When examining the history of an institution and its ties to troublesome figures and beliefs it is important to also consider the experiences of the first People of Color to go there. By examining the life, scholarship, and career of the first African American woman to receive a PhD in education we can better understand the legacies of prejudice at Teachers College while also remembering a historic moment of progressive scholarship by McAllister. In this paper I hope to illuminate the life of Dr. McAllister, her career, and her scholarship while also dissecting the founders and the legacy of the institution she attended, Columbia University’s Teachers College.

Jane Ellen McAllister was born on October 24, 1899 to a successful, well-educated Black family in Vicksburg Mississippi. Her mother was a teacher and instilled the importance of education early in Jane. By the time she was in second grade she was already tutoring younger students and practicing piano vigorously.[1] In 1919 McAllister graduated from Talladega College in Alabama with a Bachelor of Arts degree.[2] It was that same year that she saw the poor state of education in Louisiana for Black children.[3] The desire to transform this struggling system is what fueled her academic pursuits over the next decade. She began teaching at Southern University in the
Beginning her career working in teacher training was foreshadowing for her future dissertation work at Columbia University’s Teachers College.

In 1921 McAllister was in the first group of Master’s students at The University of Michigan Ann Arbor. Upon graduating, she went to teach at Southern University in the Teachers Training Department eventually being promoted to director. While there she also taught extra classes in Latin and Piano. In 1922 she began working as the principle of the Training School at Virginia State University; her first time working exclusively in teacher training. She only worked there for one year before returning to the Teachers Training Department at Southern University. During her second stint at Southern University, she became involved in the grassroots educational organizing of institutions like the Rosenwald Foundation, the Jeanes Fund, the Slater Fund, and the Phelps-Stokes Fund, and the general education fund. State intervention into the advancement of Black education at the time was minimal. McAllister saw what worked and did not work to advance teachers and schools within the segregated Black school system which no doubt influenced her deep dive into the importance of adequate teacher training while at Columbia University.

Jane Ellen McAllister began her doctoral studies at Columbia University’s Teachers College in the mid-1920s when Black students were matriculating at higher rates to the University. Despite this progression, McAllister was entering a school and program that was steeped in racism and sexism.

Teachers College began humbly as a Kitchen and Garden school headed by wealthy and well-known philanthropist Grace Hoadley Dodge. The first meeting of the school was held at her home on January 14, 1880. Dodge was enlisted to be the first corresponding secretary and financial baker. The school utilized miniature kitchen and garden tools to instruct children on a variety of household duties. The classes were conducted by “lady-volunteers” that themselves needed training. This led to the creation of normal training classes for the instruction of Kitchen and garden teachers.
When the Kitchen Garden Association expanded and transformed into the Industrial Education Association Dodge was promoted to Vice-president and began playing an instrumental role in the development of the Association. The Association grew so large it expanded from one room accommodations to a rented house where classes for children, adults, and young women were conducted as well as 15 rooms for residential students. As the Industrial Association grew, the educational objective grew as well. They “held public meetings and lectures, issued pamphlets and leaflets in large numbers, established a library and education museum and bureau for teachers, and, most important of all, enlarged and promoted the training of teachers in manual work.”[8]

In 1887 Nicholas Murray Butler, a Columbia College alumnus, was elected president of the Industrial Education Association.[9] While he was a student at Columbia, he pricked the ears of President Frederick A.P. Barnard about the subject of education. Barnard was an advocate for the formal and scientific study of education in America. He was quoted saying “Education is nowhere treated as a science, and nowhere is there an attempt made to expound its true philosophy. In this respect we are far behind continental Europe.” In 1864, President Barnard, during his inaugural speech at Columbia College, intentionally pointed out “the Principles and Art of Education” as one of the objectives of the school. He also made the science of education one of the major themes of his 1881 annual report. Trustees of the university were not as enthusiastic about establishing the science of education as a tenant of the College so Barnard focused his efforts on mentoring his student, Nicholas Murray Butler, in his ideas. Butler’s foundation in Barnard’s educational beliefs combined with Grace Hoadley Dodge’s philanthropic prowess transformed the association into the New York College for the Training of Teachers.[10]

In October 1897 James Earl Russell joined the New York College for the Training of Teachers when it started being referred to as Teachers College. He was appointed head of the Department of Psychology and General Method in the technical training of teachers and rapidly promoted to Dean-Elect of the institution. Once Russell became
Dean Teachers College was incorporated into the now Columbia University in 1898 under the following terms:

“(1) that all instruction given in Teachers College leading to the degrees of A.B., A.M., and PhD would be under the control of Columbia’s Faculty of Philosophy; (2) that Teachers College would retain its separate organization and control all of its own instruction in non-degree programs; (3) that the conferring of degrees would rest with Columbia College; (4) that Columbia College would provide at least one course each year in Teachers College dealing with the history and institutes of education, one with philosophy, and one with psychology and ethics; (5) that with the approval of the President of Columbia College, the President of Teachers College and those professors giving graduate work and/ or courses in the final year leading to the A.B. degree would have seats and voting membership in Columbia’s Faculty of Philosophy when that Faculty had under consideration matters affecting Teachers College; and (6) that all female Teachers College Students eligible for admission to Barnard College might, by registering at Barnard, become candidates for a Columbia Degree, while male students eligible for Columbia College might do the same through the institution.”[11]

Russell was the first to emphasize educational psychology on the academic level among other subjects he pushed in this newly established Teachers College.[12]

By 1900 Teachers College was organized into three levels: undergraduate, graduate, and special students. Graduate level courses catered to school professors, school superintendents, principles, supervisors, and secondary school teachers. Graduate level courses led to one of two degrees: Higher Diploma meaning professional competence, and Secondary Diploma that's main purpose was to demonstrate academic competence.[13]

Teachers College existed as a part of the psychology department at Columbia University until 1902 when it was established enough to become a stand-alone Department of Education.[14] In the 20 years that followed Teachers College blossomed, especially in attendance. 5,000 students attended Teachers College between 1926-1927. By the turn of the century Teachers College students were coming
from all regions of the United States, and some from abroad. By 1927, one in 20 students that registered were from foreign countries; representing diverse places from Iceland to South Africa. As the graduate program grew the undergraduate population decreased and the practical arts department, a vestige of Teachers College’s origins in The Kitchen and Garden School, had largely disappeared.[15]

It was at this time of growth, formalization of the study of education, and groundbreaking studies in the psychology of education that Jane Ellen McAllister began her studies. Upon her acceptance into the PhD program at Teachers College she became the first African American doctoral candidate in education at Columbia University. After completing her PhD she became the first Black woman in the nation to earn a Doctorate in Education and only the sixth Black woman in the world to earn a PhD.[16] Despite her historic acceptance she walked into a program that was still evolving. The key players in the evolution of the education field of study were some of the distinguished professors under which McAllister would study. The most controversial of these professors is one of the most well-known educational psychologists in history, Edward L. Thorndike. Direct ties can be made to his research and some of the same systems that are still currently used in the education system.

During Thorndike’s tenure at Columbia University, there was an academic push to make the field of Education a formal scientific study. Because of this, Thorndike drew on Dr. Wilhelm Wundt’s research into experimentalism, Dr. Frederick Taylor’s belief in educational efficiency, and Sir Francis Galton’s research into statistics and Eugenics.[17] A deeper understanding of the foundational theories that influenced Thorndike’s research will help better understand the values of Teachers college and the type of research and philosophies Jane Ellen McAllister had to contend with while completing her degree.

Philosopher Frederick Taylor developed a philosophy that likened learning to industrial efficiency known as scientific management. Scientific Management rested on four major principles. 1) A science for “each element of a man’s work”, 2) Scientific selection, training, and development of the worker, 3) Cooperation between the working person and the selector to ensure adherence to the principles of scientific management, and 4)
An equal division of labor.[18] This rigid view of education focused on putting students into rigid categories based on predetermined characteristics. This type of categorization continues to be utilized in education and has been shown to be both racially bias and sexist, hindering the advancement of People of Color and women.

Wilhelm Wundt, developed scientific investigation. He worked from experimentation to develop an educational theory. Specifically, he defined scientific study “as quantified analysis of particular attributes.”[19] Attempting to quantify attributes of students can amplify the value of certain characteristics while diminishing the importance of others. Certain qualities can be attributed to various groups of people based on race, geographics, socioeconomic status, etc. Those attributes attributed to those who are privileged creates a bias within the system that once again contributes to racism and sexism.

Sir Francis Galton, cousin to Charles Darwin, approached education by combing his relative’s ideas of natural selection with Wundt’s scientific quantitative specificity. In essence, he believed intellectual production like “books, paintings, music, political leadership etc” correlated with genius level. He also believed this genius level was hereditary in men. His research did not involve women at all. Galton was also the founder of the International Society of Eugenics which encouraged the selective reproduction of people based on traits that were considered desirable.[20] Eugenics is a racist belief and its application to the study of education creates an intentionally bias system.

Edward Thorndike was influenced by the work of these men when he began his research into the scientific processes of education. He famously said “if a thing exists, it exists in some amount, it can be measured.” This insistences on measuring is what led him to develop experiments on animal behavior that he believed would give insight into human behavior.[21] The results of his animal experiments found that intellectual variations were hereditary and quantitative. This meant improvement of societal intellect could happen through Eugenics.[22] Belief in Eugenics is inherently racist because it uplifts characteristics found most often in the privileged and creates rhetoric that can
justify the negative treatment of certain racial groups. Most infamously, the Nazi’s adopted the tenets of Eugenics to justify their treatment of Jewish people.

Based on his research Thorndike developed multiple intelligence and vocational performance tests that were all based in the ideas of eugenics. These tests were revolutionary for their time and the legacies of these tests can be seen in standardized testing today. This foundation contributes to the continued debate over the validity of this type of testing. Two other educational revelations from Thorndike that continue to impact our education system is the idea of educational tracks or, grouping students based on their academic intelligence so teachers can more efficiently educate students with more academic ability and the funneling of less academically inclined students into vocational education.[23]

Thorndike’s research made him one of the most influential scholars in American education. He became the namesake of the main campus building housing Teachers College on Columbia University’s Campus. It remained Thorndike Hall for 50 years until Wednesday July 15, 2020 when the University made the decision to rename the building. The statement released following this decision read,

“The Board of Trustees of Teachers College, Columbia University unanimously voted today to remove Edward L. Thorndike’s name from the building that has held his name since its dedication nearly 50 years ago. While Thorndike’s work was hugely influential on modern educational ideas and practices, he was also a proponent of eugenics, and held racist, sexist, and antisemitic ideas.”[24]

The announcement goes on to reference the work of Columbia students to expose the deep-seated hate behind Thorndike’s academic research.

“TC faculty members and students have long been re-assessing Thorndike’s work and legacy – in light both of his contributions as the founder of educational psychology and testing, and of his problematic social views. In 2018, a group of TC students painstakingly researched Thorndike’s writings on eugenics and race and their report, Proposal to Rename Thorndike Hall to Better Reflect Teachers College Values, documented a clear, disturbing pattern of extreme prejudice in Thorndike’s work.”
The building has been renamed Horace Mann Hall.[25]

Jane Ellen McAllister would have encountered Dr. Thorndike almost 30 years into his career, nearly all of which he spent working at Teachers College. By this time his ideas were entrenched in the education program at Columbia. As an African American woman with experience working in the all-Black schools of the segregated south, McAllister, and the students and teachers she sought to service, were the exact demographic Thorndike’s beliefs harmed. She not only had to contend with the isolating experience of being the only Black woman in her program but also navigate building her thesis within a department where not all the professor’s research supported her work.

Fortunately, not all of Teachers College’s professors shared the sentiments of Thorndike. While studying for her PhD, McAllister was also in the company of one of the pioneers of Kindergarten Education, Dr. Patty Smith Hill. Before becoming a professor at Teachers College, she ran a free kindergarten program in Louisville, Kentucky. Her reputation became so well-known many considered her the authority on kindergarten education. This notoriety also pricked the interest of the Education Department at Teachers College and she was invited to teach summer courses on kindergarten education. Many believe her successful summer course are what led to eventual appointment to the department.[26]

Her tenure at Columbia was marked by generous deeds, community involvement, and an approach to early childhood education that was quite opposite of her colleague Thorndike’s. Dr. Smith believed children should be introduced to education through play and free exploration at an early age. She invented large blocks for children’s play that are still popular toys and learning tools utilized today.[27]

Once at Columbia Dr. Smith’s educational pursuits extended beyond the classroom. In 1923, Dr. Patty Smith and a small collective of professors from various Morningside heights educational organizations worked together to study the conditions of the upper Manhattan neighborhoods surrounding Columbia University. These neighborhoods represented various races, economic statues, and religions.[28] Her goal was to collaborate with these organizations to improve the community. Contrary to the efforts of
Thorndike, Smith worked with students of diverse backgrounds with an optimistic idea that a nurturing approach to education could have a positive impact on any student.

One such success story was detailed in the *New York Herald Tribune* on November 11, 1935. The headline read “Dr. Hill Turns Child Rowdies Into ‘Models’”. After many shop owners in the area around the Morningside Heights Campus complained about broken shop windows Dr. Hill decided to take a different approach to solving the problem. She asked that the increased police protection in the neighborhood be rescinded because she believed when dealing with juvenile crime the police “might help, but would never cure the situation.”[29] Her progressive thinking did not stop there. The children told her “We have no place to go, and nothing to do after school is over.” Her solution was simple. She approached the students with kindness and created educational planned activities that turned misguided students into scholars.[30] Dr. Hill’s emphasis on play, a nurturing approach, and desire to help students of various racial, religious, and economic backgrounds greatly differs from Thorndike’s strict ideas of categorization. These “rowdy” students would have been tossed into the lesser category and tracked into vocational work rather than have their academic potential explored.

Jane Ellen McAllister started studying at Columbia at the end of Dr. Hill’s career when her influence on education was well known and deeply established. McAllister’s dissertation work leans more toward the influences of Dr. Hill. Benevolence and strategic reform characterized Dr. Hill’s career and as one of the professors McAllister studied under, this surely influenced her course of study.

Another influential professor McAllister studied under during her time at Columbia was Dr. George S Counts. He believed teachers should not only be concerned with matters of the school but also with economics, politics, morality, art, religion, and ethics. Additionally, he believed schools should collaborate with community organizations to ultimately enact change within society.[31] Counts was a new professor on the faculty during McAllister’s time at Teachers College and his philosophy about the social responsibility of schools a very progressive idea at the time. These progressive influences can be seen in McAllister’s dissertation which outlines transformative ways to improve the segregated Louisiana school system through Teacher Training.
McAllister’s course of study culminated in her dissertation entitled *The Negro Teacher in Louisiana*. She based her dissertation on a 1923 study that was conducted on the state of teacher education that wholly disregarded the training of African American teachers. She leaned on her first-hand experience working in southern Black teacher training institutions and thoroughly researched statistics to illuminate effects of teacher training on education. Her basis was “(1) for determining the teacher training needs of the Negro Public schools in Louisiana, (2) for making recommendations as to what the state should do to meet these needs.”[32]

In this thesis McAllister used data collected by the state to better understand the state of teacher training in Louisiana, the first time a study of this kind was done. She aimed

“1. To give the necessary national, sectional, and local background for the understanding of the Louisiana situation.

2. To describe actual conditions for training teachers in Louisiana

3. To point out some weaknesses in the present program of teacher training

4. To encourage Louisiana to make even greater improvement by showing what North Carolina, with similar handicaps, has done.

5. To make constructive recommendations regarding the training of teachers in Louisiana.”[33]

In order to best evaluate the situation in Louisiana McAllister used North Carolina as a comparative school system. For one, both states were located in the segregated south and had segregated school systems. North Carolina, however, had a better school system than Louisiana because of state investment and an emphasis on teacher training. Part of this investment is higher salaries and better training which would produce overall improved schools for Black students like it had in White schools at the time. McAllister goes on to say, “Schools cannot be efficient when the state pays so little money for teachers’ salaries and for the training of teachers.”[34] North Carolina and Louisiana state governments had comparatively the same amount of money but North Carolina had a better school system because they invested more money in both Black
and white schools. McAllister hypothesized this was because of higher salaries and more educational investment in black schools.[35] In the table *Per Capita Cost of Elementary & Secondary Education*, Louisiana invested 45.37 per capita in white schools as compared to 8.33 per capita in Black Schools. North Carolina on the contrary invested 25.36 in white schools compared to 9.74 in Black schools.[36] McAllister’s argument presents the need for greater investment in the Black school system. She does not mention integration or equality with white schools. Her hope is improvement. Her optimism about bettering the Louisiana school system through training shows her belief in nurturing intelligence as oppose to it being a heritable trait. As a doctoral student navigating a sparsely integrated program at Columbia, she stood strong in her convictions in the potential for excellence for the African American education system.

Interestingly, McAllister did not believe professional school was absolutely necessary for teacher education, although she herself was pursing the highest degree offered in education, a PhD. She felt, in the spirit of Dr. Patty Smith Hill’s benevolence and in opposition to Dr. Edward Thorndike’s idea that vocational tracks were less important than academic tracks, that vocational training schools for teachers was the best solution for bringing educators up to par.[37] When McAllister does mention professional teacher training, she believes HBCUs are pivotal in the professional training of Black teachers. She makes no mention of Teachers College, or Columbia’s role in improving teacher training.

During this time period only 22 states were formally training teachers. Louisiana did not start training teachers until 1820. Educational psychology of the day suggested that teacher training was necessary for a successful education.[38] “The teacher is recognized as the deciding factor in grading the efficiency of a school.”[39] McAllister believed this sentiment to be true and used her dissertation to prove it. Her decision to base her dissertation on a recent educational study done solely on white teachers also demonstrates her determination to prove the same methods could be applied to the study and improvement of Black education as those used to improve white education.
Upon graduating from Teachers College, now Dr. Jane Ellen McAllister became the first Black woman with a PhD in education, and the sixth African American to possess a PhD in the country. It is important to underscore the non-academic stressors McAllister faced during her time at Teachers College. Being a Black woman in a white academic space was surely a tough dynamic to navigate. One obstacle McAllister had to surmount was financial. Working to pay for school was always a part of McAllister’s educational journey. While studying for her masters at University of Michigan Ann Arbor McAllister worked as a maid for room and board, and an assistant to a cleaning woman who catered fraternity and faculty dinners for money. She described it as an isolating experience. When she was not working she spent her time in the library.[40] While studying for her PhD at Columbia she juggled multiple jobs including working as a house cleaner, waitress, substitute teacher, tutor, and dog walker.[41] Successfully balancing work and school shows how smart and capable McAllister was. It illustrates the high pressure McAllister was finishing her studies under that some of her fellow doctoral candidates may not have been feeling.

McAllister was eventually awarded a Rosenwald Fellowship which allowed her to dedicate more time to her studies. A friend once described one of her intense study habits. “She would seclude herself on the weekend in the Seth Lowe apartment after placing a sign on the door which read, ‘Do Not Disturb. In case of Emergency, Stick a Note Under the Door’.”[42] In a 1986 interview later in her life an 88 year old McAllister reflected on her experience at Teachers College. She said,

"For this I worked as a waitress, I walked dogs in the park studying, baby-sitting, etc., any job. The whole convent [where I worked] prayed for me; I studied alone, no group invited me, if they had I would have refused. I stood highest (I think if the professor was right) because I knew the technique of taking standardized tests--skip anything that puzzles you and full speed ahead.”[43]

McAllister worked tirelessley to achieve her academic goals without the support of her cohort. Despite this, she still managed to impress her professors while also challenging their beliefs with her work.
Upon graduating from Teachers College, in 1928, now, Dr. McAllister became professor of education at Fisk University. She was the only doctorate degree holder in the department. She quickly distinguished herself, becoming the first Black woman to be named head of the Department of Education at Fisk. In 1930 she spearheaded a program to involve Fisk University students in Nashville public schools as a laboratory for education students which greatly aided in Fisk University becoming the first Black college to be accredited. Even with all of her work Fisk University and being verbally told of her promotion to dean, the administration refused to publicly acknowledge her promotion out of fear of white backlash. Feeling undervalued, McAllister left. Even after overcoming the seemingly insurmountable odds of being the first Black woman to achieve the terminal degree in her field, once in her career she had to continue to prove herself qualified to do the work she was already excelling at.

Following her stint at Fisk, Dr. McAllister became a professor and the official head of the education department at Miner Teachers College in Washington, DC. As chair of the curriculum committee, she reorganized the education course sequence and helped other divisions of the college “realize their objectives.” Once again, her tireless work led to Minor’s accreditation on February 25, 1933. In 1937 she took a brief leave of absence from Miner college at the request of The Louisiana State Department and the Louisiana State Department of Education, now known as Grambling State University. She directed and revised the teacher training program there. As a part of her program at Grambling state a Field Service Unit which assisted the rural poor by carrying “the gospel of better food, housing, clothing, etc. to rural poor people who were tenant farmers or wage earners on large plantations.” In 1981 Dr. McAllister was inducted into the Grambling State Hall of fame for her short but impactful 5 years of work (1937 – 1942). McAllister spent one semester assisting the deeply segregated and unequal educational system through the Mississippi Negro Training School. State support for her work was extremely low. She used all of the skills she had sharpened to adeptly navigate the racially charged Mississippi environment earning respect across the color line.

She returned to Minor College where she worked for another decade before making her return to the place she started her education career, Jackson State University. Notable
programs she instituted at Jackson State were The Student Sponsored Forum, The Tele-Lecture Series, The College Enrichment Program, “Town Meeting on the Air”, NDEA Institutes for Teacher of Disadvantaged Youths, and a College Readiness Program. She was also responsible for the funding of 1200 “teachers of the disadvantage” under Title IX of the National Defense Education Act.

Overall, Dr. Jane Ellen McAllister’s career spanned 51 years from, 1919 until her retirement in 1970. She had a tremendous impact on education, doing the research and hard work of training scores of African American teachers over decades. Her career spanned through the beginnings of formalized educational study, through Brown v. The Board of Education and the Civil Rights Movement. She navigated racists scholarship rooted in eugenics and sexism that was determined to track African American students into less adequate education. Her scholarship established accredited teacher training programs in schools that are still in existence today. Although her journey to her PhD was a long one, she took what she learned at Columbia’s Teachers College and transformed African American Education. Her legacy lives on through the many institutions, and lives she impacted throughout her long career.
Endnotes


[2] Ibid, 345

[3] Ibid, 346

[4] Ibid, 347

[5] Ibid, 345


[10] Ibid, pg 19-20


[22] *Ibid*, pg 65


[25] *Ibid*


[27] Cremin, A History of Teachers College, pg 59.


[29] “Dr. hill turns child rowdies into 'models': Converts gang war spirit into chemistry interest at neighborhood center adds music and plays nursery school is changed into a

[30] Ibid, “Dr. Hill turns child rowdies into ‘models.’”


[33] Ibid, pg 2.

[34] Ibid, Pg 34.


[36] Ibid, Pg 19.

[37] Ibid, Pg19.

[38] Ibid, pg 5.


[41] Ibid, pg 346.


Bibliography


"Resigns Plaue: Miss Patty Hill To Leave Louisville Accepts Important Position At Columbia Many Years With Free Kindergarten Association Wide Fame As An Educator." *Courier-Journal (1869-1922)*, Mar 31, 1906.