"I Decline to Play the Part of the Fish Dangling on the End of Your Line"[1]: How a Blind Politician Led the Way to a Dissertation Topic in Educational History

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Abstract

This article traces the author's personal and academic journey to a dissertation topic in educational history, catalyzed by a chance encounter at a garage sale and a provocative letter from a blind South Carolina politician, John E. Swearingen. Initially struggling to identify a viable dissertation topic, the author discovered Swearingen while searching through archival microfilm of the correspondence between the General Education Board (GEB), a Rockefeller-funded philanthropic organization, and the South Carolina State Department. The discovery launched a biographical project that explored Swearingen's life and career. The article blends autoethnography, historiography, and biography, chronicling Swearingen's tenure as State Superintendent of Education and his advocacy for marginalized communities, despite operating within a segregated and racially oppressive system. It examines the methodological process of constructing a historical life from fragmented records and personal interviews—including with Swearingen's son—and the broader implications for understanding masculinity, disability, and resistance in Progressive Era education reform. Ultimately, this narrative underscores how unexpected moments and overlooked figures can shape a career, illuminate injustices, and expand the field of educational history.

Keywords: educational biography, dissertation journey, John E. Swearingen, General Education Board, Progressive Era, blindness, educational philanthropy, archival research, Southern education

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[1] From a letter by John E. Swearingen to Wallace Buttrick, January 29, 1921 (Swearingen, 1921a).

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May of 2002 was a tumultuous time for me: I had resigned from my career as a high school teacher, was moving halfway across the country with no job, had recently passed my comprehensive exam for my doctoral degree in Educational Foundations, and had ten dissertation topic ideas rejected by my committee. However, sometimes one comes across an artifact—a piece of art or architecture, a work of literature, a piece of journalism, or an archival document—that can become life changing. Such was my case: a conversation at a garage sale led to scrolling through microfilm during which a scrawled signature on the bottom of a very short piece of correspondence caught my eye. This in turn led to a deeper dive in historical material, an oral history that took me from a small tourist town in Wyoming to the top floor of Chicago's Aon Center, and fed a project that would become my dissertation and my first book.

This article explores the relationship between biographer and biographical subject as a lens through which to explore one writer's journey through the dissertation phase in hopes of providing some guidance to doctoral students. It frames this discussion in an examination of John E. Swearingen, State Superintendent of Public Instruction in South Carolina who happened to be the first blind person elected to public office in the state, beginning with his contentious relationship with the General Education Board, a philanthropic group founded and funded by John D. Rockefeller. The article begins on an autobiographical note, describing the convoluted path to my discovery of a dissertation topic. It shifts into a historic exploration of the General Education Board, then to a study of the methods used to craft Swearingen's biography before presenting a biographical sketch of Swearingen's fascinating life and career. The article concludes with a return to an autoethnographic discussion of how Swearingen's letter to the GEB still impacts my research agenda.

Struggles with a Dissertation Topic

Many doctoral students find themselves in a similar situation to what I was going through at the end of my coursework back in 2002: after years of writing around prescriptive topics and themes in my classes, how do I choose a topic for my dissertation? Some students work with a chair who encourages them to build upon the chair's line of research; however, my chair's work lay half a world away, in South Africa, so this was not an option for me. Other

students have a clear notion of their dissertation topic by the end of their coursework. While I had a concept, by the end of my coursework I realized it made for an interesting class paper but would not cut it as a major dissertation research study in the field of educational history.

Still other students have a committee with whom they can meet, individually or collectively, and who can help move them forward towards a topic. Committee composition is critically important to the dissertation process: a large part of it is what the committee member can bring to the student's project? However, interpersonal dynamics and internecine politics are also significant factors students should consider. My committee was comprised of faculty in whom I had the utmost respect and trust; however, they came from opposite ends of the sociopolitical and academic spectrum. This brought about some challenges when selecting a topic.

Before starting their full dissertation proposals, most doctoral students are encouraged to work up a small version of it, sometimes referred to as concept paper or mini proposal. I wrote several of these before finding one that could go to the full committee for discussion and review. Some topics were just not "dissertation worthy" (though I still have notes on a few for future projects). Others were greeted with acceptance by one or two committee members but rejected by the rest. My chair was able to preempt some potential conflict-causing topics before I went too far down the scholarly road with them. Finally, one committee member sat me down and gave extensive advice on how I might find a topic: "Go to the library. Find the old State Superintendent reports. Go to the oldest and begin skimming them. You will find something there."

All doctoral students are on a timeline; mine was particularly sensitive. These conversations were taking place in May; in July, I was moving over a thousand miles away to begin the next phase of my career. There were a small group of doctoral students counted as friends who were graduating or moving on; we decided to hold a group garage sale to purge old furniture and raise some money for our move. When the word of our sale got out, a handful of other students asked to set up tables and join in. On the day of the sale, during a break in the action, I was lamenting my lack of topic with this group. One of them worked in the South Caroliniana Library, the main archival library of the University of South Carolina. He mentioned that the archive had just received a large shipment of microfilm; nobody there ordered it or had an idea of what it

was. He knew it had something to do with education and suggested I give it a skim; I might get a topic, and he would learn what was going on with this mystery box. I agreed to see him Monday morning to begin; little did I know this passing conversation in my front yard at a garage sale would introduce me to the man who would change my life.

A Brief History of the General Education Board

The boxes of microfilm contained correspondence from the General Education Board (GEB) pertaining to South Carolina, including correspondence with schools, colleges and universities, and the State Department of Education. The Rockefeller family were the impetus behind the GEB; John Rockefeller, Jr. was the one who created the Board and laid out its mission; his father, John D. Rockefeller, contributed more than $129 million of his own money, equivalent to a staggering $2.26 billion in 2024 dollars,[3] between the years 1902 and 1921 (Fosdick, 1962, p. 327). Upon its creation in 1902, the GEB dedicated itself to two fields: Southern education and general education:

> *Southern education*. Currently this tenet is observed in assisting state governments and higher institutions to undertake studies, experiments and demonstrations in public education designed to adapt school programs to the life interests and opportunities of the students; studies dealing with significant southern interests and problems; qualitative development of selected institutions, more especially in the physical and social sciences; and the improvement of personnel. Special programs in Negro education relate to supervision and promotion of public schools, basic development of selected higher institutions, and the training of staffs.
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> *General education*. The other major interest of the Board is in the field of general education at the high school and junior college levels. This program, which was begun in 1933, is concerned with research and experimentation looking toward the improvement of education at the secondary level to meet the conditions that social change has imposed upon the schools and colleges…the Board has also provided aid for a

[3] Calculations based by relative value in real wage or real wealth comparing the years 1921 to 2024 by Measuring Worth, https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/uscompare/

> limited number of research projects in the study of adolescence. (General Education Board)

Between the years 1902 and 1960, the Board spent more than $324 million across more than a dozen states and two foreign countries (Fosdick, 1962, p. 335). The GEB served multiple functions targeted toward improving education: funding positions in state departments of education, providing funds for faculty positions in universities, overhauling medical school education, funding schools serving marginalized populations, providing scholarships for graduate students to study in established universities, providing scholarships for teachers to attend summer institutes, using the public schools to spread agrarianism, and conducting and publishing research on contemporary educational trends (Fosdick, 1962, pp. 333–335). According to Peter Collier and David Horowitz (1976), while Rockefeller made multiple contributions to the fund, he specified that his 1905 contribution was to produce "a comprehensive system of higher education in the United States" (p. 62). As Board member Frederick T. Gates later described, the purpose was "to reduce our higher education to something like an orderly and comprehensive system, to discourage unnecessary duplication and waste, and to encourage economy and efficiency" (Collier & Horowitz, p. 62).

The historian of the GEB, Fosdick (1962), has provided further details on the organization. The GEB had extensive partnerships with a handful of universities, such as the University of Chicago (p. 16). Rockefeller Jr. would lead the GEB to help fund the nascent field of audio-visual education in US schools: the GEB funded studies of the effectiveness of radio in education and launched the pioneering studies of Ohio State University and the University of Wisconsin at the time (p. 254). The GEB contributed to providing educational broadcasts on the radio, particularly effective in rural schools and universities. The GEB was critical in the creation of other universities such as Texas Christian University (TCU). They targeted support to many Historically Black Colleges and Universities, primarily Tuskegee and Hampton (pp. 329–331), as well as Tribal Colleges such as Bacone College.

One of GEB's most successful accomplishments was the funding of Abraham Flexner's scathing indictment of the American system of medical schools which became known as the Flexner Report. The GEB's medical education program provided millions of dollars funding an overhauled,

upgraded approach that matched the European model and established the model still influencing medical education today, considered "perhaps the single most dramatic achievement in the history of American philanthropy" (Fosdick, p. 328; Nielsen, 1996, p. 29).

The GEB correspondence archival records (Early Southern Program, n.d.) offer many insights into the funding policies of the organization. The GEB helped a variety of higher education institutions in South Carolina. Religious schools such as Furman received funding; Winthrop University was another early recipient of GEB funds. Schools that served White students (the University of South Carolina; Clemson University; Presbyterian; Wofford; and Converse, among others) and African American students (Voorhees; Claflin University; Benedict College; Allen University; Limestone College; and South Carolina State, among others) received endowments to be matched locally or loans from the GEB (Early Southern Program, n.d.). The GEB also paid for summer teacher academies held at colleges across the state (Summer School 1918–1936).

The GEB correspondence also demonstrates that the State Department of Education benefitted greatly from the infusion of GEB money. The GEB funded two Supervisors of Rural Schools, one for White schools and one for schools serving the African American population. It also funded a State Agent for Secondary Education, a Director of Schoolhouse Planning, and a Director of Research and Information. GEB funds were used to hire draftsmen and stenographers to assist with these offices (Early Southern Program, n.d.). In 1933, at the height of the Great Depression, the South Carolina National Bank failed; it was the institution in which the State Department of Education kept its accounts. The GEB covered the entirety of the missing funds, allowing the state department to continue its work (Brierley, 1933). The GEB repeated this when Chase National Bank failed in 1934 (Brierley, 1934).

The GEB also helped the public schools of the state. It awarded a grant to Columbia Public Schools for a building program that substantively increased both White and Black classrooms, though not in equal numbers (Buttrick, 1923). Sumter Public Schools were awarded funds dedicated to adding an industrial school for African American students which would hire specifically African American teachers, doubling their teaching force in the city (Davis, 1927). Likewise, in 1927 Rock Hill Schools received a grant to provide school facilities

for its African American students; these funds were dedicated to building classrooms for woodwork, bricklaying, and agriculture (Brierley, 1927).

The more time I spent reviewing the GEB's correspondence records, the more obvious the trend in the funding: the GEB would only fund vocational-industrial schools, particularly when it came to African American education. For example, Voorhees College wrote frequently requesting funds for its academic programs, all of which were rebuffed by the GEB. At one point Rufus Stinson, a field agent for the GEB, wrote to Jesse Thomas, principal of Voorhees, "I think you will find the home projects of girls, indoors, and boys, outdoors, will be among your most effective demonstrations of the methods advocated by your school for farm and community betterment" (Stinson, 1917). Once Voorhees agreed, they were awarded funds to expand their offerings to include agriculture. The funding continued until the Great Depression caused Voorhees to shutter many of its vocational programs; despite frequent requests from the school after that, the GEB refused (Voorhees Normal & Industrial School, n.d.).

It was clear the GEB only funded schools that engaged in what historians such as James Anderson refer to as the Hampton-Tuskegee model of education (Anderson, 1988, p. 33). The model was rooted in the work of Booker T. Washington who, in his 1895 address to the Atlanta Exposition, argued that the "greatest danger" for African Americans of the time was

> that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labour and put brains and skill into common occupations of life…No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top. (Washington, 1995, p. 107)

Washington argued that a gradual approach was best when it came to improving race relations, noting that "[t]he wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly"; he argued that "the progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing" (Washington, 108).

Washington's words were taken as gospel by Northern White philanthropists such as members of the GEB. Anderson describes the GEB's Southern program as spending "most of their time systematizing industrial education where it was practiced; and advocating systematizing industrial education where it was not installed" (1978, p. 383). The personnel of the GEB in and of itself demonstrates this opinion; key board members and contributors, such as Robert C. Ogden and George Foster Peabody, also served as board members and/or contributors to Tuskegee University and stated publicly that the Hampton-Tuskegee model was "the solution to the southern race problem" (Anderson, 1978, p. 373). In his Atlanta Exposition Address, Washington noted that his vision of vocational education for gradualism received "constant help…especially from Northern philanthropists, who have made their gifts a constant stream of blessing and encouragement" (p. 108).

Anderson describes the GEB's funding pattern in the Southeast directly: "Any black institution emphasizing classical liberal education was regarded…as impractical and not geared to prepare black youth for useful citizenship and productive efficiency" (1988, p. 133). South Carolina's teacher academies reinforced this model. Those serving African American teachers included less training in the "literary subjects" (English, math, U.S. history and civics, physiology and hygiene, and geography) and more in "domestic arts" (cooking, canning, "using wheat substitutes to replace fats and oils", and sewing) as well as "handcrafts" (basketry, chain carving, mat making, paper objects, picture framing, and woodworking). Even the "literary" academic subjects were "endeavored to make these subjects plain and practical" (Brannon, 1918).

As Charles Biebel (1976) pointed out, the GEB sought to assist education in the South by "infiltrating Southern universities and government agencies with its own paid evangelists" in order "to promote a reorganization of 'general education' through a coordinated national effort" (pp. 3–4). Reading Raymond Fosdick's (1962) insider history of the GEB supports the evangelical bent to such criticisms: He describes the Southern program as moving "forward with the spirit of a revival movement" with the professors of secondary education hired through GEB funds as "missionary professors" (p. 20) evangelizing the gospel of gradualism.

What did they evangelize? What was the revival movement that the GEB trumpeted so loudly? According to Anderson (1988), the concept is "the

ideological antithesis of the educational and social movement begun by ex-slaves" (p. 33). The model initially focused on the training of teachers; however, it "employed a unique manual labor routine and an ideology of 'self-help' as the practical and moral foundation of their teacher training process" (p. 33). The point of the program was not necessarily to instill skill in industry, but rather "to work the prospective teachers long and hard so that they would embody, accept, and preach an ethic of hard toil or the 'dignity of labor'" that would allow graduates to "teach the children of the South's distinctive black laboring class" (p. 34). Biebel (1976) asks

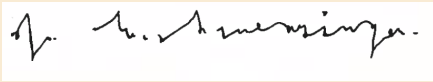
> whether the Board's contribution to the survival and success of particular organizations…and to the demise of others was in the long run in the best interests of the country…It is hard to escape the conviction that the officers and trustees, representing a foundation which by its nature was private, elitist, and paternalistic, could not transcend their collective vested interest in sustaining a social and economic order largely created by their class—all in the name of democracy and the public interest. (pp. 22–23)

Eric Anderson and Alfred Moss (1999) take up a similar critical lens in *Dangerous Donations*, explaining that because the GEB "acquired immense prestige" (p. 5) its agenda for Southern education was adopted by many other philanthropic organizations. For Anderson and Moss, this development was highly problematic as the GEB favored the vocational-only model as opposed to a more classical curriculum and favored White governance of Black schools, in spite of the fact that the Hampton-Tuskegee model of education had gone out of favor by the 1930s. Anderson and Moss criticize the GEB for its pattern of funding the existing, deficient public schools serving African American students in the South rather than devoting their funding towards developing a more effective, independent system that bucked White supremacy in the region or funding already established private schools.

My anger grew as I sat scrolling through reel after reel of microfilm in the South Caroliniana Library. The condescending, paternalistic tone set by the Board in its correspondence with school officials initially felt cloying; however, as the hours and reels went by, the GEB's tone was metaphorically sticking in my craw. The racist nature of the pattern of funding deeply disturbed me. The correspondence was very much of its time: lengthy, with extensive salutations

and substantive prose filling pages. Which is why, when I was scanning through correspondence, one particular letter made me stop. It caught my eye for two reasons: first, the signature at the bottom of the page looked more like a seismograph printout than a signature, nearly filling the bottom of the page in a spikey, almost angry handwriting (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Signature of John E. Swearingen



Note. Figure from title page of Mary Hough Swearingen's memoir of her husband, A Gallant Journey (1950, n.p.).

Second, the letter was brief. It had all of two short paragraphs, four sentences in its entirety. It was a letter from then State Superintendent of Education John E. Swearingen to Wallace Buttrick, Chair of the GEB. Dated January 29, 1921, it read (almost in its entirety):

> Up to this writing the quarterly contribution of the General Education Board…has not come to my desk, You have the absolute right to do as you choose with your own fund. I decline, however, to play the part of the fish dangling at the end your line. Yours Respectfully. (Swearingen, 1921a)

The correspondence was almost shocking. As I would learn, it was not a unique pattern. Just a few days later, February 2, 1921, Swearingen followed up with Buttrick (again, in its entirety) "My letter to you was to protect myself against any misunderstanding of figures when settlement time comes June 30th. If the situation is satisfactory to you, it is perfectly plain to me" (Swearingen, 1921b). Swearingen's ire was not just directed towards Buttrick; in April of that year Swearingen wrote to Abraham Flexner (the same Flexner of the Flexner report, one of the nation's most respected educators):

> If you attach conditions to your donations, such conditions ought to be stipulated at the time the donation is made and ought to accompany the record…I have received three letters from your office that I do not relish, and it is high time for a clear understanding to be arrived at between all parties. The use of your contribution means nothing to me individually, and I cannot afford to be harassed and bedeviled by meddlesome dictation and afterthoughts. (Swearingen, 1921c)

Two things became obvious to me when reviewing this correspondence: first, I

really liked this man. Second, I had to learn more about him. Thus, I launched my major dissertation—a historical biography.

Methodology: Constructing a Life

As Paul Marinari (1986) explains, biographers are tasked with "reassembling the dust" of a person's life (p. 104); they must grapple with "[w]hat strategies shall the biographer use by which to reassemble the dust and reveal the pattern the biographer believes is somewhere in the midst of all that?" (p. 109). Historians and biographers must gather this dust, the raw materials which are similar to pieces of a jigsaw, with an eye of putting them together into a coherent picture. However, while the biographer may have an idea of what the final picture will be, often the reality is markedly different.

Louis M. Smith (1998) suggests that when beginning an archival biography, the writer must address two questions in order: first, is there enough material to write the biography? If the answer to that is yes, then the second question: Where to start (1998, p.159)? As a doctoral student with fewer than three months to gather the bulk of the material, I became an academic scavenger, collecting all the scraps and pieces of the puzzle that might or might not make it into the final analysis.

Answering the first question became something of a mixed bag as I proceeded; my biographical journey started with mixed results. I was successful in the fact that the university library had copies of all state superintendent reports; I was able to spend my nights in the library typing notes and making photocopies, filling binder after binder. There was one unpublished book about Swearingen in the library, focused exclusively on his time in office, that I was able to copy pages from (Dreyfus, 1997). I further purchased a copy of the memoir written by Swearingen's wife that focused more on his personal life and early days in office (Swearingen, M.H., 1950). I, however, was not so successful in my next step when I approached the State Department of Education to request access to their archives. They welcomed me, greeted me in the John Swearingen conference room (with a portrait of him hanging on the wall, Figure 2), and informed me that all correspondence before the 1970s had been destroyed in a flood.

I was able to recreate some of what would have been in the State Department archives, the official correspondence of Swearingen while in office, by going to the State Archive and working my way through the papers of the governors in office during Swearingen's tenure. This proved more time consuming than I anticipated; while some of the governors' papers had been sorted and classified, others were completely jumbled in boxes, thrown in by year. I had to go through hundreds of linear feet of material seeking those needles in the haystack that were correspondence with Swearingen; luckily, I had his signature (and the letterhead of the State Department) to serve as flags. My binders continued to fill; my answer to question one became more and more a resolute "Yes!"

Figure 2
Portrait of John E. Swearingen

Note. Photo courtesy of the author.

I was most successful where it all began: in the South Caroliniana library. When I mentioned my new focus to the friend who started me off on the journey, he was quick to tell me that the family papers were on file there. Another archivist took me on, and I spent my days going through the family papers. Fortunately, these were quite extensive, particularly those around my biographical subject; unfortunately, very little about any of his campaigns or political dealings were included. As the summer went by and my binders filled, my moving date approached. On one of my final days in the archive, I struck up a conversation with the archivist about how the collection came to be. The son of my subject was the one who donated and helped lead the collection. Amazingly, the archivist asked: "Do you want his address?" One emphatic "Yes" later, I was home sending John E. Swearingen, Jr. a letter detailing my project and providing both my current and new addresses and phone numbers. As I would learn, Swearingen Jr.'s success exceeded his father's (Figure 3). He became an engineer and was a co-inventor of the catalytic converter. He became president of Standard Oil (another Rockefeller connection, now part of BP), and often was seen as the "face of big oil" during the gas crisis of the 1970s. After retirement, he was appointed to head the US National Bank by Ronald Reagan. The Molinaroli College of Engineering and Computing at the University of

South Carolina is housed in the Swearingen Engineering Center, named after Swearingen Jr.

In July 2002 I moved from South Carolina to Wyoming and was still in the process of unpacking the house and purchasing new furniture when our new home phone rang: an unfamiliar voice asked for me and then asked if I would be interested in meeting with Mr. Swearingen to talk about his father. As it turned out, Mr. Swearingen summered in Saratoga, Wyoming…a short drive from my new address. The next day I got a map and made my first drive over the Snowy Range Mountains to Saratoga, where I was fortunate to conduct the first of two interviews. We spent hours reflecting on his life and what he knew of his father; at times he grew deeply emotional, moved to tears as he told some stories. He also provided the answer to a question that I had not been able to answer: Why did Swearingen decide to abort his gubernatorial race? It was Swearingen Jr. who told me of the Klan connection, a fact I was able to assert through triangulation of data.

Figure 3
John E. Swearingen, Jr.

Note. Photo courtesy of and with permission from estate of John E. Swearingen, Jr.

During our first interview, Swearingen Jr. kept referring to a family photo album that was at his Chicago residence, wishing I could see it. After transcribing the interview, I performed a member check and sent him the transcript; shortly, he returned it with some revisions and a suggestion that I meet him in Chicago for pictures. A few weeks later, I received a phone call from his secretary making arrangements for me to meet with him again and look at the family album. I found an inexpensive hotel near to his office building, the Aon Center, booked a budget flight to the Windy City, packed my recording equipment and a suit and tie, and flew out for our second interview. I was able to pose some follow-up questions and get photographs of the photos in the family album. After another couple of hours, he invited me to lunch—in the executive dining room at the top of the building. Sadly, it was my last contact with him; he passed away soon after our meeting.

I had my material; it then became time to move into Smith's second question, where to start? Throughout that year I blocked out three days a week

on my schedule to focus on writing my dissertation. As I got to know Swearingen more, I experienced much the same level of relationship building with my subject as described by Lynda Anderson Smith (1998) …though I would not go so far as to compare it to falling in love. However, I did experience "exhilaration, excitement, attraction, and then the joy of discovering the two of you agree on many important matters," that we shared some beliefs, ideas, and interests. Over time, I truly began to "identify with your subject, when trust, commitment, and even ownership begin to develop and grow" (L.A. Smith, 1998, pp. 195–196).

I set out to portray what Leon Edel (1986) describes as "the figure under the carpet, the evidence in the reverse of the tapestry, the life-myth of a given mask" (p. 24). As Edel explains, archival research allows us to "wade simply and securely through paper and photocopies and related concrete material"; however, "in our quest of the life-myth we read on dangerous speculative and inferential ground, ground that requires all of our attention, all of our accumulated resources" (p. 24). My quest to discover Swearingen's figure under the carpet led me to set aside my anger towards the GEB. Doing so allowed me to focus on exploring of the tapestry of Southern history in the early 20th century; Swearingen's life definitely proved to be the Edel's reverse of this tapestry.

Biography: John Eldred Swearingen

The biographical sketch that follows is the result of my in-depth archival research and discussions. Swearingen was one of the most influential educators in South Carolina's history, crafting and shepherding through more pieces of educational legislation than any other individual serving in his office before or since. Serving as State Superintendent of Education from 1909 through 1922, Swearingen directly oversaw major reform efforts on both state and national levels; he tried to raise South Carolina's schools to at or above average regional standards; he made education an ongoing priority for the State Legislature; and, most remarkably, he actively campaigned for equal educational opportunities for disenfranchised populations such as millworkers, their children, and African Americans (Janak, 2009; Janak, 2014; Janak & Moran, 2010). The fact that he worked towards these amazing personal and academic goals while adventitiously blind (someone who becomes blind during their life

as opposed to being born blind) makes his story all the more remarkable (Janak, 2010; Janak, 2014). He remained blunt and direct in his communication throughout his career, something that earned him both staunch supporters and bitter enemies. As his wife would later recount in her memoir, "I am not sure that the word 'tact' was a part of Mr. Swearingen's vocabulary. 'At best,' he said, 'tact is usually a method of evasion and confusion—not far removed from lying'" (M.H. Swearingen, p. 112).

Swearingen's life proved a fascinating study for many reasons. First, it provides an analysis of how society treated people with disabilities—and what can happen when someone does not subscribe to these societal definitions of disability. Second, Swearingen was reforming the public schools during one of the most interesting, oversimplified, and overlooked periods in their history: the Progressive Era. Indeed, Swearingen proved that progressivism did not just take place in Chicago and New York, and that the definition of progressive was not just bound to temporality but also to regionalism. Third, Swearingen's political career is both a model and cautionary tale. Never one to let politics get in the way of doing his job, yet ultimately undone by opposing machinations, Swearingen's career proves particularly poignant in today's political climate. Fourth, in addition to his contribution to the field of education in South Carolina, Swearingen's life can serve as an exemplar of progressive masculinity.

Swearingen was born January 9, 1875, near the town of Trenton located in Edgefield County, South Carolina. The Swearingen family were among landowning elites in the state. He was the son of John Cloud Swearingen, a confederate veteran and Red Shirt Rider, and Anna Tillman Swearingen, sister of U.S. Senator Benjamin "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman, another who waved the Red Shirt. Red Shirt Riders were similar to members of the Ku Klux Klan in their actions directed at suppressing the African American population of the state. However, they did not wear white robes or hoods, opting instead for red shirts representing the bloodshed during the Civil War. They focused more on political purposes, leading the charge to expunge the Reconstruction-era state legislature at the end of pistols and bayonets.

By contrast Anna was widely recognized for her exceptional intellect, hosting a private day school for her and her neighbor's children. The family farm grew cotton and hosted a variety of domesticated animals, including goats,

pigs, cows, horses, mules, chickens, turkeys, and hunting dogs. Swearingen grew up equal parts avid outdoorsman and student. Possessed with an athletic physique, he would hunt and fish, as well as play sports with his younger brother. However, this love of the outdoors significantly altered his life. He was blinded in a hunting accident in 1888, when he was trying out a new shotgun that was a thirteenth birthday gift. Swearingen tripped over a log; the shotgun accidentally discharged through his hand and spread buckshot throughout his face. At the time, doctors could not remove most of the buckshot; he endured occasional pain from these facial injuries the rest of his life.

Swearingen never allowed himself the luxury of self-pity or doubt. His mother, ever the educator, would not stand to see her son go on helplessly. She began a strict program of re-education for him, beginning with having him re-learn to perform simple household chores such as lighting stove fires, bringing in firewood, fetching water, and tending the extensive family garden. She advanced his training to include proper table manners, the techniques of which Swearingen would later use as a teacher of the blind. Swearingen was always athletically inclined, so next she had him re-learn activities such as basic exercises, acrobatics, wrestling, and horseback riding. As Swearingen was re-mastering household duties and activities, his mother continued his education by reading to him.

His academic life outside the home began with one year spent in the Georgia Academy for the Blind where Swearingen mastered a set of coping skills. He moved on to the Cedar Springs Institute for the Deaf and Blind of South Carolina, which he attended from 1890 through 1893. Swearingen wanted to attend college, particularly the South Carolina College (now the University of South Carolina), but his application was rejected due to his blindness. In an effort to overcome the college's perception that he was intellectually incapable, Swearingen made a formal appeal to the president and board of trustees of the college, who granted him provisional admission in 1895: Swearingen had to provide his own guide and readers for his textbooks, and any sign that he could not keep up with the other students would result in his being asked to withdraw from the college.

Much to the surprise of everyone involved (except Swearingen), he excelled in all of his coursework; records of his academic achievements and awards stood unbroken from his graduation in 1899 through becoming the

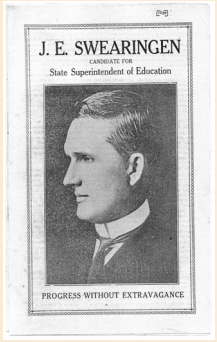
University of South Carolina into the 1950s (M.H. Swearingen, pp. 13 & 48). By the time Swearingen graduated from the college in 1899 he was amazing his fellow students with his feats (Figure 4). He could walk unassisted anywhere on campus with no difficulty and could identify all 200 students on campus by voice. He was so skilled in mathematics that he performed math recitations in front of the whole faculty and college president. Students volunteered to study with him to improve their own grades. He was honored by the president of the institution at graduation for his academic excellence (M.H. Swearingen, p. 45).

Figure 4
John E. Swearingen, Graduate of the South Carolina College

Note. Photo courtesy of and with permission from estate of John E. Swearingen, Jr.

Upon graduation, Swearingen returned to the Cedar Springs Institute for the Deaf and Blind as a teacher. However, the school did not appeal to the college graduate; he frequently complained in letters home about the low expectations of the students by faculty, and the rural location not allowing students life experiences. However, Swearingen developed a skill for public speaking during these years, addressing educational topics with a variety of civic groups in the area. He became a passionate teacher with a reputation for being tough and compassionate with students. As is typical in education when the best teachers are plucked to become administrators, Swearingen rose to become principal of the blind department, then superintendent of the entire school.

Figure 5
Swearingen State Superintendent Campaign Flyer



Note. Photo courtesy of the Swearingen Family Papers, South Caroliniana Library.

After eight years in Cedar Springs, persuaded by friends and family, Swearingen ran for the office of State Superintendent of Education (Figure 5). Writing to a friend, Swearingen wrote that some of his friends and family members had requested him to make a run for the office. He believed himself qualified by taste and training and wrote that even if he was to lose the

election, he didn't "think I shall have occasion to regret the work put into the campaign" (Swearingen, 1908). The campaign was long and grueling, occurring in the heat of the summer, and expensive, far beyond the means of a normal teacher; fortunately, Swearingen was the son of privilege. Swearingen balanced the populist politics of the time (championed by his uncle, "Pitchfork Ben," who took Swearingen under his wing), while being gender and race inclusive. He won his first race and held office from 1909 to 1922.

While in office, Swearingen advanced education more than any other superintendent in the state's history. He fought to increase funding for schools, set a minimum length for the school year with compulsory attendance, and created teacher certification standards. He focused on opportunities for millworkers and their children, partnering with advocate Wil Lou Gray to advance adult literacy; they coauthored the tract *Midsummer Drive Against Illiteracy for White Schools* which was subtitled "Let South Carolina Secede from Illiteracy" (Gray & Swearingen, 1920). However, the most powerful contradiction of Swearingen's career is observed in his attitude toward race. A social traditionalist, Swearingen was raised in a racist state, the son and nephew of slave owners; however, he also encouraged the colored schools of South Carolina more so than any previous State Superintendent. Swearingen was described to GEB Board member Wallace Buttrick as "quite a progressive person in favor of education for the negro and he much encourages the idea" (Dana, 1916). Even though Swearingen was working in the era of *Plessy vs Ferguson* (1896), he fought hard for educational opportunities for both races (Dreyfus, 2). In part, Swearingen was successful due to the infusion of money from the GEB; despite his almost disrespectful correspondence with the Board, they funded several positions in the state department and at the University of South Carolina that helped Swearingen move education in the Palmetto State into the 20th Century.

Swearingen held office with little opposition; he was so successful, few tried to run against him, despite the urging of Swearingen's political nemesis Governor Coleman Blease. Blease was the exact opposite of Swearingen in every way; the two men were natural enemies. Their animosity was made worse by Blease's hatred of Swearingen's uncle, who used his own popularity in the state to campaign against Blease. In 1922, Swearingen was persuaded to run for

governor. However, as the campaign continued Swearingen was the victim of several unethical political dealings (including false scandals about textbook purchasing and his religion). Ultimately a friend informed Swearingen that were the campaign to continue, the Ku Klux Klan would threaten Swearingen. Fearing for the safety of his family, Swearingen left the race and tried to re-enroll as superintendent. However, the voters were not appreciative of this maneuver and Swearingen never held public office again.

The Long-Term Impact of a Chance Encounter

My time spent with two generations of Swearingens launched my academic career. The biography became the lens through which I examined the development of high schools in South Carolina for my dissertation—a topic that appealed to all the disparate members of my committee. As I transitioned from being a high school teacher to an academic, Swearingen's life provided my first peer-reviewed journal publications, launching my career. I was even able to engage in a bit of speculative history, wondering what might have been if South Carolina had Swearingen stayed in office in one journal article (Janak & Moran, 2010). However, there were two unresolved issues that arose during my dissertation that would follow me.

The first issue was the question of why, or what Edel describes as "psycholological evidence" that "enable us to understand what people are really saying behind the faces they put on, behind the utterances they allow themselves to make before the world" (Edel, 24). What was the reason Swearingen so staunchly advocated for marginalized populations? When I began presenting aspects of Swearingen's life at academic conferences, this was the question that came up in every session, and one that I was never able to address satisfactorily. Finally, after one unusually intense grilling session, my interrogator just said, "It's masculinity. You need to look at masculinity." They were correct; masculinity was completely infused throughout Southern culture.

Even though a blind man could not perform traditional masculinity, Swearingen found ways to prove himself as a masculine figure: If he could not take up arms to defend his country, he could use his intellect and wits to improve his society. This included paternalistic attitudes towards the marginalized—which addressed the immediate question as I completed the

book. This masculine lens also was at least part the "why" behind his boldness with the GEB; he was proving his masculinity among other men, even via correspondence. Considering the legacy of northern "carpetbaggers" in the state was still fresh during Swearingen's tenure, his resistance to Northern intrusion was just another mark of Southern masculinity. I had a new framework as I revised the dissertation into what would become my first book, expanding the focus to more national in scope and including critical lenses of masculinity and disability into my examination (Janak, 2014).

The brief encounter at a garage sale led me to the GEB. While the GEB was what led me to Swearingen, it was tertiary in his story. I wanted to go back and do a deeper dive; I wanted a scholarly outlet to vent the anger that still emerged when I thought about them. I told myself that someday I would go back and write a scathing indictment of the Board, showing the racism and pecuniarism that dominated the thinking of the wealthy White men on the Board. Achieving tenure and promotion afforded me the opportunity to finally pursue this line of research. At my university at that time, faculty were entitled to a sabbatical semester the year after achieving tenure and promotion. Of course, the first step in research is the literature review; I found an extensive body of literature that essentially justified the anger I felt going through those microfilm reels all those years ago, arguing in various ways that yes, the men who served on the Board were arguably racist and pecuniary in their funding, particularly when analyzed with a presentist lens. Step two of a literature review is finding the research gap: in this case, the literature focused almost exclusively on the African American funding of schools in the Southeast. I was living in the Rocky Mountain West at the time; why not focus my research accordingly?

I developed a broad research question: Did the GEB funding pattern from the Southeast carry over when looking at the Southwest? Were they just as racist when looking at the indigenous of Oklahoma or the Hispanic of New Mexico as they were with African Americans in South Carolina? I submitted my application to the university to pursue an ambitious research agenda, which was successful. I submitted a pair of grants to help defray the costs of my research, which were not successful. I knew I had to start at the Rockefeller Archive; my application was reflective of my anger. Thanks to their policy on allowing anyone in with a genuine research interest (from academics to conspiracy

theorists from all over the globe), the Rockefeller Archive approved my visit, and the next phase of my research trajectory launched.

I spent a month in the Rockefeller Archives engaging in what Paul Murray Kendall (1986) would describe as mapping boundaries—seeing what was there and what was not. Every week that went by I was able to narrow my boundaries more—from the West as a whole to the rocky mountain West, eliminating the Pacific and Midwest regions. I chose three states which had significant people whose lives, personally and professionally, benefitted greatly from GEB funding: Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico. I then spent two more months on what I later called my "research road trip," visiting state and university archives in all three states. My positionality changed throughout my research, then shifted back to approaching my original stance (Janak, 2018). My scavenging approach developed in my hectic time researching Swearingen served me well; I was able to collect reams of data, documents, photographs, and stories.

Just as Swearingen led to the launch of my career as an academic—and I arguably would not have earned tenure and promotion without him in my life—so too was he instrumental in my promotion to full professor. My archival work has led to several peer reviewed publications and presentations, enough to warrant my promotion. I continue to mine my data, finalizing a collective biography. It is not hyperbole to say that throughout my scholarly career, I have been led by a man who was blind that helped me see stories that are worth telling.

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