

John G. Fee

Born: 1816

Birthplace: Bracken County, Kentucky

John G. Fee (1816-1901) was born in Bracken County. His family members were farmers who owned slaves. Fee was educated at Augusta College in Augusta, Kentucky, before attending the Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati. In 1844 Fee returned to Kentucky and began working as a minister in Lewis County. From Fee's earliest abolition work in the state, proslavery forces attacked him, both physically and in print. Devoted to nonviolence, Fee relied upon Cassius M. Clay, arguably the most famous antislavery Kentuckian, for protection.

In 1853, Clay offered Fee a 10-acre homestead on the edge of the mountains if Fee would take up permanent residence there. Fee accepted and established an anti-slavery church with 13 members on a ridge they named "Berea" after the biblical town whose populace was open-minded and receptive to the gospel (Acts 17:10). In 1854, Fee built his home upon the ridge. In 1855, a one-room school, which also served as a church on Sundays, was built on a lot contributed by a neighbor.

Berea's first teachers were recruited from Oberlin College, an anti-slavery stronghold in Ohio. Fee saw his humble church-school as the beginning of a sister institution "which would be to Kentucky what Oberlin is to Ohio, anti-slavery, anti-caste, anti-rum, anti-sin." A few months later, Fee wrote in a letter, "we...eventually look to a college -- giving an education to all colors, classes, cheap and thorough."

Fee worked with other community leaders to develop a constitution for the new school, which he and Principal J. A. R. Rogers insisted should ensure its interracial character. It also was agreed that the school would furnish work for as many students as possible, in order to help them pay their expenses and to dignify labor at a time when manual labor and slavery tended to be synonymous in the South. Mr. Fee founded Berea College in 1859 as a co-educational institution that would admit men and women, black and white, at a time when slavery was legal in Kentucky. However, a proslavery mob drove Fee out of the state. Fee spent the Civil War years raising funds for the school, and it was not until 1866 that he founded the

school that became Berea College in 1869. During his lifetime, Mr. Fee insisted that blacks and whites, men and women, learn in the same classroom and participate in the same social clubs and activities. He said that racial equality should be preached and practiced. Until his death in 1901 Fee opposed segregation and worked for racial equality.

Berea's commitment to interracial education was overturned in 1904 by the Kentucky Legislature's passage of the Day Law, which prohibited education of black and white students together. When the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Day Law, Berea set aside funds to assist in the establishment of Lincoln Institute, a school located near Louisville, for black students. When the Day Law was amended in 1950 to allow integration above the high school level, Berea was the first college in Kentucky to reopen its doors to black students.

Sources: The Filson Historical Society
Kentucky Commission on Human Rights
Berea College