

A RELIC OF BARBARISM

The Mother's Version of the Affair.

A RELIC OF BARBARISM.

Whipping of the Coleman Girl.

ANOKA UNION CLIPPINGS

FEBRUARY 1886

THE CASE OF SUSANNA COLEMAN



Susanna walked a half mile and cross the Rum River Bridge from Franklin School to Anoka High School to meet with Prof. Cummings

CLASSMATES DESCRIBED BEGGING & CRYING LASTING NINE MINUTES

ANOKA — On February 2, 1886, Susanna Coleman was instructed to appear in the Anoka High School Principal's office at 9 a.m. the following morning. A week later, the *Anoka Union* started a conversation that would last a month in the local newspapers with just five scant lines: "Considerable talk is being indulged in certain quarters over Prof. Cummings punishing a negro female pupil named Coleman. It is reported that more force was used than was necessary."

Accounts of the incident varied. Susanna's mother, Betsey Coleman, responded publicly by writing an eloquent letter to the *Union* -- an act of advocacy at a time when society often dismissed Black women's voices. According to the letter, Susanna's "awful crime" was chewing a piece of paper and as punishment, Cummings hit her hands with a horsewhip until they bled. The *Herald* responded on February 20 with derision, closing their article by saying, "let it [the *Union*] be careful to retain a little common sense."

Cummings didn't dispute that he whipped Susanna. In a response printed in the *Union* he clarified that "Mrs. Coleman's daughter was *moderately* whipped" for "*repeated and persistent disobedience*" [italics original to the text] and reported he didn't notice drawing any blood. The *Herald* allied with the Professor and his discipline of "a few small strokes on each hand from a small riding whip."

Granville Pease, editor of the *Anoka Union*, spearheaded this community conversation by giving column inches to each party and adding his opinions on corporal punishment in lengthy editorials. He calls it "a relic of barbarism" and declares he has "the severest censure for any teacher who whips any pupil in our public school." This conversation continued for another hundred years until Minnesota banned it in 1989.

WHAT ARE THE **POWER STRUCTURES** IN THIS STORY AND HOW DO THEY INFLUENCE EVERYONE'S RESPONSES?

PRINCIPAL POSITION OF POWER

JOTHAMIN HENRY CUMMINGS graduated from Harvard in 1870. After working as a teacher and Principal in Connecticut, Indiana, and Wisconsin, he moved to Anoka and took the position of Principal in 1883.

This case didn't cut his time in Anoka short. Cummings stayed in his position until 1888/1889. Two years later, he stepped away from teaching due to his increasing loss of hearing.

THE COLEMAN FAMILY

Few records exist about the Coleman family's life before they moved to Anoka. The information available to researchers includes newspaper accounts, census records, and Betsey's (Nancy Elizabeth) obituary in the *Anoka Herald* in 1895. The newspaper noted that "she was taken from her mother when only four years old and sold" into slavery, where she eventually became "the property of a hotel keeper in Missouri." Sometime after the Civil War, Betsey moved to Anoka with her son and married her second husband, William Coleman; they had three surviving daughters together: Zephie, Susanna, and Mary. William worked as a teamster and hostler while Betsey kept house and worked as a wash woman.

Following the family through historical records becomes confusing for several reasons. Not only do their ages vary by 25-35 years, but Betsey, according to the census, went from literate in 1870 to illiterate in 1880. Further contradiction exists in her letter to the editor printed in 1886.

1871 Susanna Coleman is born in an unknown city in Minnesota.

1880 Susanna's parents work as a Groom and a Wash Woman. The census taker marks both adults as unable to read or write.

Betsey, William	B. 21 65				
Betsey	B. 2 67	Wife			Anok. Herald
John C.	B. 2 11	Son			Dr. Short
Susanna	B. 2 9	Son			
Martha A.	B. 2 15	Son			
John C.	B. 2 18	Son			Prof. Cummings
Nancy A.	B. 2 22	Son			Anok. Herald

1886 Susanna, 14, attends Franklin School. It's unknown if she continues her education.

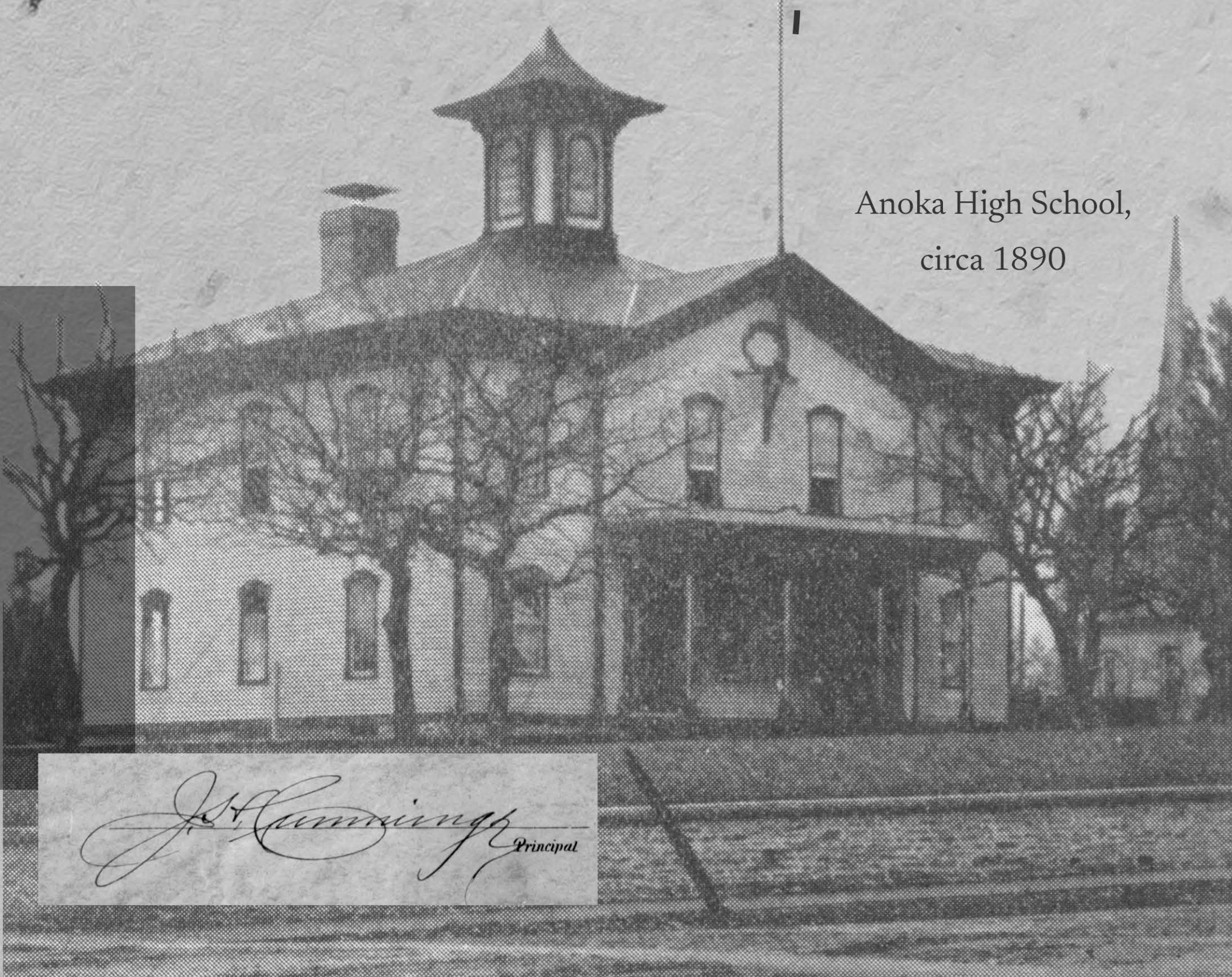
BETSEY COLEMAN'S FULL LETTER

Printed in the *Anoka Union*, February 17, 1886

Anoka, Feb. 15th, 1886.
MR. PEASE:—In last week's *Union* you speak of a negro girl, who was punished by Prof. Cummings. By your leave and for the benefit of the people of Anoka, I will state the circumstances. The girl is 14 years old and was sent home Tuesday night from school, with a sealed note and ordered to report to Prof. Cummings at 9 o'clock Wednesday morning, which she did. He took her into his office, closed the transom, drew down the curtains, took a horse whip, and lashed her hands 'till they bled. When he couldn't hit her hands he would lash her back. Her hands were so sore and swollen that she could not wear mittens, and was obliged to walk from the High school to the Franklin, bare handed, on one of the coldest mornings this winter. There was another girl in the office at the same time who begged him to stop. Some of Miss Burt's pupils say it was 9 minutes from the time she began to scream and cry before he stopped whipping her. The awful crime she committed was chewing a piece of paper in school. I expect to have my children punished when they do wrong, but do not want it done in such a brutal manner.
MRS. Wm. COLEMAN.

1895 Susanna, 23, works as a servant in Anoka.

1900 Now working as a dressmaker, Susanna lives with her sisters and brother-in-law in Minneapolis.



Anoka High School, circa 1890

TIME & PLACE

1886 ANOKA

This decade saw a 57 percent increase in population, ushering in a new era of construction and change. The fire of 1884 destroyed much of downtown Anoka, which residents not only rebuilt but expanded with a new City Hall (1885) and Library (1893). Professionals like Dr. Flora Aldrich opened offices, and the milling and transportation industries continued their boom. Residents belonged to various social and fraternal groups, creating a vibrant community, as evidenced in the local newspapers.

NEWSPAPER WAR

Anoka's two competing print publications took opposing views on the Coleman incident. Granville Pease, editor of the *Anoka Union*, covered the story over multiple weeks, while Alvin Eastman, editor of the *Anoka Herald*, didn't agree with the stir it had caused.

Union. FEB 17: No principal or teacher in this age, has a right to whip a pupil until "her hands were so sore and swollen..." It is a relic of barbarism that should receive severe censure.

HERALD. FEB 20: The editor of the Union has had his sympathies unduly excited by a whipping incident... Let not the Union's heart be troubled, and while it is stamping out the last "relics of barbarism" let it be careful to retain a little common sense."

Union. FEB 24: Let the Herald understand that it will never be charged with having any common sense as long as it tries to excuse Prof. Cummings ...

HERALD. FEB 27: The Union wastes a column of its valuable (?) space in commenting ... and it is an absurdity for the Union to try and create a sensation over this matter... it would be the graceful thing for the Union to remain silent.

Union. MARCH 3: The Union is very much obliged for the advice given by the Herald to keep still. Can't possibly do it, we have lived long enough in this world to have a mind of our own...[and] we shall speak when we see fit.

SUSANNA'S STORY CHALLENGES THE POWER OF PRINT

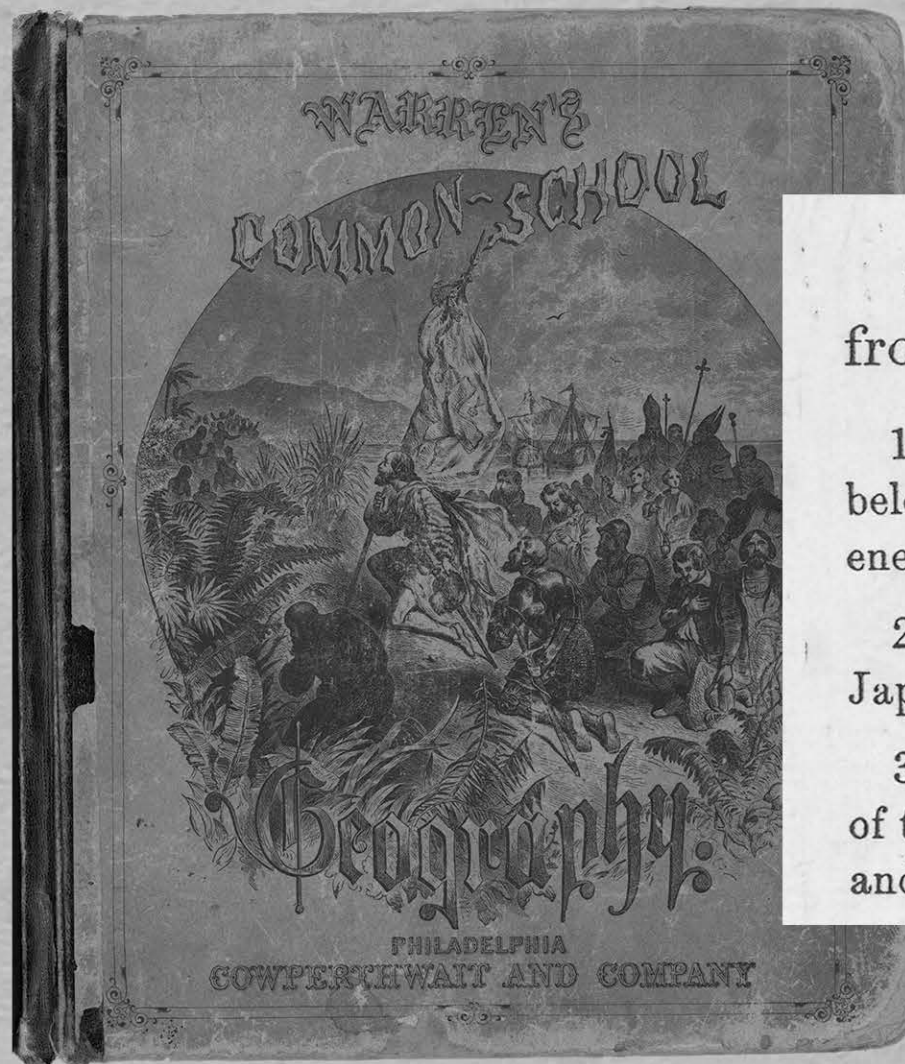
DEFIANCE VS COMPLIANCE

The social norms and laws of the 19th century dictated that women, especially Black women, and girls, occupied a negligible and often invisible role. By printing Susanna's story in the newspaper, Pease validated her experience and challenged the community's assumptions.

At the same time, curriculum authors produced classroom materials advocating for the continuation of white supremacy. Students like Susanna used these textbooks to shape their understanding of the world.

HOW WOULD IT FEEL TO READ THIS TEXT BOOK TODAY?

An excerpt from Warren's Common School Geography textbook, published in 1880 and used in Anoka Schools.



3. Mankind is divided into five varieties, or races, differing from each other by certain characteristic features.

1. The **Caucasian**, or **White race**.—Most of the nations of Europe and America belong to this race. The Caucasian race is superior to all others in intelligence, energy, and courage.
2. The **Mongolian**, or **Yellow race**, is found chiefly in Asia. The Chinese and Japanese belonging to the Mongolian race.
3. The **Ethiopian**, or **Black race**, includes all the natives of Africa, except those of the northern part; the natives of Australia, and some of the neighboring islands, and the negroes of America.

THESE EVENTS ARE NOT JUST ABOUT THE PAST THEY ARE ABOUT OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO SHAPE THE FUTURE

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