

## About Us

### Our Mission is Timeless: SEF's Donors and Legacy

Lynn Huntley, SEF President



*Philanthropist  
George Peabody*

In 1867, George Peabody, a merchant and financier from Massachusetts, set aside \$2 million to establish the Peabody Education Fund, the first educational philanthropy in the United States. Its aim was to “benefit the destitute areas of the South,” a region torn by the Civil War, by supporting educational efforts for “children of the common people.” Through this gift and another made later, Peabody hoped that educational opportunity could be extended to the people in the South who needed it the most. Among Peabody Fund Trustees was Ulysses S. Grant, who joined the Board in 1868.

Inspired by Peabody’s example and the work of the Peabody Fund, in 1882, John Slater, a Connecticut textile industrialist, donated \$1 million to create the Slater Fund, for “the uplifting of the lately emancipated population of the Southern States....” Rutherford Hayes, former President of the United States, was the Chair of the Slater Fund Board of Trustees, comprised largely of northern philanthropists. Atticus Haygood administered the Slater Fund from 1882 to 1891. His successor was J.L.M. Curry, who was also an advisor to the Southern Education Board. He administered the program for the Slater and Peabody Funds.

In 1905, Anna T. Jeanes, the Quaker daughter of a wealthy Philadelphia merchant, donated \$200,000 to the General Education Board to help improve Black rural schools in the South. She later supplemented her gift with \$1 million, creating the Anna T. Jeanes Fund for the Assistance of Rural Schools in the South, commonly known as the “Jeanes Fund.”



*Jeanes Supervisors: Educators with  
a Timeless Mission*

Guided by James Dillard, the Jeanes Fund supported teachers to do industrial and extension work and county agents to improve rural homes and schools and promote public support for Black education.



*Of John Slater's gift, his eulogist remarked: "It is a noble thing to break a slave's fetter, but it is equally noble to help the slave to manhood, and give his race a future".*



*Virginia Randolph*

An offshoot of the Jeanes Fund, the Virginia Randolph Fund was established in 1936 in memory of the first Jeanes teacher, Virginia Randolph. Randolph had traveled all over the South providing oversight and training to Black teachers and more generally helping poor communities meet a variety of pressing needs.

Though created at different times, these four funds shared a common goal: to broaden and improve the quality of education in the American South. The funds were combined in 1937 to become the Southern Education Foundation.

All of SEF's donors were white and from the North, but their empathy was neither color-coded nor geographically constrained. Peabody was concerned with education for the poor of all races. The other donors were, in the language of the times, primarily concerned with the "Negro Problem" and the need to address it. W.E.B. DuBois once noted that many Whites saw Blacks as a "problem people" rather than "people with problems," many not of their own making.

While the philanthropic impulses of each donor may have been animated more by a sense of noblesse oblige than affirmation of the fundamental equality of all human beings irrespective of "race," their gifts created an important legacy.

It is now a new millennium. Today, many national foundations have assets that range in the hundreds of millions of dollars, and the gifts made by SEF's founding donors may seem comparatively small. But over the years those gifts have yielded big, positive consequences for more than 137 years.

SEF believes that the health of the South as a region, indeed, of the nation, depends upon ensuring that everyone--irrespective of station in life--has a fair chance to develop his or her talents and contribute to the common good. Broadening access to educational opportunity is essential, if the South is to achieve economic growth and added prosperity, heal racial divisions, reduce inequality, and create shared and workable communities built on trust, cooperation and civility.