

Thomas W. Cardozo (1838-1881)

**Reconstruction-Era Educator,
Journalist, Politician and Target of
White Supremacists**

This print was made by S. Anderson in
New Orleans in 1876.

Anderson, S. *Thomas W. Cardozo*. 1876.
Photographic print. Library of Congress
Prints and Photographs Division.
[https://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3b4
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The Life of Thomas W. Cardozo: (1838–1881)

1838: Thomas Whitmarsh Cardozo was born in Charleston, South Carolina, on December 19, to Isaac Nunez Cardozo, from a prominent Sephardic Jewish family, and Lydia Weston, a formerly enslaved woman of mixed race

1855: Isaac Cardozo dies; Thomas leaves school to work as an apprentice

1857: Thomas moves to New York to train as a teacher at the Newburgh Collegiate Institute, leaving before graduation when the Civil War breaks out in 1861

1861: Thomas begins his teaching career in New York

1861(?): Thomas marries Laura J. Williams, a Brooklyn-born fellow teacher and musician of mixed race

1864: Thomas is principal of the Colored School in Flushing

1865: The Cardozos move to Charleston, where Thomas is appointed supervisor of the schools for formerly enslaved people run by the American Missionary Association (AMA)

1866: Thomas is replaced with his brother Francis after the AMA becomes aware of Thomas's affair with a student while in New York

1866-1872: The Cardozos began a peripatetic life, teaching in Baltimore, Maryland; Syracuse, New York; Elizabeth City, North Carolina, and Vicksburg, Mississippi, supported by the Freedmen's Bureau and other funders

1872: The Cardozos move to Vicksburg, Mississippi, where Thomas begins his political career in as circuit court clerk for Warren County

1873-1876: Cardozo serves as State Superintendent of Education in Mississippi. He is targeted by white Southern Democrats and is forced to resign, ending his political career

1876: The Cardozos move to Newton, Massachusetts, where Thomas works for the Post Office

1881: Thomas dies at the age of 42

T.W. Cardozo as a Politician and Journalist

Cardozo wrote for the Republican press, including the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* in 1868 and 1869. Under the pen name Civis, he wrote commentaries reflecting on his own experiences in government in Reconstruction-era Mississippi for the *New National Era*, a Washington-based newspaper run by J. Sella Martin and Frederick Douglass. He was also active as a civil rights organizer and in 1873 was an elected delegate to the National Equal Rights Convention in Washington, D.C.

The Republican Party at the time was allied with the anti-slavery and civil rights movements. The Democratic Party became favored by white conservatives looking to regain power as the Reconstruction era ended. In Mississippi, white Southern Democrats developed what became known as the Mississippi Plan, a program of organized violence and voter suppression against Black citizens and their white Republican supporters. Black people in positions of power, including Thomas Cardozo, were targeted.

Cardozo's service as State Superintendent of Education in Mississippi from 1873-1876 was disrupted by such targeting. In 1874, Cardozo was accused by white Democrat opponents of having committed financial crimes during his time as circuit court clerk. The first trial, in 1875, ended with a hung jury; a retrial was scheduled for 1876. On July 4, 1875, a mob attacked a meeting at which Cardozo was to speak. Street fighting broke out, and several members of the Black community were killed or injured. Sympathetic white colleagues helped Cardozo escape the city. In February 1876, Cardozo was impeached for alleged embezzlement connected to his duties as superintendent. He resigned on March 22, 1876, in exchange for the charges being dropped. Cardozo's political career was over. The Cardozos moved to Newton, Massachusetts, where Thomas worked for the Postal Service until his death in 1881, at the age of 42.

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[Note: Newspapers.com requires sign-in, available at many libraries.]

T.W. Cardozo: Commentary on the Sources

The historiography of T.W. Cardozo is problematic. The biography of Cardozo by the Texas historian and politician Euline Williams Brock is highly critical of Cardozo's character and his conduct as a civil servant. This tone continued in the dictionary entry compiled by William L. Richter. Brock and Richter, the main authors cited in the Wikipedia page for Cardozo, have been widely cited by other scholars. T.W. Cardozo also appears tangentially in the much more prolific scholarship on his brother, Francis L. Cardozo, an educator and politician in South Carolina who was also persecuted after Reconstruction.

Newspaper accounts purporting to present the details of Cardozo's alleged perpetration of mail fraud and embezzlement should be viewed with a degree of skepticism. Some of the reports are openly derisive, and the tone generally suggests an agenda on the side of white Southern Democrats. For example, the *Newton Weekly Ledger* (Newton, Mississippi) repeats details from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* article of 1867. The *Brooklyn Eagle/Daily Eagle* was in part an organ of the Democratic Party, which before the Civil War supported the right of Southern states to remain slaveholding.

Other newspapers that covered the Cardozo trial and impeachment included the *Clarion/Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, Mississippi), the *Vicksburg Herald* and the *Weekly Vicksburger*. One of the few newspapers to write in Cardozo's defense was the *Weekly Mississippi Pilot* (Jackson). The considerable volume of coverage can be read in part by searching Newspapers.com, as follows: Keywords: "Cardozo", "Cardoza"; Location: Mississippi.

[Note: Newspapers.com requires sign-in, available at many libraries. Because Cardozo's name was often misspelled as "Cardoza," that spelling should be searched as well.]