for the girls in attendance. For example, “educational preparation paralleled the public school curriculum through grade eight, and the academic content was supplemented with…programs to promote English-proficiency skill.”19 Regardless of a girls’ educational upbringing prior to her admittance, Mrs. Barrett made sure the school strove to maximize each girl’s potential.

Similar to Tipton, “religious training, crop harvesting, and household management were all part of the vocational education program” at the Virginia State Industrial Home for Colored Girls.20 Mrs. Barrett emphasized humility and Christian values, encouraging daily prayer while maintaining a “regular ‘open forum,’ at which the girls were given the opportunity to air their grievances freely.”21 By creating a safe yet open environment, “the goal of the industrial home school was to help each girl gain self-control and develop home-life skills in preparation for independent community living.”22 This “open forum” provided a safe space for mature dialogue between the girls and the staff and created a much more trusting environment than the rigid hierarchy at Tipton.

Whereas many girls at Tipton were forced to live self-sufficiently due to inadequate resources, girls at Peakes were encouraged to spend much of their free time learning and exploring. While girls did pick up domestic skills such as cooking, cleaning, gardening, and sewing, these chores did not hinder their exposure to outside air and other extracurricular activities. Rather than worrying over the next meal, the young girls had ample time to refine their skills in order to better their chances for independence upon their release.

Lastly, one of the most significant differences between Tipton and Peakes was the involvement of the superintendent. As can be surmised, the staff at Tipton was irregular and generally unfamiliar with child welfare and hence unfit to care for the girls. Superintendents never stayed for more than a few years and hiring staff to fill vacant positions was difficult: either because of the inconvenient distance, unsuitable salary, racial tensions or a combination of all three. In contrast, the sincere interests of Mrs. Barrett were showcased throughout her decades as superintendent of the school. She eventually “became an authority on child welfare problems in the United States,” and there is no denying that most of her firsthand experience came from her decades at Peakes.23 Even after many of the girls were released or paroled, Mrs. Barrett continued to keep in contact, urging her pupils to write her regularly with updates, concerns, and occasional requests.

**DISCIPLINE**

Although vocational training at the Missouri State Industrial School for Negro Girls and the Virginia State Industrial Home for Colored Girls was similar, the methods they used to discipline the girls varied in many ways. While girls at both facilities were eligible for parole if their behavior was satisfactory, the standards used to judge such successes differed. Regardless of the specifics of each institution’s merit system, it is important to note that Victorian virtues and feminine ideals, such as being submissive to one’s husband, were placed at the forefront of good behavior; even the state’s most helpless females were expected to become young women of dignity and honor.
Tipton, Missouri
Tipton saw its fair share of superintendents pass through its doors during its decades of operation and all of them demanded to be called “Mother.” This was supposed to create a familial atmosphere and a nurturing figurehead, though in reality the effect was minimal.

The role of “guardian Mother” was executed in a unique manner by each superintendent at Tipton. For example, Mother Bowles, who became superintendent in 1933, proposed “a strict regimen of work, worship and play,” focusing on making sure her girls were presentable for marriage rather than academics. She utilized a merit system (which had been established by her predecessors) to ensure that the girls at the school were meeting her standards, despite the meager resources at Tipton.

The merit system, in its most basic form, rewarded girls in five general categories every day. These rules of discipline attempted to show favoritism towards girls who excelled regularly, but also penalized those who struggled to adjust to life in the institution. Monthly, tallies from the merit system were accumulated to write progress reports on each girl, allowing the staff to track an inmate’s progress. By keeping record of a girl’s path through the school, the prospect of early parole (which was a rarity) provided an incentive for many inmates and assured staff that adequate behavioral improvement had been made.

Peakes, Virginia
As at Tipton, “Mother” was also commonly used at the Virginia State Industrial Home for Colored Girls. Rather than creating a hierarchy, Mother Barrett intended to become every girl’s new parent in almost every sense of the word. She felt the community created at the institution would be closer to a family simply if everyone felt related to one another.

Here too, a merit system was instigated. It was enforced with physical clothing distinctions rather than privileges, though girls could receive special freedoms if their behavior was outstanding. When a girl arrived at Peakes, she was cleaned and given a clean bed: signs that she could start all over. Mother Barrett would literally write her name across a clean page of paper, indicating a fresh start and a chance to confess to all past events without fear of judgment or denial. After the ten-day grace period of learning the school’s rules, the discipline system was enforced. Called the Honor System, the tactic of using demerits, silences, and rewards to encourage good behavior was the primary method of discipline used at Peakes.

Though both Tipton and Peakes attempted to create family atmospheres within the walls of their respective institutions, the discipline systems they employed created competition amongst the girls, rather than sibling-like camaraderie. While the former school seemed more focused on preparing girls for a future life supported by a man, the latter emphasized above average performance from the beginning, regardless of past experience. Girls at Peakes often wrote letters after their discharge thanking Mother Barrett for giving them the skills needed to be independent women working as laundresses, secretaries, seamstresses, and cooks. They were often reintroduced into society successfully, whereas girls at Tipton were dependent on men after their release since the school did not adequately prepare them for independent living.
INMATES

The girls who entered the Missouri State Industrial School for Negro Girls and those committed to the Virginia State Industrial Home for Colored Girls differed little. They had most often been charged with “delinquency,” which was a simple label for crimes such as missing curfew, attending a dancehall alone, or staying too late at a suitor’s house. Although the legal procedure for commitment was different in each state, the girls who eventually found themselves locked behind those walls were practically mirror images of one another, despite the hundreds of miles between the schools.

Tipton & Peakes

As previously mentioned, the vast majority of girls who entered reformatories during the early twentieth century had been sentenced for crimes of poverty and/or sexual promiscuity. While being courted by eligible suitors was often the highlight of a girl’s teenage years, she frequently walked a thin line between exploring her boundaries and disgracing her name. Moreover, young girls living in segregated cities, including Kansas City, St. Louis, and Richmond, often found themselves in impoverished conditions and thus committed petty crimes simply to find something to eat, help support the family, or experience a luxury such as seeing a show.

It is tragic to think that, although some girls committed punishable crimes, many others were sentenced to reform schools “for little more than their parents’ poverty.”28 Girls who were committed for serious crimes such as robbery and murder were housed alongside victims of neglect and abuse, though the majority of sentences received by girls at both schools were for petty or minor offenses.

That being said, it is important to acknowledge the legal differences in the crimes encountered both at Tipton and Peakes. While parents could report and bring their daughters to Tipton, both schools required legal proceedings before the state could intervene. Although girls at both institutions were most often sentenced as general delinquents, defined as those who engaged in activities that were deemed illegal, regardless of age, they were also charged with “general delinquency” for crimes which were only applicable to juveniles. Because of the ambiguities in defining the girls’ crimes, it is often difficult to tell the severity of these cases from records alone. Regardless, delinquency was the overarching issue at both institutions, which attests to the hard living conditions these girls endured while growing up in urban areas. In reality, many of the girls who were committed to Tipton and Peakes were simply considered uncontrollable by their parents and/or guardians.

CONCLUSION

Through a comparison of their creation, logistics, discipline, and inmates, it is possible to identify many of the similarities and difference between the Missouri State Industrial School for Negro Girls and the Virginia State Industrial Home for Colored Girls and to consider the outcomes for their inmates. While both facilities experienced southern prejudices and endured racially-motivated hardships, the separate paths of these institutions can be directly attributed to their initial foundation and the subsequent attention paid to them. In Missouri, not only did the state admit that it did not have a vested interest in the institution, but given that the Department of
Corrections had control over the institution at Tipton, it further implied that the girls deserved to be criminalized. In Virginia, in contrast, the privatization of the school at its inception had a profound impact on its future trajectory. The fact that respected individuals within the community were seriously concerned about the problem of delinquent girls and were willing to invest their own time, money, and resources to come up with a solution created an entirely different institution and outcomes for its inmates. Therefore, it may be concluded that Peakes was a true reformatory which was ultimately beneficial for its girls, whereas Tipton attempted to rehabilitate its girls but ultimately failed. While examination of these two state institutions only provides a glimpse into the treatment of young black girls during the 1930s, it works as a lens through which to analyze the racialized and impoverished conditions of girls from metropolitan environments during this time.

Notes

7. 49th Annual House and Senate Journal Appendix, Missouri State Archives, 42.
8. 49th Annual House and Senate Journal Appendix, Missouri State Archives, 42.
13. 56th Annual House and Senate Journal Appendix, Biennial Report, Missouri State Archives, 276.
14. 56th Annual House and Senate Journal Appendix, Biennial Report, Missouri State Archives, 276.
15. 56th Annual House and Senate Journal Appendix, Biennial Report, Missouri State Archives, 279.
16. 56th Annual House and Senate Journal Appendix, Biennial Report, Missouri State Archives, 278.
17. Legal Pad Notes from Betsy Brinson, The Virginia Historical Society.


