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## **"Educators of the Public Taste": Post-Civil War Textbook Publishing and the American History Textbook**

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**“Educators of the Public Taste”: Post-Civil War Textbook Publishing and the American  
History Textbook**

**by  
Andrea T. Traietti  
HIS 490 History Honors Thesis**

**Department of History  
Providence College  
2020-2021**



*For Mom and Dad*

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*Andrea T. Traietti  
Providence, RI 2021*

## INTRODUCTION

American history has long been my favorite subject to study. Growing up and attending public school in the suburbs of Boston, my education in American history started early—as early as kindergarten—with reenactments of the first Thanksgiving followed by field trips to nearby museums or historical sites like Plymouth Plantation. Later years brought poems and songs about Paul Revere, stories about the Boston Tea Party, walks along the Freedom Trail, and tours of the Massachusetts State House. Though I was lucky to live in an area where I often got to see the history I was learning come to life, what I picture when I reflect on my history education is not class field trips or creative interpretations of historical events. The first image that comes to mind is of the utterly massive textbook that I lugged back and forth between home and school for the two years that I took AP United States History in high school. Assigned what felt like pages upon pages of reading every night, I hardly ever left school without that textbook, and when it was in my backpack, I struggled to fit anything else in it.

When I thought of the weightiness of that textbook during those years, it was because the book physically weighed me down. Now when I consider the gravity of that book, I realize that there was an entirely different kind of weight to it: that textbook, and really all history textbooks, are a source and symbol of power. Few are completely free from bias and thus they are, whether intentionally or not, political texts. Each editorial choice—from subject matter, to the arrangement and order of topics, to the primary sources included—says something about the time period a certain text comes from, the predominant popular or social views at the time, and the audience that the text aimed to educate. What people, places, and events were considered important enough to include? In what order do they appear and how much attention is devoted to

each individual subject? Do the primary sources included reflect the diversity of the United States, or are they limited in perspective? The content included in history textbooks forms the answers to these questions and represents deliberate choices made by the authors of the text. It is these choices that make history textbooks more than simply a vehicle of education about the history of the United States; as the primary method that so many American students come to understand the history and traditions of their own country, textbooks serve a civic and social purpose as well. This thesis tells the story of such choices.

It is within this context that American history textbooks and curricula have long been the battleground for political debates about how we should approach our own history as a nation. But especially right now, as the country moves through one of the largest civil rights movements in recent years and pursues a national reckoning on the issue of race, questions about how we understand, teach, learn, and celebrate history have taken center stage in politics and are at the forefront of so many Americans' minds. The inspiration for this project came in large part from a desire to understand and actively participate in the national discourse on race and racism in the United States, especially as this conversation has expanded and intensified during the past year in particular after the murder of George Floyd. Analyses of and arguments for America's need to reckon with its past have long been a component of academic writing on the subject of racism and the Jim Crow era. However, noticeably in the past several years, arguments for this kind of reckoning have crossed into more widely accessible and public spheres. Literature like the *New York Times*' "1619 Project," speaks to the manner in which arguments for actively engaging with our own history have become more popularized—and also to the way that the educational resources needed to understand this approach to history have become more easily available and accessible to those outside of academia. Evidence of this crossover was abundant this past



summer, as the longstanding controversial debate about the removal of Confederate statues and memorials took center stage, drawing people from across the political spectrum into a conversation about how we remember the past and who we choose to commemorate.

My project began to take shape after reading an article about these Confederate statues, which clarified a common misconception that the statues were erected in the years following the end of the Civil War; rather, the vast majority of the statues appeared much later—between the 1890s and 1950s, lining up with the era of Jim Crow segregation. The group responsible for a massive number of these monuments was the United Daughters of the Confederacy, a coalition of white women whose goal was to hearken back to and preserve the cause of the South in the Civil War, especially as the Civil Rights Movement began to gain traction. Research into the group revealed a number of other initiatives they promoted, including a pro-Confederate textbook campaign and the creation of a sub-organization, the Children of the Confederacy. That children were the target of these campaigns, and literature and education their medium, struck me as an area to investigate further. I intended to write my thesis on these Southern history textbooks, but after diving into sources, it was clear that this topic had been covered extensively already. As I searched for a way to contribute something original to this ongoing conversation, I thought that perhaps by doing a direct primary source comparison of these Southern history textbooks with their Northern counterparts, I would be able to highlight the Southern bias in new and poignant ways. What I found, however, was that these Northern history textbooks presented their own set of issues; while free, for the most part, from rhetoric aimed at conveying the Civil War as the South's Lost Cause, these textbooks were also deeply flawed on the issue of race in different ways.

To understand, first and foremost, the narratives relayed in Southern history textbooks, I turned to study Jim Crow more broadly and the roots and development of the Lost Cause narrative. I began with Vann C. Woodward's *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, followed by Grace Elizabeth Hale's *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*, which builds on Woodward's groundbreaking text, and David W. Blight's *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*.

Originally published in 1955, Vann C. Woodward's *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* is still widely regarded as the cornerstone of scholarship on the Jim Crow era and segregation. At the time of the text's initial publication, Woodward's thesis was groundbreaking; since then, Woodward's ideas have continued to shape the field and have inspired other scholars and historians to elaborate on his evidence and arguments. Woodward begins by refuting a common understanding of the history of segregation at the time: that segregation grew naturally out of slavery and took root immediately following the overthrow of Reconstruction.<sup>1</sup> However, Woodward argues that for nearly two decades, competing ideologies of conservatism and southern radicalism prevented the South from embracing what he calls "extreme racism." During this time, Black Americans actually voted in relatively large numbers.<sup>2</sup> However, as white Southerners struggled to reconcile their own political differences, African Americans were "pressed into service as a sectional scapegoat in the reconciliation of estranged white classes and the reunion of the Solid South."<sup>3</sup> "The only formula powerful enough to accomplish that," says Woodward, "was the magical formula of white supremacy."<sup>4</sup> With the Northern presence having

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<sup>1</sup> Woodward, C. V. (2006). *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. New York: Oxford University Press. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 65.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

faded away in the South, white Southerners met little resistance as they used the oppression of African Americans as a means to unify the white South and create a new social order.

Woodward's argument correcting the chronology of Jim Crow is important because it paints segregation as a man-made *construct* rather than a natural social progression. Portraying segregation and Jim Crow as a purposefully designed system thus assigns far more agency to those actors in the South—and it makes each narrative constructed by white Southerners appear all the more purposeful and powerful.

One historian who builds off of Woodward's argument is Grace Elizabeth Hale, who in *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* advances Woodward's thesis by explaining that through the process of segregation, white Southerners not only succeeded in 'othering' Black Americans, but also in creating a new identity of white superiority for themselves. In other words, not only was segregation a purposeful design, but whiteness itself—white supremacy and white superiority, specifically—was also a carefully constructed, man-made identity. With reference to Woodward in the text, Hale makes the case that "the Civil War violently, convulsively produced the need to narrate new foundations," "to mediate the ruptures of modernity" that had split the New South.<sup>5</sup> According to Hale, "it was racial identity that became the paramount spatial mediation of modernity within the newly reunited nation." Race itself, she says "became the crucial means of ordering the newly enlarged meaning of America."<sup>6</sup> Hale describes the same kind of Southern factionalism as Woodward, and cites divisions within Southern society not only as a reason why white Southerners began 'othering' African Americans, but also why they turned to their own whiteness as a symbol of unification

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<sup>5</sup> Hale, G. E. (1999). *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. New York, NY: Vintage Books. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 7

and power and to create “new collective identities to replace older, more individual and local groundings of self.”<sup>7</sup> The result of these new identities was the creation not only of a segregated society, as Woodward explains, but also of Whiteness itself as a source of power and superiority—in the eyes of white Southerners, something that needed defending in the face of a growing Civil Rights Movement. Thus, Hale sets the foundation for understanding the rise of the Lost Cause narrative during this period as a means to forge a new identity and preserve a segregationist society that held white people at the top of the social hierarchy.

Finally, David W. Blight advances this line of thinking in a new direction; through the successful creation of a system that oppressed Black people systemically and severely, white people not only created a new identity for themselves, but by doing so, they redefined their loss in the Civil War as a new victory, this time over Reconstruction. Thus, the Lost Cause took a new form during this time period of increasing segregation and widespread white supremacist violence. In his chapter “The Lost Cause and Causes Not Lost,” Blight says, “throughout the spread of the Lost Cause, at least three elements attained overriding significance: the movement’s effort to write and control the *history* of the war and its aftermath; its use of *white supremacy* as both means and ends; and the place of *women* in its development.”<sup>8</sup> According to Blight, as Reconstruction came to a close and, as Woodward explains, a new segregationist social order came into play, the Lost Cause was “no longer merely explaining defeats”; with the dismantling of Reconstruction, Southerners “had a victory to bequeath to history as well,” thus adding new life to the Lost Cause narrative.<sup>9</sup> Blight outlines how the Lost Cause tone shifted: the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Blight, D. W. (2002). *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American memory*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 270.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 276.

South's loss in the Civil War was merely a matter of military strength; politically and morally, the new segregationist South could still win victory in the United States.<sup>10</sup> Blight concludes,

Just as reminiscence reflects essentially the need to tell our own stories, so too crusades to control history demonstrate the desire to transmit to the next generation a protective and revitalizing story. An almost desperate need for sectional and racial justification compelled the Lost Cause history crusaders to equate virtually any form of Southern defense with 'truth.'"<sup>11</sup>

With this passage, Blight highlights how groups like the United Daughters of the Confederacy, whose goal was to preserve the Lost Cause, took on a new, forward-thinking attitude during the Jim Crow era; their motivation was to shape the future by redefining the past.

This scholarship on the development of the Lost Cause narrative made it clear why it appeared in so many Southern textbooks after the Civil War. But the question of how and why those same narratives, and the same white supremacist tones, often appeared in textbooks that were published even in the North was more complicated. In order to understand, then, why textbooks were flawed in their approach to history on a national scale, I turned primarily to two sources, Richard L. Venezky and Carl F. Kaestle's *A History of the Book in America: Volume 4* and Joseph Robert Moreau's, "Schoolbook Nation: Imagining the American Community in United States History Texts for Grammar and Secondary Schools, 1865-1930." Put together, Moreau and Venezky and Kaestle's research offers an outline of the textbook publishing industry in the post-War era: publishers were contending with intense competition within a monopolistic industry, expanding school enrollments, and polarized public opinion. When synthesized, these

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 277.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 291-292.

factors had an immense and oftentimes direct impact on the industry's publishing practices, and thus on the content of history textbooks in the post-War era.

Using this existing scholarship from Moreau and Venezky and Kaestle in particular as a foundation, I turned my focus to Northern history textbooks of the post-Civil War time period. What I discovered in my sources were the effects of this complex and dynamic textbook publishing industry, which was struggling to produce history texts that could satisfy different regions of a country that had grown sharply divided ideologically. Diving into research on this dynamic, I realized that textbook publishers' attempts to adapt to a changing country and produce texts that could sell nationally were in large part shaping the content of those textbooks. For a time after the Civil War, publishers were slow to acknowledge the war's effects on American life and society, and by avoiding and omitting controversial material, they attempted to produce a text that could satisfy Northern and Southern school districts alike. But as time went on, it became clear that this strategy of producing 'uncontroversial' books for national distribution was no longer yielding profitable results. Pressure mounted particularly in the Southern states, where school committees and advocacy groups were pushing for textbooks that espoused views sympathetic to the Southern cause in the Civil War. No longer able to avoid the controversial, textbook writers and publishers faced it head on, producing texts that were clearly engaged with the Lost Cause narrative taking root in the South.

Chapter One traces this dynamic in two sections: Section I covers the years after the Civil War up to roughly 1890, when publishers avoided including controversial material in the hopes that mass-produced texts could be sold nationally, in the both the North and the South. Section II covers the shift in publishing practices that occurred between 1890-1900, when textbook publishers began engaging directly with controversial material, oftentimes espousing views

sympathetic to the Southern cause, in order to secure publishing contracts particularly in the South, where school enrollment was skyrocketing.

Chapter Two builds off of Chapter One, and branches off of existing scholarship about the educational *impact* of these textbooks—not just the content contained within them. The chapter opens with a discussion about the self-proclaimed purpose of many textbooks of this time period and examines in the first section the educational impact of reading through a lens of historical romanticism. The next section investigates some of the more tangible resources provided in textbooks and by textbook publishing companies—such as reading questions and writing prompts included at the end of textbook chapters or separate teachers’ and students’ guides meant to accompany textbooks. Here, a comparative analysis of these lessons and exercises with what modern scholarship considers to be the best practices for teaching the history of race and racism underscores the educational shortcomings of the textbooks and reading materials from the post-war time period. Chapter Two also explores one of the central limitations and challenges to understanding exactly how these textbooks and reading materials impacted students’ learning: namely, the difficulty of discerning exactly how teachers guided students’ engagement with content.

Overall, this thesis centers on how textbooks of the post-Civil War time period fail to recognize and convey that racism in the United States has always been systemic, embedded institutionally throughout the country, regardless of time period or regional geography. Across the board, these textbooks fail to teach white supremacy in the United States accurately, and they fall short in conveying racism as it truly is: a traceable, continued form of oppression accompanied and perpetuated by repeated failure to address that oppression. This failure has had

tangible and observable effects on American society: generations of Americans have grown up without an accurate understanding of the history of racism in the United States.

These failures are not isolated in time, and they affect our ability to understand and address racism as it currently exists. How can we see the problems in our own society if we fail to recognize them as they existed in our past? As we face a national reckoning on race that is taking place in the midst of a pandemic that has served to underscore pre-existing social and economic inequalities, politicians, journalists, and the American public at large now contend with the question: what is the purpose of history, in general and in the United States? And equally as pressing: what is the best way to teach American history to the next generation— young children in schools across America? In a broad sense, I hope that my project speaks to the importance of asking these questions in the first place, and of formulating evidence-based, careful solutions to these pressing issues. Even more so, I hope that it will serve as a meaningful contribution to the argument that as Americans, we need to reconcile with our past, and that perhaps the most effective way to do so is by analyzing and reforming how we choose to study and remember it.



## CHAPTER ONE

### Post-War Publishing and Textbook Material: An Industry Adapts to a Changing Country

“The youth of the present age are bright and inquisitive,” writes Thomas Francis Donnelly in the preface to his 1885 textbook *A Primary History of the United States for Intermediate Classes*. “They are not to be put off with a mere recital of facts, but want to know the why and the wherefore of every thing.” And so, “recognizing this wholesome propensity,” he concludes his preface with the following note to his readers:

“an attempt has been made throughout this little book to diffuse, in a familiar way, just enough of the philosophy of history to give the young beginner an idea of cause and effect in human affairs. The superior artistic and mechanical execution of this work, on which no expense has been spared, shows that the publishers realize their responsibilities as educators of the public taste.”<sup>12</sup>

Donnelly’s point about textbook publishers’ recognition of their role as “educators of the public taste” raises a few interesting questions for the modern reader. First and foremost, what exactly does that responsibility entail? And how seriously do textbook writers, and more importantly textbook publishers—who are driven in large part by profit—take that responsibility? Today, American educators, parents, and students alike recognize that there is a certain *civic* as well as educational value to learning history, and so questions like these about what exactly should constitute an education in history, and who ought to determine it, are not unfamiliar to us.

But considering the broader historical context and the time period in which Donnelly’s textbook in particular was published, his claim about these “educators of the public taste” is even

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<sup>12</sup> T. F. Donnelly, *A Primary History of the United States, for Intermediate Classes*, (New York: American Book Company, 1919), vi.

more fascinating. As difficult as it might be to answer questions about what ought to constitute the “public taste” today, in 1885, when this textbook was published, those questions were exponentially more difficult to answer. Donnelly was writing during a time in which “the public taste” was quite a complicated thing. Twenty years after the end of the Civil War, in 1885 the nation was still contending with the war’s effects, and the country—North and South—was divided socially, economically, and ideologically. What was moral in the South was immoral in the North; men who were heroes in the North were villains to Southerners; and what Northerners would have preferred to remember, their Southern counterparts would rather have forgotten. These were the tensions that textbook writers and publishers had to contend with in the decades following the Civil War. Each stylistic choice made, each biography presented, every explanation provided had the potential to be polarizing. To devote too much attention to one subject and not enough to another, let alone to make any kind of moral commentary, might alienate an entire region of readers and school systems.

This backdrop of social change and tension added pressure to a textbook publishing industry that was already facing its own challenges and experiencing changes. Rising demand for textbooks stemming from increased school enrollment created new competition in the industry, and competition in turn gave rise to mergers, acquisitions, and monopolies that would change the face of the industry entirely. As different regions, especially the South, struggled to find textbooks that told history the way they wanted it to be told, textbook publishers, predominantly based in the North, struggled to produce textbooks that could be sold nationally and turn the profits necessary to stay afloat in a cutthroat industry.

This chapter provides an overview of the changes within the textbook publishing industry in the years following the Civil War, and how the content of history textbooks in particular

shifted over time. Section I summarizes the slow response of the textbook publishing industry to discuss the social and political changes brought on by the war, and it explores how textbook content was at first geared towards the uncontroversial. Section II describes the changes in the textbook industry occurring around 1890-1900, when publishers began shifting their approach to textbook production. This second section explores the ways in which publishers and authors altered their content, no longer to avoid the controversial, but rather to present it in different ways in order to appease different audiences—especially in the Southern states. Ultimately, in this chapter I argue that while textbooks did not initially engage with controversial material in the years after the war, changes in the industry and in American society at large eventually created drastic changes—and much more polarizing content—in history textbooks. But in different ways, both before and after this shift in publishing practices and content, textbooks on the whole failed to appropriately address slavery, the Civil War, and race and racism in America.

## I.

### **“Avoiding the Local, the Colorful, and the Controversial”: Post-War Textbook Content and Publishing Practices up to 1890**

In 1865, the United States was coming off of an era of unprecedented change—and entering a new one as Reconstruction began. For four years, the nation had endured a brutal and bloody civil war, but for generations leading up to the start of the war, Americans had borne witness to steadily increasing social and political tensions. As America continued to expand westward, each new territory acquired added fuel to the fire that was the debate over slavery: in the new states, and in the Union in general, should slavery be legal? By 1861, conflict could no longer be contained, and social and political differences between the North and South erupted into war. Despite the fact that the war represented one of the biggest turning points in the nation’s history, American history textbooks were initially slow to reflect the vast social and

political change born not just from four years of war, but from the decades of increasing tensions beforehand.

Textbooks' slow response was no coincidental matter. Rather, it was representative of a reluctance on the part of textbook publishers, contending with a growing and polarized market, to include content that could be perceived as controversial. Richard L. Venezky and Carl F. Kaestle explain that "expanding school enrollments made textbook publishing a large and growing industry after the Civil War."<sup>13</sup> Moreau echoes this point, and elaborates on its impact on the industry:

"Publishers approached the market conservatively. Demand for texts leapt dramatically as public schools expanded after the war, and history, particularly American history, assumed a more central role in the curriculum. But overproduction and cutthroat competition made sales and profits difficult to predict, particularly in the 1870s and 1880s. Publishers tended to keep a proven title, author, or historical style as long as it would sell."<sup>14</sup>

Alongside demographic and industrial changes, publishers also had to navigate shifting opinions, especially in the South. In the antebellum period, some activists in the South had begun pushing for histories specific to the Southern states and produced by Southern publishers rather than their Northern counterparts. One of the reasons this push failed to gain traction was because the public education system in the South was both small and poorly funded before the war; with such little demand, Southern textbook publishing could never be profitable.<sup>15</sup> Aware of this antebellum

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<sup>13</sup> Richard L. Venezky with Carl F. Kaestle, "From McGuffey to Dick and Jane: Reading Textbooks" in *A History of the Book in America: Volume 4: Print in Motion: The Expansion of Publishing and Reading in the United States, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 421.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Robert Moreau, "SCHOOLBOOK NATION: Imagining the American Community in United States History Texts for Grammar and Secondary Schools, 1865-1930," PhD diss., (University of Michigan, 1999), 37.

<sup>15</sup> For more information, on this antebellum effort in the Southern states, see Moreau, "SCHOOLBOOK NATION: Imagining the American Community in United States History Texts for Grammar and Secondary Schools, 1865-1930," 60.

movement, Northern publishers likely faced increased pressure after the war to accommodate Southern opinion, especially since the growth of the Southern school system presented new possibilities in the South that had not existed before.<sup>16</sup> Thus, facing new industrial demands while also having to contend with different opinions in the North and South, publishers often reverted to textbooks published before the war—books that had proven themselves to be reliable sellers—as they were making stylistic and content choices.<sup>17</sup>

The marketing demands placed on companies and publishers in such a competitive industry often had a role in shaping the content of textbooks directly. Venezky and Kaestle write:

“National marketing of a reading series required not only a large sales force but also a selection of readings that were acceptable in all of the country’s diverse regions. Certain kinds of readings had to be avoided. For example, although Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address* was recognized by the end of the nineteenth century as one of the masterpieces of English oratory, it appeared in few school readers prior to the 1920s because its inclusion limited sales in the South.”<sup>18</sup>

Moreau similarly describes the industry’s approach to controversy. “The historical meaning of the Civil War remained contentious through Reconstruction and succeeding years,” he writes. “Publishers likely believed a fact-based, conceptually vague approach would alienate the fewest teachers or textbook committee members who chose the books.”<sup>19</sup> The need to cater to specific regions thus created not only a homogenized textbook industry, but homogenized content within those textbooks—and content that was biased in terms of what it chose to omit. The manner in

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<sup>16</sup> According to Moreau, “between 1871 and 1890 the percentage of the Southern population enrolled in public schools nearly doubled, to roughly the national average” (60). Hence, where the movement failed to gain traction before the war, the possibility for success was much more realistic after the war.

<sup>17</sup> Moreau, 37.

<sup>18</sup> Richard L. Venezky with Carl F. Kaestle, “From McGuffey to Dick and Jane: Reading Textbooks” in *A History of the Book in America: Volume 4: Print in Motion: The Expansion of Publishing and Reading in the United States, 1880-1940*. 423-424.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

which textbooks were sold—in a highly competitive industry, on a national scale, and usually only once a year at the beginning of the academic year—meant that “reading texts became blander and more uniform as all the publishers moved toward the inoffensive, avoiding the local, the colorful, and the controversial.”<sup>20</sup> Overall, the “national and cyclical nature of the textbook market acted to encourage books that were bland in order to be uncontroversial.”<sup>21</sup>

Venezky and Kaestle also point to another manner in which bias took root in textbooks during this era: not simply in content, but also in the authors who determined that content. They explain that “professors tended to be of Anglo-American background, so racial and ethnic diversity among the new impresarios of reading texts was also lacking.” Furthermore, they point to an “Anglo-American bias” in textbooks: “despite the dramatic social and economic changes occurring between 1880 and 1940,” say Venezky and Kaestle, “the Anglo-American identities and perspectives of reading textbook authors remained constant.”<sup>22</sup> Moreau puts it plainly that even outside of authorship, “by the late 1880s these histories had drifted behind new currents in American thought.”<sup>23</sup>

Overall, both Moreau and Venezky and Kaestle’s research demonstrates how the demands of a competitive textbook industry that had to meet the needs of geographically-diverse buyers and school districts had tangible effects on textbook content. After the war and up to roughly 1890-1900, two main themes marked the textbooks produced with this ‘uncontroversial’ approach to history: first and foremost was the omission or inadequate description of topics that

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 424.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 425.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Robert Moreau, “SCHOOLBOOK NATION: Imagining the American Community in United States History Texts for Grammar and Secondary Schools, 1865-1930,” 37.

could be perceived as politically divisive. Second, when textbooks did approach topics that could be divisive, they often used vague language or presented multiple explanations that would appease both sides of the debate.

One of the defining characteristics in many of the textbooks published in the early years after the war is the omission of controversial topics in history. Perhaps the most noticeable of these omissions was the topic of slavery. What makes discussions about slavery some of the most insidious in these textbooks is that the texts do in fact discuss slavery as an issue—but typically only as a political one. They talk about slavery in the context of disagreements over the acquisition of new territory, or the politics driving the Missouri Compromise. In focusing their occasional mentions of slavery on its political implications, the textbooks purposefully exclude the controversial aspects of the discussion: that slavery was a racial, economic, and cultural issue. David B. Scott’s *A School History of the United States* provides a perfect case study. Early in the text, Scott makes a brief mention of slavery’s beginning in the United States. He writes: “In August of the preceding year, 1620, twenty negroes were brought by a Dutch vessel to the James River and sold as slaves. This was the beginning of negro slavery in the colonies, but it did not extend rapidly for forty years.”<sup>24</sup> With these two sentences, Scott wraps up his presentation of slavery in the early United States.

For the next nearly 300 pages, Scott says little about the institution of slavery or its impacts beyond brief mentions of its political implications. The occasional mention of slavery is typically in the context of politics—he devotes much of his section on Taylor’s administration to a discussion about how the question of slavery caused territorial disputes during westward

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<sup>24</sup> David B. Scott, *A School History of the United States, from the Discovery of America to the Year 1870*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1876), 41.

expansion, for example.<sup>25</sup> Finally, roughly 300 pages after his initial mention of slavery's beginning in Virginia, Scott refers back to that same discussion: "we have seen that negro slavery in the United States began in 1620 with the importation of slaves by a Dutch vessel into the colony at Jamestown," he writes. This time, he adds more: "The use of slaves was not confined to Virginia, but was encouraged, in the course of time, in all thirteen colonies." To demonstrate slavery's growth in the colonies, he includes a chart, from which he concludes that from 1620 to 1790, the number of enslaved people in the United States grew from 20 to 700,000.<sup>26</sup> Telling the story of slavery in numbers alone is exactly the kind of "fact-based" approach of textbook publishers that Moreau characterizes as a conscious effort on their part to avoid alienating readers. However, this approach, purposefully omitting the facts about slavery that were controversial, is what makes textbooks like Scott's problematic.

In cases like these, what the textbooks do not say often speaks the loudest, especially for a reader today. By limiting discussions of slavery to its political implications, authors refused to acknowledge that slavery was tied to more than just politics in America. What made slavery a controversial issue is that it was inherently economic, cultural, and social, as well—but textbooks like Scott's never develop that story within the larger framework of United States history. Scott, for example, briefly explains that "negro slavery, during colonial times, spread and increased more rapidly in the South, because the climate there was warmer, the soil in many places richer, and because tobacco, which, until the close of the Revolution, was the chief production, needed cheap labor for its cultivation."<sup>27</sup> One could hardly consider this brief mention of the financial

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 306-309.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 316-317.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 316.



incentive driving slavery to be an adequate explanation of slavery's economic impact. Slavery spread in the South not because the climate is warmer and the land is more fertile. This explanation provides no agency. Slavery spread because it made white people rich; it spread because white people continued buying, selling, and enslaving other human beings in geographic areas that were conducive to cash crops, slave labor, and profits for white people. Authors like Scott similarly make no connection between slavery and white supremacy, and never mention that slavery allowed Southern plantation owners to create and sustain a hierarchical society and culture driven by racism. Scholars today continue to engage in efforts to demonstrate how the history of America is inherently tied to the history of slavery; many of our institutions, cultural, educational, and financial alike, would not exist without it.<sup>28</sup> Thus, textbooks' omission of the controversial aspects of slavery—that it was driven by racism and had cultural, economic, and social effects—attempts to make slavery itself more palatable to their readers. In doing so, it minimizes the risk of alienating readers, but it also presents a dangerously inaccurate version of history.

Inevitably, however, there were some discussions too important and too obvious to avoid entirely. In places where they could not omit controversial material, many textbooks instead tried to present a neutral attitude, offering cursory and conciliatory accounts of both the Northern and Southern point of view. The conversation over the causes of the Civil War was typically one place where textbooks aimed for a conciliatory and distanced approach that could appease two different sides. William Swinton's 1878 textbook *A Condensed School History of the United*

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<sup>28</sup> The *New York Times's* "1619 Project" is one such effort. The goal of the project is to examine the legacy of slavery in America, and it attempts to demonstrate how each aspect of the country's history has been impacted by slavery in some way. For example, Matthew Desmond's 2017 article "In order to understand the brutality of American capitalism, you have to start on the plantation" describes the long-lasting impact of a country whose economy was originally centered around slavery.

*States* provides a perfect example. Swinton opens a section on secession by presenting a typical states' rights argument: "this antagonism between North and South had its roots deep down in our country's history," he says. "The seeds of the war were sown before the men who waged the war were born." He elaborates by providing background for the states' rights line of thinking:

"There was a difference of opinion respecting the nature of the United States government almost from the time the United States became a government. One class of statesmen said that the Federal Union was a *league* or confederation, which might be dissolved at the wish of the respective States. Another class of statesmen held that the Federal Union formed a national government, which could not be dissolved."<sup>29</sup>

The description Swinton provides, lending legitimacy to the historical authority of the states' rights argument, falls right in line with the narrative typically advanced by Southerners and former Confederates in order to distance themselves from the issue of slavery. But in the very next paragraph, Swinton changes course. "This was truly a very wide difference of opinion," he writes, "but the love for the Union was strong in all sections of the country, and this disagreement respecting the *theory* of the government would not probably have led to the dissolution of the Union, if important *material* questions had not arisen to give practical point to the disagreement." Swinton is then quick to follow up that "the question which most widely divided the North and the South was the question of *slavery*," which on the next page he notes gave rise to a long political struggle in the United States.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Swinton carefully balances his conversation about the cause of the war in order to explain both the Northern and Southern line of thinking: while Southerners defended the war as an issue of states' rights, Northerners often framed the conflict in terms of the question of slavery.

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<sup>29</sup> William Swinton, *A Condensed School History of the United States, Constructed for Definite Results in Recitation and Containing a New Method of Topical Reviews*, (New York and Chicago: Ivison, Blakeman, Taylor, & Co., 1878), 236.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Furthermore, while historically inaccurate, assertions like Swinton's that "the love for the Union was strong in all sections of the country" represent attempts to minimize the appearance of conflict between the North and South in the first place. Other textbooks employ similarly vague and oversimplified wording. In a section called "General Reflections on the Causes of the Civil War," Scott's 1876 textbook *A School History of the United States* breezes through a summary of the causes of conflict. Whereas Swinton's description of the events leading up to the war in a way serves to assign blame for the war to both the North and the South, Scott's description of the war's causes tries to distance both sides from a conflict he portrays as inevitable. "The South felt that there was nothing left for them but secession from a Union that they no longer loved; and the North determined that the Union should not be broken up," he writes. "What could come of this but war?" Scott concludes. He wraps up his discussion on the causes of the war with a similar sentiment about the war's inevitability: "Each section was grievously mistaken about the feelings of the other, and a single spark was all that was needed to fire the magazine."<sup>31</sup> By taking a conciliatory approach and employing more neutral explanations for the causes of the war, like both sides simply being mistaken about the other, textbooks like Swinton's and Scott's ultimately serve to trivialize the conflict itself. Moreover, they detract from historical truth by presenting neutral, two-sided explanations that never get to one of the central, and most controversial, reasons for the war: racism and white supremacy.

Overall, that the predominant tendency of textbooks during this time period was to omit controversial content where possible and take a conciliatory, middle-ground stance when not points back to an industry attempting to employ a cautious, conservative approach during a time

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<sup>31</sup> David B. Scott, *A School History of the United States, from the Discovery of America to the Year 1870*, 319-320.

of national upheaval. While this approach may have enabled textbook manufacturers to appease national audiences and produce larger profits, it came at a cost to historical truth. And ultimately, it was one that would not be sustained: decades out from the end of the war, tensions between the North and the South would escalate and audiences—especially in the Southern states—would no longer be satisfied with middle-ground narratives. The textbook industry would face new pressure and experience new change as it would come to redefine its approach and usher in a new wave of textbook content—unafraid of controversy.

## II.

### **“Constructing a Usable Past”: The Change in Textbook Content Post 1890s**

By 1890-1900, roughly twenty years after the end of the Civil War, American history textbooks finally seemed to be catching up and catching onto the magnitude of the effects of the war—and the content in those textbooks began to change dramatically. The textbooks produced during this time period were a product of three factors: the nature of the textbook publishing industry, rising tensions in the country, and the changing landscape of the American school system.

By 1890, a new textbook monopoly had taken hold in the North with the creation of the American Book Company (hereafter ABC), a merger of five of the leading textbook publishers in the country.<sup>32</sup> Immediately and forcefully changing the shape of the industry, ABC “was all the more insidious because the publisher might gain de facto control of school curricula, and with them, the minds of future citizens.”<sup>33</sup> Moreau notes that “in the South ABC became a

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<sup>32</sup> Joseph Robert Moreau, “SCHOOLBOOK NATION: Imagining the American Community in United States History Texts for Grammar and Secondary Schools, 1865-1930,” 72.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

symbol of Northern commercial exploitation and Republican political domination,” indicating a growing sense of resentment in the South towards both the North’s control of educational content and Northern ideologies in general.<sup>34</sup> Along with this resentment, however, came a growing sense of purpose and a revitalized motivation to tell a version of history that was true to Southern ideals. Moreau captures the development of this movement in the South:

“The revolutionary potential of this new nationalism, and especially its manifestation in Southern public schools, set the context for a renewed call for textbooks true to the South. Slavery was gone forever. The hope that schools might shore up the peculiar institution... had died. But the racism that made slavery workable, and might still determine how political power would be exercised after the war, could be saved. If historians could construct a usable past that absolved the South of guilt in the war and showed the wisdom of Confederate policies, they might blunt the social impact of Reconstruction.”<sup>35</sup>

Recognizing this opportunity to “construct a usable past,” interest groups like the United Confederate Veterans and United Daughters of the Confederacy picked up the unsuccessful antebellum attempt to create Southern state histories and launched textbook campaigns to aid in and promote the writing and adoption of textbooks that would not only sympathize with the history of the South, but advance Southern ideology. Fred Arthur Bailey explains that “from the 1890s until well into the twentieth century, the United Confederate Veterans, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and the Sons of the Confederate Veterans condemned the sectionalism of northern historians, established lists of approved and disapproved books, and produced literature more congenial to their perception of an unbiased history.”<sup>36</sup> Establishing their own history committees, the groups launched efforts to censor writing that they deemed

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 73.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 64.

<sup>36</sup> Bailey, Fred Arthur. "The Textbooks of the "Lost Cause": Censorship and the Creation of Southern State Histories." *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (1991): 507-33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40582363>. 508.

critical of the South's actions in the war and hostile to Southern values. They also began producing their own content and encouraged the creation of state histories over national histories. Bailey characterizes the actions such groups took as "an intellectual quest designed to conform the southern aristocracy's continuing legitimate authority as the dominant force in the region's political, social, and economic life."<sup>37</sup>

Powerful interest groups were not the only voices pushing for change, however. Southern state school boards engaged in oversight measures, setting forth new and increasingly selective standards for the textbooks they would purchase and adopt for their school systems. Reacting to both the formation of influential publishing monopolies and powerful interest groups, some states chose to move forward independently by creating their own state histories. However, Moreau writes that "in the South the majority of states chose a less drastic alternative: regulation of book adoption at the state level."<sup>38</sup> With state school committees acting as regulatory bodies, Southern states typically selected one or a small number of textbooks to adopt state-wide. Moreau notes that it was primarily financial incentives that initiated the move to state adoption: by selecting only one or a small list of textbooks to purchase, states put themselves in a position to negotiate prices with publishers and mitigate the effects of the corruption that came along with publishing industry monopolies.<sup>39</sup> Whatever their initial purpose, plans for state adoption quickly took on a new significance, which Moreau captures:

"But once in place, these plans had profound effects on what sorts of books students read. A single board nominally accountable to the people of the state gave organizations a

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Robert Moreau, "SCHOOLBOOK NATION: Imagining the American Community in United States History Texts for Grammar and Secondary Schools, 1865-1930," 73.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 74, 76.

powerful lever to pursue adoption based on the ideological content of textbooks. This power was then magnified nationally because most Northern states chose books on a local basis. Publishers had more incentive to meet the demands of a single large buying unit like Texas than a multitude of smaller ones with different expectations and priorities in Illinois or Massachusetts. The South thus gained influence over the textbook industry out of proportion to its population.”<sup>40</sup>

Thus, school boards’ plans for state adoption created a demand for a new kind of textbook.

Combined with the steady Reconstruction-era increase of public school enrollment in the South, there existed in the South a new market that publishers would have to adapt to if they hoped to sell textbooks there.<sup>41</sup>

The momentum of this movement in the South, paired with the changing shape of the publishing industry in the North and post-war tensions and animosities in general, created a new dynamic in textbook publishing. No longer could publishing firms avoid controversial content and manage to produce a history textbook that Northern and Southern school systems alike would adopt. Thus, beginning in 1890-1900, authors and publishers began to alter their portrayal of topics that tended to be divisive in order to produce different textbooks for different regions—marketing certain content to Northern school systems and others to Southern school boards. Textbooks marketed to the South, for example, were highly apologist for slavery and secession, many explicitly supportive of the Lost Cause narrative. One of the most striking aspects in many of these textbooks is the conciliatory tone they take in their descriptions of the war, the causes of the conflict and secession, and the motives and character of the Confederate army and its leaders.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Buck, *The Road to Reunion 1865-1900* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1947), 163; Charles William Dabney, *Universal Education in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936), 113; C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 61-62. Quoted in Moreau (61).

First, many of the textbooks engage directly with the states' rights argument for secession, which was a central component of the Lost Cause narrative that groups like the United Confederate Veterans and United Daughters of the Confederacy fervently supported and spread. In the section on Robert E. Lee in the American Book Company's 1903 textbook *Barnes's Elementary History of the United States Told in Biographies*, author James Baldwin provides a typical description of the states' rights argument:

“We have already learned that some of the founders of our government held to the idea that this country was not a single strong nation, made up of many states, but that it consisted of several small nations leagued together for the common welfare. They claimed that each of these small nations, or states, was an independent commonwealth and might withdraw from the Union whenever its people thought best. In the North this idea gradually gave place to the present idea of one great government. But in the South no such change of opinion took place. To a South Carolinian, South Carolina was his country, and he owed allegiance to her first of all. It was so in all the southern states; and the right of a state to act independently of any other power was not disputed. This is known as the doctrine of States' Rights.”<sup>42</sup>

Baldwin's summary of the states' rights argument captures how it appeared in many textbooks: as a legitimate political theory that was separate from the issue of slavery and that had its roots in the earliest days of American history. In *A Primary History of the United States, for Intermediate Classes*, for example, author T.F. Donnelly emphasizes that the states' rights theory had “always” been a component of Southern political ideology. He writes that “a great many of the leading men of the South had always held that the Union was not perpetual, but only a league or partnership among the states, and that any state had the right to withdraw from the Union whenever it chose to do so.”<sup>43</sup> Here, Baldwin and Donnelly's descriptions accomplish exactly what a Southern secessionist might want them to: they portrays the doctrine of states' rights as a

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<sup>42</sup> James Baldwin, *Barnes's Elementary History of the United States Told in Biographies*, (New York, Cincinnati, Chicago: American Book Company, 1903), 308.

<sup>43</sup> T. F. Donnelly, *A Primary History of the United States, for Intermediate Classes*, (New York: American Book Company, 1919), 166.



longstanding and valid political tradition and remove the issue of slavery from the causes of the war. Thus, presentations of states' rights like Baldwin's and Donnelly's aid in the historical erasure of Southerners' desire to preserve the institution of slavery, depicting Southern confederates as defenders of a just cause rather than defenders of slavery.

The danger of presenting this argument in textbooks lies in the fact that it was the central narrative that groups like the United Confederate Veterans and United Daughters of the Confederacy relied on in order to advance Lost Cause ideology and preserve white supremacy in the post-war South. This was the narrative that Mildred Lewis Rutherford, for example, promoted in her collection of writings ironically titled "Truths of History." Lewis Rutherford, a pro-Confederacy, pro-slavery educator, served as historian general of the United Daughters of the Confederacy and worked to advance the Lost Cause narrative in her teaching and writing. She accomplishes just that in *Truths of History*, which Lewis Rutherford calls "a fair, unbiased, impartial, unprejudiced and conscientious study of history" meant "to secure a peaceful settlement of the many perplexing questions now causing contention between the North and the South." The titles of the first five chapters alone convey the story that Confederates worked to advance: "The Constitution of the United States (1787) Was a Compact Between Sovereign States and Not Perpetual Nor National," "Secession Was Not Rebellion," "The North Was Responsible for the War Between the States," "The War Between the States Was Not Fought to Hold the Slaves," and finally, "The Slaves Were Not Ill-Treated in the South and the North Was Largely Responsible for Their Presence in the South."<sup>44</sup> Here, the narrative that Southern proponents of the Lost Cause set forth is clear: it was within the Constitutional rights of the

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<sup>44</sup> Mildred Lewis Rutherford, *Truths of History* (Athens, Georgia, 1920), <https://archive.org/details/truthsofhistoryf00ruth/page/n5/mode/2up>.

Southern states to secede from the Union because the Constitution itself was created on the doctrine of states' rights, and thus the Civil War was one of Northern aggression that the South fought to protect their rights—not slavery. Thus, by explaining the states' rights arguments without engaging in a conversation about slavery, textbooks helped to advance and lend legitimacy to the same ideology that white supremacist groups worked to uphold in the Southern states after the war.

While many textbooks avoided conversations about slavery by advancing states' rights arguments, many others engage directly in the topic and aim to provide justifications for the Southern states' desire to preserve the institution of slavery. Many textbooks employ the same conciliatory and apologist tone they use in their portrayal of the states' rights argument in their discussions of slavery itself. In the American Book Company's 1903 textbook *Barnes's Elementary History of the United States: Told in Biographies*, Baldwin writes,

“It was believed that only negroes could do the hard work on the great plantations. Every year slaves became more and more valuable. The sentiment in the South against slavery became weaker and weaker as slave labor became more profitable... To the people of the South slavery was a source of prosperity and wealth; it was but natural that they should wish to strengthen and defend it.”<sup>45</sup>

The economic benefits that Southern planters reaped from holding slaves were inarguably a main reason why Southerners were so fiercely protective of slavery. However, this textbook does little to explain slavery as anything more than an economic affair or business venture for the Southern states. It was those things, of course, but it was also strengthened and driven by racism and white supremacy. Southerners' sense of superiority on the basis of race was also a central factor that made it “but natural that they should wish to strengthen and defend it.” Furthermore, to call

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<sup>45</sup> James Baldwin, *Barnes's Elementary History of the United States Told in Biographies*, 288-289.

slavery “natural” in any context depicts it as an inevitable circumstance, and it removes the agency that white people had in creating and perpetuating the institution. The omission of these factors is thus a major oversight at best, but more likely representative of a conscious decision on the part of the author to avoid confronting the reality of race in America.

The avoidance of the issues of race and racism is commonplace in these textbooks in general, not just in discussions about slavery. In an 1895 textbook titled *How to Teach and Study United States History by the Brace System*, author John Trainer occasionally approaches the topic of race in the section that he calls “Queer Queries”—lists of hundreds of questions, seemingly organized by neither content, time period, or theme. Queries number 584 and 585 read “Is a negro a colored man?” and “is a white man a colored man?” respectively. Responding to the question “Is a negro a colored man?” in the next section, “Answers to Queer Queries,” Trainer writes,

“No. The theory is that we only see that which is reflected. Thus, we say an object is red, when we only see this color reflected; an object is green when this color is reflected, etc. When all colors are reflected to the eye, we say an object is white—a kind of compound color. When all the colors are absorbed by an object, we say it is black—an absence of color.”<sup>46</sup>

Subsequently, Trainer answers “yes” to the next query, “is a white man a colored man?” and refers readers back to his previous answer on the science of color. This scientific approach to the term “colored” is not only out of place for a history textbook, but it also points to a general ignorance about patterns of derogatory language usage in the United States, and how that language contributed to wider social issues when it comes to race in the United States.

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<sup>46</sup> John Trainer, *How to Teach and Study United States History by the Brace System*, (Chicago: A. Flanagan, 1895), 233.

The dominant term in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, “colored” played a key role in establishing and strengthening Jim Crow segregation.<sup>47</sup> The history of the term is preserved today particularly in photographs of signage during the Jim Crow era, where the term “colored” played a public and central role in Southern segregation. Elizabeth Guffey analyzes how the term “colored” appeared on signs in the South. “Spread across a vast region of the southern United States,” she writes, “these visual communications systems confirmed the re-marginalization of African Americans in the aftermath of the Civil War and subsequent Reconstruction.”<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, she argues that “segregation signs were, in fact, part of a larger racial caste system that made them a life or death issue.”<sup>49</sup> “Colored only” and “white only” were consistent forms of identification in the south for generations, and Guffey notes that “most African Americans in the rural South relied not only on signs but also on a series of learned codes of conduct, habituated through years of living in racialized space and passed from one generation to the next.”<sup>50</sup> Considering that the term “colored” was so public and frequently used, and that its effects were so clearly noticeable, it is almost inconceivable to imagine that a textbook author like Trainer could be truly ignorant of the term’s history. Thus, though Trainer seems to approach issues of racism with these questions, his answers demonstrate an unwillingness to truly engage critically with the material, instead attempting to avoid any discussion of potentially polarizing content or content that would alienate Southern audiences. With his scientific

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<sup>47</sup> Smith, Tom W. "Changing Racial Labels: From "Colored" to "Negro" to "Black" to "African American"." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (1992): 496-514. Accessed December 4, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2749204>. 497.

<sup>48</sup> Guffey, Elizabeth. "Knowing Their Space: Signs of Jim Crow in the Segregated South." *Design Issues* 28, no. 2 (2012): 41-60. Accessed December 4, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41427825>. 41.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 43.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 51, 50.

explanation of “colored” and “white” terminology, Trainer purposefully misconstrues and misrepresents the meaning that these terms held in social contexts. By doing so, he attempts to disguise the racism that drove the popular use of the term and Jim Crow segregation in general. Trainer’s inability to successfully capture and convey the significance of racist terminology commonly used throughout the country is indicative of a larger overarching inability of textbook authors to identify racism and connect it to the events of the Civil War.

Lastly, furthering their overall justification for Southern secession and racism, many textbooks designed for Southern distribution during this time period were conciliatory and even celebratory in their presentation of Confederate soldiers and veterans. The textbooks’ treatment of these men mirrors their treatment of the causes and justifications of the war. They not only offer a justification for these men’s actions and outlooks, but frequently celebrate their contributions to the Confederate cause and their overall character. Few figures of the Civil War, whether from the Confederate or Union army, earned as much space in history textbooks as Robert E. Lee, commander of the Confederate States Army. A slave owner himself, Lee in particular is frequently praised in the pages of post-War textbooks, especially after 1900 with the rise of powerful Southern interest groups focusing on educational initiatives. *Barnes’s Elementary History of the United States: Told in Biographies*—the same textbook that called slavery “but natural”—offers a depiction of Lee that helps to distance him from the problematic and racist truth of Southern secession. The text venerates the Confederate general as a war hero despite the fact that he was actually a traitor to his country: by engaging in warfare against the United States, Lee and his fellow Confederate soldiers committed treason. The section on Lee opens with a discussion of Lee’s upbringing, which paints the commander to be an honorable, devoted, and deeply moral man: “His father’s example taught him to be self-reliant and brave,

and above all, loyal to his native Virginia,” the text notes, and “his mother’s precepts led him always to love and practice truth, morality, and religion.”<sup>51</sup> From the start, the text takes a sympathetic tone towards Lee, which intensifies once Baldwin reaches his discussion of the beginning of the Civil War. At that point, Baldwin writes:

“Colonel Lee saw nothing could now prevent a war between the states, and no man regretted it more than he. He returned to his home near Alexandria, to await the progress of events. ‘I cannot imagine a greater calamity,’ he said ‘than the dissolution of the Union.’ He declared that if he were the owner of all the negroes in the South, he would gladly yield them up for the preservation of peace. In fact, he did not approve of slavery. He had already freed the slaves that he had inherited from his father.”<sup>52</sup>

This description of Lee’s reaction to the war distances him both from the cause of the conflict, the South’s decision to secede, and the actions of the Southern states in following through on secession. Baldwin writes later in the textbook that “Robert E. Lee had been taught as a child to be loyal to Virginia,” and undeniably history points to Lee, the commander of the army, as the champion of the Southern cause; thus, to paint Lee as an unwilling participant who “regretted” the cause of the war is not only historically inaccurate, but dangerously apologist for Lee’s racism. Still present today, the claim that Lee did not approve of slavery is outlandish: he fought in the Civil War to preserve its place in Southern society. Those who attempt to point out Lee’s ‘abolitionist tendencies’ often refer to a quote from a letter Lee wrote to his wife in 1865, in which he writes, “In this enlightened age, there are few I believe, but what will acknowledge, that slavery as an institution, is a moral & political evil in any Country.” But in that same letter, he also writes:

“I think [slavery] however a greater evil to the white man than to the black race, & while my feelings are strongly enlisted in behalf of the latter, my sympathies are more strong for the former. The blacks are immeasurably better off here than in Africa, morally,

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<sup>51</sup> James Baldwin, *Barnes’s Elementary History of the United States Told in Biographies*, 299.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 308.

socially & physically. The painful discipline they are undergoing, is necessary for their instruction as a race, & I hope will prepare & lead them to better things. How long their subjugation may be necessary is known & ordered by a wise Merciful Providence. Their emancipation will sooner result from the mild & melting influence of Christianity, than the storms & tempests of fiery Controversy.”<sup>53</sup>

If his participation in the war is not proof enough, such remarks from Lee make it difficult to maintain any argument that Lee was truly ideologically opposed to slavery. Aside from ideology, Lee was a slave owner whom scholars have noted physically abused his slaves and engaged in separating slave families.<sup>54</sup>

This unwilling and heroic depiction of Lee persists throughout the textbook; later, the text (like many others) ties Lee directly into the states’ rights narrative. On Lee’s decision to join the Confederate cause, Baldwin writes, “when [Lee] grew to manhood he did not suffer his devotion to the United States to overshadow that loyalty. And so, when Virginia joined the confederacy, he felt that he must resign his commission in the army and remain faithful to his state.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, Lee’s decision to resign his position in the army is painted as “loyalty” rather than traitorous to the Union. Like the Southern states in general in their attempts to justify secession, the textbook itself portrays Lee’s involvement in the Confederate cause as a matter of faithfulness to his state instead of infidelity to his country. This depiction in turn not only celebrates Lee’s character and ignores his character flaws, but it also offers an even further justification for the states’ rights argument that the Southern states defended: if an honorable man like Lee would unwillingly but

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<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Arlington, Bobby Lee, and the ‘Peculiar Institution,’” (*The Atlantic*, 2010), <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2010/08/arlington-bobby-lee-and-the-peculiar-institution/61428/>.

<sup>54</sup> For a summary of this scholarship and an overview of Lee’s actions and character in general, see Adam Serwer, “The Myth of the Kindly General Lee,” (*The Atlantic*: June 4, 2017), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/06/the-myth-of-the-kindly-general-lee/529038/>.

<sup>55</sup> James Baldwin, *Barnes’s Elementary History of the United States Told in Biographies*, 309.

faithfully take up the cause to fight because of his deep-rooted commitment to his state, then the Southern states must be justified in secession.

Celebrating Lee and advancing the states' right narrative, these textbooks say it all: no longer would a facts-based, uncontroversial approach to history suffice. Textbooks published after 1890-1900 were unafraid to dive into the controversial and to cater to specific regions, especially the Southern states, looking to advance an alternative version of history. Thus, where textbooks once took a vague, middle-ground approach, they now presented the Lost Cause narrative, were apologist towards slavery and secession, and celebrated the legacy of the Confederacy. Overall, these textbooks represented not only a new approach by authors and publishers to react to mounting pressure and the desire, especially in the South, for more a more regional approach to history. They also represented a stark shift from their efforts just a generation earlier to avoid the controversial and produce a textbook that could be sold nationally. This change would reshape not just industry practices, but also the content of the textbooks themselves—content that, read by young students across the nation, would have tangible effects on the future landscape of American education and society at large.



## CHAPTER TWO

### **“Aiming at *Definite Results*”: Investigating the Educational Outcomes of Post-War Textbooks and Teaching Practices**

*“For the great enemy of truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.”*<sup>56</sup>

-John F. Kennedy, 1962

While the content that filled the pages of history textbooks offers powerful insight into the historical narratives that had taken root in America in the post-Civil War era and the publishing industry that fortified them, that content itself only tells half of the story. Words on a page are powerful, but in the hands of school-aged children across the country, they take on a new meaning entirely.

Imagining students scribbling notes in the margins of these books, mining them for quotations to use in their essays, or reading passages aloud in class prompts further questioning into the educational impact of the content within these texts—not just *what* the texts said, but *how* students approached, engaged with, and analyzed the information within them. Exploring how students interpreted the history textbooks during this era provides even more meaningful and more direct insight into how their content shaped a generation’s understanding of the history of race and racism in America.

Scholarship that explores the educational outcomes produced by these texts is sparse, as Moreau notes in his call for research beyond the textbook publishing industry and the content it produced after the war:

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<sup>56</sup> Address by President John F. Kennedy, Yale University Commencement. June 11, 1962.

“Did all children approach texts from the same perspective? For the historian, answering these questions requires locating new types of sources. Only recently have scholars begun to examine how students actually interpret the history they learn in school, and how their understanding is affected by a range of personal factors and the influence of other sources of historical knowledge... But only when research into curriculum development is combined with an examination of how the subject is actually learned will we gain a more complete picture of the historical consciousness of Americans, past and present.”<sup>57</sup>

Understanding how teachers and students interacted with and utilized textbooks is key to understanding their impact, but as Moreau explains, this kind of research requires new sources. Textbooks alone can only take us so far. Many provide classroom exercises and questions at the end of each chapter or the conclusion of the text, which offer at least a foundation for analysis on the manner in which students engaged with the texts. By examining the reading exercises and chapter questions commonly found within textbooks, we can understand which ideas would inform the main themes extracted from lessons and which perspectives students may have adopted in the process of reading, for example.

However, other sources beyond the textbooks help to provide a fuller picture of American history curricula in the post-war era. Oftentimes, publishing companies provided school boards, teachers, and students supplementary materials to be used in tandem alongside textbooks. Venezky and Kaestle explain that teachers often requested these materials directly from publishers, highlighting the manner in which other sources beyond textbooks informed the way that students learned about American history:

“Textbooks, unlike most forms of print, were not marketed through bookstores or regional distributors but directly to schools. Given the low, per-copy profit margins and the seasonal sales patterns of textbooks, bookstores rarely stocked them. Furthermore, when adopting textbooks, school districts and states not only negotiated prices and delivery schedules but also often requested that publishers provide supplemental support,

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<sup>57</sup> Joseph Robert Moreau, “SCHOOLBOOK NATION: Imagining the American Community in United States History Texts for Grammar and Secondary Schools, 1865-1930,” 21-22.

such as training teachers how to use new textbook and new methods in the classroom. Bookstores were not staffed to meet such demands.”<sup>58</sup>

However, it was not just teachers’ requests that drove the creation of supplementary textbook materials. Publishing companies turned to creating new resources for teachers as a way to distinguish their textbook series from competitors’ in a cutthroat market where firms vied to become the suppliers for the same school districts. Venezky and Kaestle explain that “rather than striving to provide distinctive content or cheaper prices, publishers sought to distinguish their reading series from their competitors’ by developing supplementary components—workbooks, wall charts, flash cards, and teachers’ guides.”<sup>59</sup> So, as teachers continued to request supplementary materials and publishing firms turned to the creation of those materials as a marketing strategy, new sources took root as important builders of the American history curriculum in the years after the Civil War.

Understanding how these sources were used both on their own and in conjunction with the textbooks they accompanied helps us to gain a more holistic perspective on how students would have approached, extracted, and analyzed the content within history textbooks of this time period. While the content of the textbooks on its own illustrates the creation of narratives that purposefully misconstrued the history of race and racism in America, as the previous chapter covered, only by analyzing students’ engagement with textbook content can we understand how those narratives jumped off the pages of texts and into American society in the minds of school-aged children. This chapter aims to investigate that engagement in three forms: through authors’ and publishers’ communication about how to study and interpret history, through the methods of

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<sup>58</sup> Richard L. Venezky with Carl F. Kaestle, “From McGuffey to Dick and Jane: Reading Textbooks” in *A History of the Book in America: Volume 4: Print in Motion: The Expansion of Publishing and Reading in the United States, 1880-1940*. 423.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 424.

study set forth directly in textbooks and reading guides, and finally through teachers' involvement in the learning process. By pairing the analysis of these three influences on students' reading and education with contemporary educational resources and scholarship on the best practices for teaching the history of race in America, this chapter explores reader engagement with history textbooks and the educational impact of the content within them.

## I.

### **From the Pages of Textbooks: Historical Romanticism and the Purpose of History**

At the end of the introduction his 1895 textbook *How to Teach and Study United States History by the Brace System*, John Trainer concludes:

“It is an axiomatic truth that what we are trying to realize in the present is what we idealize of the past; hence we should form noble ideals of character and action. The good in man should be remembered and perpetuated by his fellows, in song and story, the bad should be forgotten.”<sup>60</sup>

The modern historian would likely find a glaring problem with Trainer's approach to history and textbook-writing. Is there not a responsibility for textbooks, and history in general, to remember both the good *and* the bad? Is the goal of studying the past not to arrive closer to the truth, and if so, does the truth not require an unbiased, holistic approach to history?

As shocking and problematic as Trainer's approach to history might seem to a modern audience, it is one that appeared commonly, in one form or another, in the history textbooks of the post-Civil War time period. The prevalence of outlooks and historical claims like Trainer's makes them worthy of attention. As the primary resource relied upon in history instruction,

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<sup>60</sup> John Trainer, *How to Teach and Study United States History by the Brace System*, (Chicago: A. Flanagan, 1895), viii.

textbooks often form the basis of students' understanding of the broad concepts of history. Though their subject matter, length, and organization might differ, in general textbooks advance one primary goal: to provide as much information in the most easily understandable format as possible. As the last chapter highlighted, even when content appears to be presented in a straightforward way, it can be skewed, unintentionally biased, or purposefully misconstrued to fit a particular audience, and studying the manner in which textbooks present that material helps us understand the educational impacts those textbooks would have produced. However, as Trainer's introductory remarks demonstrate, simply *presenting* biased and historically inaccurate information is not the only way that textbooks from this era would have influenced the learning styles and historical consciousness of the students who read them. Often, influence could come in more indirect forms. Outlined in the introductions or prefaces to textbooks, approaches to history like Trainer's set the tone for the content in the following chapters of the book. These characterizations of the study of history, presented at the very beginning of texts, clearly functioned as a form of communication between the textbook author and his audience—as a means for an author to outline his purpose and thus guide his readers' interpretation and analysis of the content to follow. Thus, understanding how textbook authors and publishers understood the purpose of their textbooks and publications—and of history more broadly—is a key component to understanding how American students read, interpreted, and analyzed the information contained within their textbooks. Textbooks not only *presented* information in inaccurate and biased ways, but furthermore, they *directed* students' interactions with and understandings of that material in a manner that was similarly deleterious to students' education.

In telling readers that “the *good* in man should be remembered, ... the *bad* should be forgotten,” for example, Trainer not only suggests that the information he presents in later

chapters will be limited in scope to heroic acts and success stories—which is a problem in and of itself. Even more harmfully, he pushes his readers to adopt a certain attitude about history, encouraging them to view history as if through rose-colored glasses. Rather than proposing to his readers that they approach the complications and nuances of American history with a critical eye, analyzing the morality and immorality of certain key figures and the positives and negatives of important events, Trainer asks them to view history almost romantically. “A love of liberty, purity, justice and right is formed by dwelling upon individual instances illustrating these virtues, and arousing sympathy for the actions of men who devote their best energies, as philanthropists, in causes seemingly hopeless at times,” he writes.<sup>61</sup> Thus, Trainer not only primes his readers to ignore the negative parts of history—failures of morality among them—in favor of focusing solely on positive traits, but he goes further to tie his readers’ character to their studies of the past. According to him, readers themselves will know “liberty, purity, justice and right” by studying history because they can use history and historical figures as models: “a study of the government in the past, its workings, and present political issues, develops the citizen and patriot of the future.”<sup>62</sup>

While Trainer’s message is striking because it explicitly tells readers to ignore the negative aspects of history, his presentation of the study of history as a means of character-building in the present was a common attitude of textbook writers and publishers during the post-war time period. In his *Elements of United States History*, Edward Channing advised, “At every stage opportunity should be grasped to connect the past history with the occurrences of the present, and to impress upon the pupils their public duties and the crucial importance of good

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

citizenship in a self-governing state and nation.”<sup>63</sup> In *Studies in United States History: A Guide for the Use of Students and Teachers*, Sara May Riggs provides several quotations about the study of history in a section titled “Value of History.” One quote, which she pulls from Channing and Hart’s *Guide to American History*, says that a principal reason for studying history is that it “sets before the student’s mind a high standard of character,” and it refers to history as “the best training for administrative duties, for citizenship, for public life, and especially for the decision of any question which needs a knowledge of the past for its settlement.”<sup>64</sup> William and Blanche Mowry’s *Essentials of United States History* opens with a note “To the Teacher” which states that an interest in the study of history is “the best possible basis for developing patriotism and good citizenship” and that teachers should “make it appear” that men like Jefferson and Madison were statesmen, showing “the important things for which [they] should be remembered” rather than presenting a “bald outline of everything the [men] did.”<sup>65</sup>

Messages like these, similar to Trainer’s idea of history, encourage a kind of historical romanticism, presenting history as a means of personal character-building, a solution to problems, and a series of moral lessons. Of course, history can and often does serve some of these purposes; however, without guidance on how to view history critically or at least a more balanced conversation on how to go about interpreting the more negative aspects of the past, the study of history can easily turn into the creation of mythology—and harmful mythology at that.

Modern attitudes about the purpose and importance of history, and contemporary scholarship on how it ought to be taught, are valuable tools of reference in understanding how

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<sup>63</sup> Edward Channing, *Elements of United States History*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), viii.

<sup>64</sup> Sara May Riggs, *Studies in United States History: A Guide for the Use of Students and Teachers*, (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1902), v.

<sup>65</sup> William Augustus Mowry and Mrs. Blanche Swett Mowry, *Essentials of United States History*, (Silver, Burdett and Company, 1906), v.

detrimental these messages could have been to students' learning. Established in 1987 in response to concern about the adequacy of the history being taught in elementary and secondary schools, the Bradley Commission on History in Schools can provide a more contemporary lens with which to understand the faults in viewing history romantically rather than critically. Endorsed by the Organization of History Teachers, the American Historical Association, and the Organization of American Historians, the Bradley Commission's two goals were to study the effectiveness of the teaching of history in American schools and make recommendations for improvement based on their findings. Ultimately, the Bradley Commission set forth a series of objectives of the study of history in order to "take students well beyond formal skill of critical thinking" and into "their own active learning." Two of these objectives offer a direct contrast to the purposes and objectives of history offered by post-Civil War textbook writers like Trainer and Channing. These objectives, according to the Commission, are to:

- “ • appreciate the often tentative nature of judgments about the past, and thereby avoid the temptation to seize upon particular ‘lessons’ of history as cures for present ills.
- recognize the importance of individuals who have made a difference in history, and the significance of personal character for both good and ill.”<sup>66</sup>

Quite clearly, these objectives are far different than the ones offered in Trainer's text, for example. And so, the problem lies not just in the content of the textbooks—though, as the last chapter covered, that content was too often biased and inaccurate itself. The issue goes deeper than simply the manner in which the information presented, however. These texts encouraged students to engage with material in a way that was celebratory, not critical; they asked students to look towards successes and away from failures; and they invited students to draw lessons from history rather than appreciate it objectively. With any kind of history, this romantic lens, so to

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<sup>66</sup> The Bradley Commission on History in Schools. "Building a History Curriculum: Guidelines for Teaching History in Schools." *The History Teacher* 23, no. 1 (1989): 7-35. doi:10.2307/494598. 14.



speak, presents obvious problems. But in history texts with focuses on the Civil War and its causes and effects—and that already presented information in such a biased, skewed way—such an approach to history is especially problematic. After all, even Robert E. Lee could be counted among historical figures who “devote their best energies... in causes seemingly hopeless at times”—people that Trainer would have students celebrate. To study figures like Lee, or the cause of the South in the Civil War, with the intent to focus on the positive or extract some sort of moral lesson obviously misses the objective of history, but with messages like Trainer’s, Channing’s, Riggs’s, or Mowry’s at the beginning of textbooks, students would understandably gain from their reading not a critical, objective view of history, but one which overlooked the negative in favor of a romantic depiction of the past—missing the truth in its entirety.

## II.

### **Recitation versus Critical Thinking: Textbook Examples and Contemporary Comparative Analysis**

Another more direct way to understand how students engaged with this material is through analyses of the lessons, questions, and reading guides set forth in textbooks and in the supplementary materials supplied alongside them. Paired alongside textbook content, reading exercises, questions, and guides—sometimes appearing at the end of textbook chapters and sometimes in separate publications meant to be read in tandem with the textbooks—directed students’ attention to specific topics and prompted them to think about certain aspects of history in certain ways. Thus, an analysis of these exercises and questions can provide perspective on which topics students would have focused on and how they might have thought about them; in

other words, they help us to arrive at a deeper understanding of post-war textbooks' educational impact.

Understanding what a good history textbook or lesson plan should accomplish helps to illuminate exactly where and how so many post-Civil War textbooks missed the mark in terms of their direction of students' learning. The American Historical Association's "Guidelines for the Preparation, Evaluation, and Selection of History Textbooks," approved in 1997 and updated in 2018, outlines a concise set of recommendations and guidelines for the creation and adoption of history textbooks. The guidelines place an emphasis on best practices geared towards what the Association calls "Historical Thinking." When it comes to teaching students to engage with historical thinking, the AHA explains that textbooks must acknowledge that history is, above all, a discipline that centers around themes, narratives, and patterns:

"The presentation of evidence in textbooks should acknowledge the diverse forms of historical evidence and the fact that the interpretation of this evidence is rarely straightforward. Adequate history textbooks should actively encourage historical thinking and the development of historical habits of mind beyond memorization. Adequate history texts not only provide a historical narrative based on a variety of historical sources and the latest scholarship, they also encourage readers, when appropriate, to apply the range of skills it takes to decode the complex historical record and to create historical arguments and narratives."<sup>67</sup>

Accordingly, good textbooks encourage and teach students to adopt new ways of thinking, and to consider historical events and figures from different perspectives:

"Good historical textbooks can also encourage historical thinking in other ways. They can help students learn both to rigorously analyze specific pieces of evidence and to identify and explain broader patterns of change and continuity over time. They can also help students develop the skills to apply historical knowledge and historical thinking to contemporary issues. They can encourage students to engage in a dialogue with the past, to have them ask substantive historical questions, and to help students develop positions that reflect careful deliberation and diverse perspectives."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> American Historical Association, "Guidelines for the Preparation, Evaluation, and Selection of History Textbooks" (2018). <https://www.historians.org/jobs-and-professional-development/statements-standards-and-guidelines-of-the-discipline/guidelines-for-the-preparation-evaluation-and-selection-of-history-textbooks>.

The AHA's emphasis on finding patterns and tracing historical themes in order to understand change over time, as well as the importance of approaching history with a critical and analytical lens parallels the suggestions set forth by the Bradley Commission on History in Schools in 1989.

As with understanding the purpose and objectives of history, the Committee's recommendations in particular are important in establishing grounds for comparison with school textbooks and reading guides from the post-Civil War period. One of the Committee's top recommendations for curricula reform, which closely mirrors the AHA's cautionary advice to avoid memorization in favor of critical thinking, is as follows:

“That [the study of history] must reach well beyond the acquisition of useful information. To develop judgement and perspective, historical study must often focus upon broad, significant themes and questions, rather than short-lived memorization of facts without context. In doing so, historical study should provide context for facts and training in critical judgment based upon evidence, including original sources, and should cultivate the perspective arising from a chronological view of the past down to the present day.”<sup>69</sup>

The Commission stresses narrative history, which it asserts “must illuminate vital themes and significant questions, including but reaching beyond the acquisition of useful facts.” In tracing these vital themes, the Commission also highlights the importance of asking and answering ““What of it?”” in order to encourage students to move beyond memorization and into the realm of critical and analytical thinking.<sup>70</sup>

The AHA and the Bradley Commission's emphasis on critical thinking—and their rejection of rote memorization—is valuable for two reasons: first, it provides insight into what

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> The Bradley Commission on History in Schools. “Building a History Curriculum: Guidelines for Teaching History in Schools.” *The History Teacher* 23, no. 1 (1989): 7-35. doi:10.2307/494598. 12.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

historians today widely consider to be the best practices for teaching history. Second, and more specific to the study of post-Civil War history textbooks, the guidelines offer a powerful point of contrast to the content and the reading and teaching methods provided by post-War textbooks. Especially when analyzed through the lens of the AHA or Bradley Commission's best practices for the writing and adoption of school textbooks, the shortcomings of post-Civil War textbooks are striking.

Two textbook examples can serve to demonstrate the failures of post-war textbooks to encourage critical thinking because they do precisely the opposite of what the AHA and Bradley Commission suggest: they encourage memorization, deemphasize narrative, and set forth an objective for students to understand merely a broad, cursory overview of history.

John Trainer's 1895 textbook *How to Teach and Study United States History by the Brace System* opens with a focus on memorization: "Concepts and reasons are formed by the power of the mind to judge or discriminate between thoughts, conclusions and ideas," Trainer writes in his introduction. "The power of association is of most use to the memory; without this the mind is unable to associate ideas, thoughts, conclusions, chronology, places, etc."<sup>71</sup> With his conclusion that "Correct thinking is produced by getting correct ideas of the subject in hand, and in their proper order," Trainer conveys that to him, adequate historical thinking involves little more than the memorization of facts and chronology. Thus, he establishes the purpose of his text and what he calls the "brace system"—a tool meant to help students memorize and recall basic facts, figures, and chronology.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> John Trainer, *How to Teach and Study United States History by the Brace System*, (Chicago: A. Flanagan, 1895), vii.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Trainer's "brace system" begins with writing the topic out in what he calls "blackboard form" (see right for example). He advises that the teacher write out the blackboard form so that students can copy it into their notebooks; they should then proceed to "repeat and re-write, time and again" so that they can memorize the information.<sup>73</sup> If the

| <b>STUDY XXIX.</b>             |                                       |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <b>BLACKBOARD FORM.</b>        |                                       |
| Causes<br>of the<br>Civil War. | 1619—Slavery Introduced.              |
|                                | 1820—Missouri Compromise.             |
|                                | 1828—Tariff Bill.                     |
|                                | 1832—Tariff Bill.                     |
|                                | 1850 { Fugitive Slave Act.            |
|                                | Compromise Measures.                  |
|                                | 1854 { Repeal of Missouri Compromise. |
|                                | Kansas Struggle.                      |
|                                | Party Disputes.                       |
|                                | 1856—The Elections.                   |
|                                | 1857—Dred Scott.                      |
|                                | 1859—John Brown.                      |
|                                | 1860—Secession.                       |

Trainer's outline of the causes of the Civil War presented in what he calls "blackboard form," part of the brace system.

goal of history teaching should be to convey a narrative, the blackboard form example provided—on the causes of the Civil War—demonstrates a clear failure: the text uses only ten bulleted lines to span the time period from 1619 to 1860. The content accompanying the blackboard form of the topics that Trainer covers does little to enhance students' *understanding* of key events and figures beyond providing questions that, on the whole, merely prompt more recall of basic information. With the example provided on the causes of the War, for example, Trainer advises that the teacher "spend one or more lessons in tracing the progress of slavery from 1619 to 1860" and lists out a handful of basic recall questions, such as "How could the Fugitive Slave Act embitter the South against the North?" and "Why was the secession of South Carolina considered the signal for hostilities?"<sup>74</sup> Questions like these—which deal more with the recall of basic information about events—do little to engage students' critical thinking skills; furthermore, paired alongside an already sparse outline of events, they do not encourage students

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 14, 32.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 134.

to contextualize the “so what” and “why” questions, so to speak, in the larger narrative history of the Civil War.

While Trainer’s textbook explicitly acknowledges memorization as the goal of the “brace system” outline, his is not the only text that suggested this kind of approach. Across the board, textbooks and reading guides emphasized memorization and recitation. William Swinton’s 1878 text, *A Condensed School History of the United States* set forth a similar method of studying: “a plan of clear and concise paragraphing, by which the *gist* of each paragraph is readily apprehended by the pupil.” Swinton also highlights the use of “direct, concise, and *recitable* construction” of his sentences.<sup>75</sup> Swinton’s emphasis on recitation mirrors Trainer’s focus on memorization and recall, and like Trainer’s, the questions that Swinton supplies later in his text do little more than prompt students’ memory and ask them to repeat, or in Swinton’s case merely to rewrite, certain facts. In later chapters of the textbook, Swinton provides reading questions as footnotes on each page of reading. On the surface level, some of Swinton’s questions do seem thought-provoking. In a section about the Civil War, for example, he prompts students about the ideological causes of the War, asking students, “What was there a difference of opinion about? Explain the views of the two classes of statesmen.”<sup>76</sup> In actuality, however, Swinton’s question merely asked students to lift their eyes a few paragraphs above, where he states, in a paragraph numbered in a way that lines up with the number of the question, “There was a difference of opinion respecting the nature of the United States government” and describes the different classes of statesmen in a matter of two sentences. In fact, all of Swinton’s questions follow the

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<sup>75</sup> William Swinton, *A Condensed School History of the United States, Constructed for Definite Results in Recitation and Containing a New Method of Topical Reviews*, (New York and Chicago: Ivison, Blakeman, Taylor & Co., 1878), iii.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 236.

same basic pattern: each question number matches up with a numbered paragraph appearing on the same page, so all students need to do is reread and rewrite, rather than comprehend the reading and produce a well-thought-out answer.

In general, the inadequacies of texts like Trainer's and Swinton's meant that students would have completed their reading without a true understanding of historical narratives—a failure when studying any kind of history or historical time period, which is why today organizations like the AHA and the Bradley Commission stress understanding narratives as a primary objective. But in particular, as the examples from Trainer and Swinton demonstrate, when it comes to presentations of the Civil War, texts' failure to engage students in critical thinking about historical narratives is especially detrimental. A 2018 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center, which was designed to study how effectively schools across the United States were teaching the history of slavery, set forth ten key concepts on teaching the topic. Among those key concepts were these five:

- “ • Slavery and the slave trader were central to the development and growth of the economy across British North America and later, the United States.
- Protections for slavery were embedded in the founding documents; enslavers dominated the federal government, the U.S. Supreme Court, and the U.S. Senate from 1787 through 1860.
- Slavery was an institution of power, designed to create profit for the slaveholder and break the will of the enslaved and was a relentless quest for profit abetted by racism.
- Slavery was the central cause of the Civil War.
- Slavery shaped the fundamental beliefs of Americans about race and whiteness, and white supremacy was both a product of, and legacy of, slavery.” <sup>77</sup>

In short, effective teaching on the Civil War not only centers slavery as its primary cause, but places the topic of slavery squarely in the narrative of American history more broadly,

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<sup>77</sup> Stephen Sawchuk, “How is Slavery Taught in U.S. Schools? Not Well, Says Study,” *EducationWeek*, 6 February 2018: <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/how-is-slavery-taught-in-u-s-schools-not-well-says-study/2018/02>.

encouraging students to think about the causes and effects of the war as both longstanding and interconnected.

Thus, having received an education that failed to accomplish these tasks students in the post-War time period were left with an education that essentially lacked real substance because, as Ben Orlin argues, “What separates memorization from learning is a sense of meaning.” And he provides a fitting example about the effects of ‘cheat sheets,’ or study guides like Trainer’s blackboard form:

“With a cheat sheet, a question like ‘Why did the Confederacy use Richmond as its capital for most of the Civil War?’ becomes equivalent to ‘Did you remember to jot this down on your page of notes?’ Getting students to dive into the real issue—what makes for a good capital city, especially in light of the specific pressures facing the seceded states—might require a longer, more open-ended, slower-to-grade question such as, ‘If Montgomery and Richmond had the same population and industrial capacity, which would have made a more desirable capital for the Confederacy, and why?’”<sup>78</sup>

Orlin’s hypothetical is, in the end, hardly far off from the kind of content that was common in textbooks of the post-War era—it is nearly identical in form to the earlier example from Trainer’s text: “Why was the secession of South Carolina considered the signal for hostilities?” And so overall, by merely asking students to recall basic dates and facts—focusing on memorization rather than contextualization and critical thinking—textbooks of the post-Civil War era left students without the tools to think critically about history as a discipline. Furthermore, and more specific to the study of racism and the history of slavery in America, they left students with a harmfully minimal understanding of the Civil War as more of an isolated event in the course of American history rather than as evidence and the effect of longstanding oppression and structural racism.

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<sup>78</sup> For a compelling case against memorization as a learning technique, see Ben Orlin, “When Memorization Gets in the Way of Learning,” *The Atlantic*, 9 September 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/09/when-memorization-gets-in-the-way-of-learning/279425/>



### III.

#### Teacher Influence and Involvement in the Learning Process

While memorization and recitation were strategies that a majority of textbooks advanced in some shape or form, there were some textbooks that acknowledged the need for further, deeper engagement with reading material. It would be inaccurate, therefore, to make sweeping generalizations about textbooks from this time period and assume that across the board they failed in their basic teaching strategies to get students to think critically about material. In her 1902 reading guide, *Studies in United States History: A Guide for the Use of Students and Teachers*, Sara May Riggs explains, “the object of the recitation should not be that alone of finding out how much the pupil remembers.” Rather, she writes, “the study, analysis, and coordination of historical material, under the teacher’s guidance, should form an important part of each day’s work.”<sup>79</sup> Riggs’ mention of the importance of “the study, analysis, and coordination of historical material” much more closely mirrors the AHA and Bradley Commission’s emphasis on narrative and independent, critical thinking.

Indeed, in Riggs’ guide she presents questions and exercises that prompt students to think independently and even engage with analyses of primary sources in order to understand and contextualize historical events. For example, in a section on the causes of the Civil War, she refers students to a pamphlet where they can find South Carolina’s Ordinances of Secession. She asks students to take notes on the ordinances, and poses thought-provoking questions such as whether they have “the tone of earnestness” and if, “upon the basis of a strict construction of the Constitution...the South demand[ed] more than it was justified in doing.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Sara May Riggs, *Studies in United States History: A Guide for the Use of Students and Teachers*, (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1902), xii.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 139.

As impressive as these questions are, especially compared to those set forth in texts like Trainer's and Channing's, Riggs' remarks in her introduction to her reading guide—and the exercises and prompts she sets forth throughout her text—raise a new question to consider when going about analyzing how students engaged with their history reading: in this case, what exactly constitutes “the teacher’s guidance,” as Riggs mentions in her introduction? Posed without accompanying answers, the questions that Riggs asks are left up to the teacher to determine how to answer. Riggs seemingly recognizes the open-ended nature of her reading guide, and therefore offers advice to teachers in the beginning of her text, telling them, for example, not to “follow slavishly the questions and topic given in the outline” but rather to use the guide “during the preparation of the lesson.” She notes that the topics she presents “must be enlarged upon as the needs of the recitation demand.”<sup>81</sup>

Thus, Riggs' text presents an unknown variable—and yet one that is critically important—in the analysis of how students engaged with textbook material, and ultimately, what educational impacts textbook content made upon the impressionable minds of students. Riggs is not the only textbook writer to acknowledge the role of educators, nor is hers the only text to provide advice for classroom direction and discussion. In *Elements of United States History*, Edward Channing writes, “in teaching American history, the fact that it is an account of a development should always be present in the teacher’s mind, and each teacher should, by question and suggestion, lead the pupils themselves to look upon it as a continuous story instead of a succession of events.”<sup>82</sup> William and Blanche Mowry similarly address the role of teachers in their *Essentials of United States History*, where they offer this paragraph of advice in their introduction:

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid. xii.

<sup>82</sup> Edward Channing, *Elements of United States History*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), vii.

“It largely rests with the individual teacher to give the class a liking for the history hour. The discerning teacher will select the important topics and study them in fuller detail than the space of a single text-book allows; he will provide for the reading of interesting books listed in the bibliography...he will enlarge upon the significant parts of the biographies of our leading statesmen and makers of history.”<sup>83</sup>

William Swinton’s *Condensed School History of the United States* serves as yet another example, as Swinton opens his text by noting that teachers are actually his primary audience.

“This condensed manual of the History of the United States has been prepared in order to meet the view and wants of that large and increasing class of teachers, and more especially the teachers in our common schools,” he writes, “who are aiming at *definite results* in this study.”<sup>84</sup>

Statements like these from textbook authors serve to paint a picture of learning that places teachers in the middle of students’ educational experiences: teachers form the bridge between textbook material—words on pages—and students’ interpretation of those words, absorption of the material, and their active learning. The challenge lies, however, in discerning what exactly that role would have looked like. How did teachers read and interpret these textbooks? To what extent did they rely on and incorporate different texts in their lesson planning and classroom exercises? How might they have answered the questions presented in textbooks, and how would they have guided and graded students’ responses?

Without archival sources that can speak directly to these questions, understanding the role teachers played in students’ interpretation of textbooks and in their educations at large requires a good deal of conjecture. Nonetheless, even minimal conjecture suggests reason for concern about how effectively teachers of the post-Civil War time period may have been able to

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<sup>83</sup> William Augustus Mowry and Mrs. Blanche Swett Mowry, *Essentials of United States History*, (Silver, Burdett and Company, 1906), v.

<sup>84</sup> William Swinton, *A Condensed School History of the United States, Constructed for Definite Results in Recitation and Containing a New Method of Topical Reviews*, (New York and Chicago: Ivison, Blakeman, Taylor & Co., 1878), iii.

fill in the gaps of textbooks, which, as explored in the previous chapter, too often failed to convey in both content and historical method the reality of United States history. Education historian Diane Ravitch explains that “in the first half of the nineteenth century, the requirements for entry into teaching were modest: new teachers had to persuade a local school board of their moral character, and in some districts, pass a test of their general knowledge.” As time progressed, requirements would slowly develop—Ravitch states that “by 1867, most states required teachers to pass a locally administered test to get a state certificate, which usually included not only the basic skills, but also U.S. history, geography, spelling, and grammar”—but there were no uniform requirements or qualifications to be met. Ravitch ultimately concludes that “during the nineteenth century, different states adopted different approaches to training future teachers”: on the whole, “teacher certification in the nineteenth century was irregular and diverse,” she writes. “There was no single pattern, and there was no teaching profession as such.”<sup>85</sup>

Just this basic trajectory of the history of teaching in America offers room to hypothesize that teaching qualifications and guidelines, which were both minimal and non-uniform, likely would not have been enough to ensure that the teachers working in school across America had the ability to effectively teach history—and fill in the gaps left by textbooks that, as we have seen, were wholly inadequate. In Southern states in particular there is cause for concern: if school boards in the South were able to apply enough pressure on textbook publishers to alter their content, as Chapter One explored, it is not hard to hypothesize that those same school committees, which Ravitch says tested teachers’ “moral character” as a qualification, could have

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<sup>85</sup> Diane Ravitch, “A Brief History of Teacher Professionalism,” White House Conference on Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers, 23 August 2003, <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/tchrqual/learn/preparingteachersconference/ravitch.html>.

applied the same pressure and standards directly to educators themselves. In a South that would lag behind economically and remain segregated long after the War's end—with educational spaces often serving as a primary space of segregation—it is not so much of a reach, even with the inexistence of direct archival sources, to conclude that teachers may not have been able to advance students' learning in the way that an education in American history demands, or the way that some textbook authors themselves envisioned.

In this specific area, further research into the demographics of teachers, and perhaps primary sources from classrooms themselves, could yield more definite results. But on the whole and paired all together, textbooks; reading questions, writing prompts, and classroom exercises; and authors' communication with teachers about their role in the classroom and utilizing textbooks tells a story about American history education in the post-Civil War era. Rather than encourage students to think analytically and independently about history, they asked students to memorize and recite basic facts; instead of teaching students to approach the past with a critical eye and objective perspective, they encouraged students to focus on the positive aspects of our nation's history rather than learn from its mistakes. And when it comes to studying race, slavery, and the Civil War, textbooks and teaching methods failed to equip students with the knowledge and tools to see racism as a systemic, institutional part of America's history—as both the cause and effect of conflict. These learning materials made classrooms places where, indeed, students could “enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.”<sup>86</sup> And thus, the process of learning in its entirety in post-War America failed not only in helping students arrive at the truth about American history, but in doing so, it failed to help those students contextualize and understand their own place within that story.

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<sup>86</sup> Address by President John F. Kennedy, Yale University Commencement. June 11, 1962.

## CONCLUSION

One of the Bradley Historical Commission's points, discussed in Chapter Two, was the importance of asking and answering the "What of it?" question—one that should always be present in the mind of an historian or student of history. So what, then, of all these textbooks? Why study the intricacies of the textbook publishing trade after the Civil War? Why trace textbooks of this time period for evidence of the Lost Cause narrative or attempts to gloss over 'controversial' material? Why does it matter?

I answer that it matters for two reasons.

First, because these mindsets—by that I mean the lines of thinking set forth in post-War textbooks, like the Lost Cause narrative or states' rights argument—are still present in our society. We have to bear in mind that a generation of Americans, not long ago in the grand scheme of American history, was educated using texts just like these; a generation thus failed to grasp the true meaning of the war, and perhaps even more relevant to our own society where we continue to see the effects of such thinking, that generation failed to comprehend the War's causes and effects within the context of a structural and ongoing history of racism. In the same way that a book often survives on a shelf long after its publication, or maybe makes its way through the hands of family members as it is passed down, so, too, do ideologies and mindsets persist long after they were first taught.<sup>87</sup> If we want to challenge and change these mindsets in

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<sup>87</sup> For example, in a 2015 McClatchy-Marist poll, 41 percent of respondents did not think that slavery was the main reason for the Civil War, and 38 percent responded that schools should not teach students that slavery was the main reason for the War. <https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/politics-government/article30101748.html>.

our own time, we have to trace them back to the source and understand how they were internalized.

My research in the previous chapters aimed to make a contribution to the sourcing of those narratives and mindsets, beginning with tracing the intricacies of a publishing industry that was struggling to respond to the rapid social change that the country had witnessed leading up to and in the wake of the Civil War. Scholarship from Venezky and Kaestle on the history of the book in America synthesized with research from Moreau on textbook content from the post-War era demonstrated how the textbook-publishing industry was initially slow to react. Wary of isolating certain regions of the country by publishing content that could be perceived as polarizing, the industry on the whole took a conservative approach: publishers and authors attempted to produce a book that could sell on a national scale by avoiding controversial material entirely. As a result, the textbooks produced immediately after the War, from 1865 until about 1890, tended to favor merely a cursory overview of American history, or one that attempted to appease the ideological arguments of both the North and the South.

By 1890, however, the story had already begun shifting. The industry's conservative approach was no longer working and facing pressure, especially in the South where school enrollment was skyrocketing and interest groups were pushing for narrative histories sympathetic to the Confederate cause, publishers struggled to mass produce one textbook that could appease school boards from the North and South alike. And so, they faced the controversy head on. Recognizing a growing market in the South, textbook publishers began to produce texts that dove into the Lost Cause narrative and the states' rights argument alike, hoping to publish textbooks that would pass Southern school boards' adoption standards.

While Chapter One relied on analyses of various textbooks to support the argument about the change in publishing practices and therefore in textbook content, Chapter Two begins to answer Moreau's call for further research into the actual educational *impact* of those textbooks. Therefore, it returns to some of those same textbooks in order to analyze how students would have engaged with the material contained within them, and what educational effects certain textbook content would have produced. Three main areas of analysis offer insight into the educational impact of many of these textbooks and the reading guides that accompanied them: how the textbooks' definition of the purpose of history informed their approach to studying it, what kinds of critical thinking skills (or lack thereof) the texts established as learning objectives, and finally how teachers might have influenced students' engagement with historical material.

First, textbook authors communicated with students and teachers about the function and purpose of history in a manner that sent a clear message about how they ought to study history: rather than asking students to approach history with a critical eye, authors encouraged students to look at the subject as a means to build good character, and therefore they encouraged students to turn towards the positive aspects of history and away from the bad—meaning that students lacked a holistic depiction of history. Second, the reading questions and writing prompts that were often contained in textbooks or their accompanying supplementary materials directly influenced—and often defined and directed—students' learning. Ultimately, these questions often pointed to a simple conclusion: textbooks on the whole were focused on getting students to recall basic information and facts rather than dive deeply into material in order to form their own conclusions about historical events and figures. When it comes to understanding slavery, racism, and the causes of the Civil War, the result of focusing on memorization and recitation rather than critical thinking followed naturally: students were not equipped with the ability to contextualize



the War within the broader history of institutional racism and oppression within the United States. Finally, assessing the role that teachers played in students' interactions with textbook material poses somewhat of a barrier to our ability to fully understand students' engagement with textbooks. Without the sources to determine exactly how teachers applied and utilized textbooks and their accompanying questions and exercises in their classrooms, it remains unclear exactly how students absorbed and interacted the information they learned about American history. A majority of textbooks, however, emphasize the role of teachers and offer advice to educators about how to utilize their texts. Therefore, basic conjecture about teachers' influence in the classroom, based on both authors' notes in textbooks and the history of education in America can help us form hypotheses about how many teachers, in the South in particular, may have lacked the necessary qualifications to successfully fill the gap left by many textbooks of the post-War time period.

Thus, these three factors combined point to the fact that American history classrooms in the post-War period were not spaces that fostered independent, critical, or objective thought about American history. On the contrary, they were places where American students internalized, through memorization and recitation, pre-established narratives, which were far too often conciliatory to the South, celebratory of the Southern cause, and overly focused on the successes of American history rather than a holistic, realistic, and truthful picture of it.

Specifically, this thesis covered the textbook-publishing trade in the years following the Civil War, tracing the influences on the trade, the content it produced, and finally the educational impact of the texts published during that era. But more broadly, this project addressed patterns and narratives: the patterns that were shared across textbooks and the narratives that filled that filled their pages. Resulting from social change but also helping to spur it in their own right,

these narratives present almost limitless potential to study—especially because they continue to influence our society and shape our history today. The potential to know more about how American history education in post-War America shaped students’ thinking in their own time and even to this day reminds us of the value of these sources—and the importance that we keep studying them.

Part of that importance—and the second reason to study post-War textbook publishing and reading content—is because, much like the textbook publishing industry in the years after the Civil War’s end, we are still grappling with the question of how to teach United States history. As we contend with the effects of the pandemic and witness one of the largest civil rights movements in recent decades, in many ways it feels like we are at a turning point in history—and the question about how we ought to teach our national history has been placed center-stage. It only makes sense that in the final months of his presidency, former President Donald Trump launched a new commission, the “1776 Commission,” branded as an education in patriotism to combat what his administration dubbed “reckless ‘re-education’ attempts that seek to reframe American history around the idea that the United States is not an exceptional country but an evil one.”<sup>88</sup> Trump’s actions against these “re-education” attempts were a direct response to recent efforts, spearheaded by the *New York Times*’ “1619 Project” to contextualize United States history within the broader story of slavery and racism in the United States. The 1619 Project explains its mission as an attempt to “reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national

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<sup>88</sup> Statements and Releases from the Trump White House Archives: “1776 Commission Takes Historic and Scholarly Step to Restore Understanding of the Greatness of the American Founding.” <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/1776-commission-takes-historic-scholarly-step-restore-understanding-greatness-american-founding/>.

narrative.”<sup>89</sup> We should be careful to note the false dichotomy presented here: that a project that centers the experience of Black Americans must be unpatriotic in nature, and that an attempt at conveying a more accurate, truthful depiction of America is necessarily aiming to portray it as an evil country. These incorrect assumptions about the historical reframing happening right now are, obviously, driven by racist ideology—and they are ones that we must continue to push back on.

With these two considerations in mind, I hope that there is a broader purpose to studies like mine. In the introduction to this thesis, I asked how can we see the problems in our own society if we fail to recognize them as they existed in our past, what the purpose is of history both in general and in the United States, and how we ought to go about teaching it to students across the country. These are complex, difficult questions, but they are ones that we must continue to ask. So long as textbooks and education more broadly remain the battleground for debate about the meaning and value of our national history, we need to make a conscious effort to reform not just *what* we choose to study, but *how* we go about studying it. The time is now to reconcile with our past, and while the questions we now ask ourselves are complicated and challenging, perhaps the first step in answering them only asks that we pick up a book—and that we remain willing to turn the page.

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<sup>89</sup> *The New York Times Magazine*, “The 1619 Project,”  
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