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AUTHOR McLaurin, Melton
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ABSTRACT

This report reviews the image portrayed of the Negro, in textbooks used in the deep South. Slavery is painted as a cordial, humane system under kindly masters and the Negro as docile and childlike. Although the treatment of the modern era is relatively more objective, the texts, on the whole, evade treatment of the Civil Rights struggle, violence, and the positive contributions of Negro leaders such as Martin Luther King. (KG)

THE IMAGE OF THE NEGRO IN DEEP SOUTH PUBLIC SCHOOL STATE HISTORY TEXTS

by

Dr. Melton McLaurin
Department of History
University of South Alabama
Mobile, Alabama

THE IMAGE OF THE NEGRO IN DEEP SOUTH PUBLIC SCHOOL STATE HISTORY TEXTS

The tenacity with which a society clings to its myths is truly an amazing and at time, disheartening, phenomenon. Within the subculture that is identified in American society as "Southern," this tenacity approaches the irrational insorfar as the image of the Negro race is concerned. Despite the findings of historians, sociologists, and anthropologists to the contrary, the Southern white still continues to believe the Negro a docile, trusting, lazy, emotional, child-like creature who needs the guidance of the more mature, intelligent white. This image of the Negro the white man insists on retaining in the face of the Supreme Court desegregation decision, the 1964 and 1965 civil rights laws and the grudging acceptance thereof, and the increasingly prominent roles played by Negroes in all areas of national life. The eloquence of a Martin Luther King, the intellectual brilliance of a James Baldwin, the obvious competence of a Ralph Bunche or a Thurgood Marshall, not even the athletic and leadership abilities, both qualities admired by white Southerners, of a Bill Russell, have blurred the image. This myth is so durable because it is transmitted by informal learning, that is, one learns to accept the myth simply by living in a segregated society, which has as its ideological basis the belief in the Negro's inferiority. Or, to put it more bluntly, one eats, breathes, lives, sleeps and therefore inevitably learns, segregation and the myth of the Negro. Because this social learning becomes a part of one's subconscious mind set, it is by far more forceful and less easily erased than formal education. Instead, any thinking Southern white easily recognizes the

influence that such received ideas have on one's mentality, and also the effort needed to overcome them. It is in overcoming these received ideas, when they have no factual basis, that formal education, which at least supposedly makes use of the latest scientific information, must play an important role. Yet in the Deep South the "received ideas" concerning the Negro are an integral part of the curriculum of the primary and secondary school systems -- in both Negro and white schools. Thus, social learning is sanctioned and buttressed, even today, by formal education. This is one of the major reasons a tremendously distorted image of the Negro continues to enjoy such widespread acceptance among Southern whites.

A study of state histories used in the elementary and secondary school systems of three Deep South states clearly reveals the manner in which formal education perpetuates the traditional image of the Negro. With the exception of Mississippi: A History, the texts considered in this study are all approved by the state textbook committees of the state in which they are used, they are all currently being used within the school systems, and they are all being used in required courses. All were written since the 1954 desegregation case. Know Alabama[1] and Our Georgia[2] are elementary texts, usually used in either the third or fourth grades. Mississippi: A History,[3] Alabama History for Schools[4], and Empire Builders of Georgia[5] are used in grades eight or nine. Thus, the average Deep South student will twice encournter state history at the grade school level. If he does not go on to college, where, hopefully, the myth at least will be challenged, he will depart from

his formal schooling with no conflict between what society has told him is true about the Negro and what the textbook informed him.

The authors of Our Georgia find a solution to the first problem of racial imagery confronted by any writer dealing with Southern history, the institution of slavery. Since slavery in Anglo-Saxon societies was based on race, and since ante-bellum Southern society was based on slavery, their solution is rather unique--they ignore the issue as much as possible. Eli Whitney sees Negroes picking seed out of cotton, while singing, of course.[6] Joel Chandler Harris writes stories of slaves, who are also musically inclines.[7] Frank Lebby Stanton writes poems in Negro dialect.[8] That is the extent of the text's treatment of slavery; indeed, that is all the text says about the Negro. The word "slave" is used in the book five times, the word "Negro" only five. There is however, an entire chapter on the Indians of Georgia, and numerous references to them elsewhere in the book.[9] The role of the Negro since the ante-bellum period is completely ignored. No attention is given to any of the social problems caused by tne growing Negro militancy of the late 1940's and early 1950's, or the problem race presented in education, although education in modern Georgia is discussed.[10] Not one single contribution to the State of Georgia by one single Negro is considered. The color line does not exist.

The other elementary text under study does not avoid the problems of race, it casts them in a mold acceptable to Southern white society. Slavery is discussed in Know Alabama, but without

even the pretence of historical objectivity. The consideration of slavery is presented in the text in the form of a story about the life of a Southern child (white) who lives on a plantation which is inhabited by slaves right out of the pages of Uncle Remus. He, of course, is reared by a loyal Mammy. "You have known her all your life and love her very much. She was your nurse when you were a baby."[11] Most masters treated slaves "kindly." The plantation wife "is the best friend the Negroes have, and they know it." Slaves at work in the fields look up when they see the young white child,"tip their hats and say, 'Good morning, Master John.'" Master John likes "the friendly way they speak and smile; they show bright rows of white teeth." One of the slaves is named "Jig" because "He dances so well when the Negroes play their banjos." After a hard day's work in the field,. "the slaves are coming in for the night. You can hear their faraway, sad, sweet songs as they walk slowly home. Later in the night, they will gather around the front steps and sing spirituals. The singing is beautiful. . . ."[12] Whippings, runaways and discipline problems of any type are conspiciously avoided. So is any discussion of the slaves' family life. Thus, the myth of a joyous institution -- slavery, is retained and the white Southerners' stereotype of the Negro reinforced.

One of the works used at the secondary grade level is hardly more objective. The author of Alabama History for Schools explains that "while the Negro was badly treated as a rule in the foreign slave trade /which was conducted by Northerners/ he was generally very well treated by Alabama farmers." Slaves lived in

homes which the author implies were as good as those of four of every ten Americans. They lived in slave quarters because "the Negroes liked to live together to keep from getting lonesome." They received excellent medical care. Actually, in this respect "the slave was almost always better off then free laborers, black or white, of the same period." The fact that the overseer determined whether a slave was sick, and was inclined to work all slaves who were not seriously ill in order to insure production, is ignored. Runaway slaves were treated "leniently." In noting that formal education was denied slaves, the author defends this omission with Booker T. Washington's statement that "In a certain way, every slave plantation in the South was an industrial school." No comment, however, is made on the phrase, "In a certain way." And, of course, the "lazy field hand who went to sleep beside his job" is worked into the narrative. Again, significantly, the family life of the slaves is not discussed; the word "family" is not used in connection with the Negro. The overall picture that emerges is one of slavery as a benevolent, paternalistic system, accepted by a docil, trusting people. Indeed, "with all the drawbacks of slavery, it should be noted that slavery was the earliest form of social security in the United States."[13]

Mississippi: A History is even less factual in its treatment of slavery. Rather than discuss slavery per se, the author partially adopts the policy of the authors of Our Georgia and attempts to ignore the subject. However, since historical objectivity obviously requires some consideration of slavery in a history text on a Deep South state, the author does include a five page section on the plantation. The section is hardly an objective discussion of plantation life. Instead, it is almost totally comprised of an account of plantation life by, of course, a member of the planter class. In the account, the master treats the Negroes "as his own," implying that the Negroes were treated as children of the master. Slaves were intolerably lazy: "It was often said with a laugh by their owners that it took two to help one to do nothing." Slaves were merely "inefficient and lazy people," whose laziness was looked upon and accepted with kindly understanding by the master. Negroes were taught by the master and mistress "as they taught their own children." Such teaching, however, was in the area of social conduct, not formal education. That is, Negroes were taught to refrain from theft and dishonesty, not to read or write. For these child-like creatures, who were "fond of making visits" to the planter's home, slavery was a beneficial system.[14]

By treating slavery within a five page section on plantation life, the authors of Empire Builders of Georgia also adopt the tactic of avoiding a thorough consideration of the subject. A formula of vague generalizations and few facts is employed to transform slavery into a cordial, humane institution. Ignored are the slave codes

that held the system together. Ignored are the peculiar institution's adverse effect on the Negro's family roles and the morals of both planter and slave. Whippings, runaways, and other unpleasant details of the system's harsh disciplinary measures are conspiciously avoided. Rather, the author would have the reader believe that "In general, where the master lived on the plantation, there was a happy relationship between him and his slaves." "The plantation was a school. An intelligent master considered his own interest by providing special instruction for every talented slave . . . Civilizing the Negroes was important to the master."[15] The word "civilizing" heavily reinforces another myth about the Negro, that of his supposed savagery, which also denotes inferiority. The entire concept of the plantation as a school, a favorite of Southern historians since Ulrich B. Phillips, implies that Negroes were an inferior, uncivilized people who received valuable training at the hands of their masters.

After the Civil War, Negroes continued to be loyal, trusting, and lazy, as the authors (or revisors) of Know Alabama vigorously maintain. "Many of the Negroes in the South remained loyal to white Southerners. Even though they had lately been freed from slavery, even though they had no education, they knew who their friends were. They knew that the Southern white men who had been good to them in time of slavery were still their friends."[16] Thus, Negroes stayed and worked in the South, many of them dedicated to making their fellows

realize that "they must be honest and keep the laws. . . ."[17]

The violence perpetrated upon the Negro during and after the state's redemption is carefully neglected. The treatment the Klan receives could be deemed laughable were it not for the seriousness of the subject and the fact that that organization, reborn, still exerts its sinister influence within the South. The Klan, according to the authors, was comprised of loyal white men who realized that the government could not protect their families. They banded together "to do something to bring back law and order, to get government back in the hands of honest men who knew how to run it." The Klan warned those who did "lawless things" and sentenced people in its courts. "Sometimes the sentence would be to leave the state." (One wonders if the authors believed this to be the worse punishment that could be inflicted upon an individual.) "The Klan did not ride often, only when it had to." The Klan was also invincible. "Federal troops killed some Klansmen in gun battles, but they could not stop the Klan." Finally, the Klan drove the carpetbaggers back North and the Negroes "decided to get themselves jobs and settle down to make an honest living."[18] Within this one short discussion, vigilante action becomes legitimate, the federal government becomes an enemy, and Negroes are implied to be somewhat less than honest.

After this description of the Negro during Reconstruction the authors ignore the Negro in the post-war South, except for short essays on, of course, Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver, neither of whom were born, reared, or educated in Alabama.

Carver, the authors note in an extremely revealing but unintentional commentary on Southern society, was presented an honorary degree by Simpson College of Iowa.[19] Although revised in 1965 to include the development of the Marshall Space Flight Center at Huntsville, the text fails to mention the practice of segregation, the 1954 Supreme Court school decision, the civil rights struggles at Montgomery, Birmingham, or Selma, or any of the early civil rights movements. It reads as if the Negro ceased to exist some time around the turn of the century. And, for all purposes except labor, he did.

Alabama History also amply demonstrates the failure of secondary texts to substantially improve the traditional image of the Negro, or, with a few exceptions, to chronicle his contributions to society after gaining his freedom. The Negro's role in Reconstruction is briefly mentioned, but no details are given. However, at least in the discussion of this subject, the Negro achieves equality with some whites. According to the author, "The great body of Negro and white (native) Republicans were dupes of the carpetbaggers and scalawags." The text virtually ignores the Negro after Reconstruction. Tacked on almost as an afterthought to the author's discussion of this subject is the statement that "No laws were passed at this time to keep Negroes from voting, although there were such laws passed many years later."[20] Otherwise, the struggle over disenfranchisement during the late 1890's and the brutual racial persecution it engendered are entirely omitted. Also ignored is the Negro's positive role in the agrarian reform movement, the

Progressive era, and the New Deal. What is perhaps most striking is the author's almost total failure to acknowledge the development of the legal system of segregation. If a complete stranger to Southern life were to read this work, he would hardly be left with the impression that segregation was ever practiced in the state. Despite an entire decade of racial turmoil since 1955, only the Birmingham crisis of 1963 and the role of George C. Wallace in the integration of the University of Alabama are mentioned, briefly, by the author. The name of Martin Luther King, who influenced the history of the state more than perhaps any other figure in the twentieth century, is nowhere to be found. With a feel for the status quo that is amazing, the author completely ignores the 1954 Supreme Court desegregation decision and the irate reaction it provoked from the white community, although a section on "School Problems Today" is included.[21] Were it not for Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver, whose careers do receive attention, the post-war Negro would be consigned to oblivion. Again, an author chooses the development of the Huntsville space center as the most significant event in recent Alabama history, devoting an entire chapter to it.[22]

Considerably more objectivity is encountered in Mississippi: A History. The Negro's continued state of dependence on the white man during the immediate post-war years is briefly noted, as is the development of segregated educational and religious systems.[23] The Negro's disenfranchisement is given rather factual treatment, although the terrible racial bitterness of the 1890's is not.[24] Also ignored

is the Negro's activity as a positive factor in the Farmers' Alliance and the Populist Party.[25] In addition, James K. Vardaman, one of the most vicious race baiters in the history of Mississippi, a man who, by championing white supremacy, controlled state politics during the first quarter of this century, is portrayed as a rather harmless demagogue whose bark was worse than his bite.[26] Other political leaders, from Theodore Bilbo to Ross Barnett, who used the race issue as a means to gain office, are treated in a somewhat similar manner.[27] Although the author acknowledges the existence of segregation in education and religion, there is in his writing the underlying assumption that the Negroes approved of these developments and were happy living in a segregated society. This assumption is finally stated in the discussion of the 1954 Supreme Court school desegregation case. Mississippi, according to the author, prior to the decision was taking steps to improve its segregated system, steps which both races "evidenced their satisfaction with." The Court's decision, it is implied, caused the state's efforts some difficulty. But, by adopting a pupil assignment plan, the state continued its segregated educational system. The program worked beautifully; "Incidents had been extremely rare, for by and large, each race--its parents, its pupils and their teachers, had found it advantageous to remain in an 'equal but separate' status."[28]

The treatment accorded the Negro and the problems he presented in the post-war era in Empire Builders of Georgia is, from an historical viewpoint, appalling. Of course, the newly freed Negro is pictured as a buffoon who comes under the "unfortunate influence

of dishonest men who were attracted like thieves to the scene of confusion and disorder." The work of the Freedmen's Bureau is dubbed "generally acceptable" and the name of Booker T. Washington is intoned.[29] Other than that, the Negro is non-existent. Yet the material omitted and the topics avoided speak volumes about the Southern white's attitude toward the black man. Missing is a discussion of the repressive Black Codes or the constructive Reconstruction measures supported by Negro legislators. Although Georgia had one of the largest Populist Parties in the South, th e drama of the Populist insurgency and the Negro's role in it are completely avoided. Tom Watson, that enigmatic figure who first attempted to unite Georgia whites and blacks in the Populist Party and then, by becoming a violent Negrophobe, controlled Georgia politics in the early twentieth century, becomes simply another bland politician. "Thomas E. Watson represented Georgia in both houses of Congress, where he advocated the use of automatic couplers on railroad cars. In 1896 he introduced the bill which began the system of rural free delivery of mail in the nation."[30] That is all of the attention given Watson, who also happened to be the Populist candidate for vice-president in the year 1896. The disenfranchisement struggle, the lynchings and burnings, and the general racial hatreds of the era from 1880 to 1920 are evidently not considered a relevant part of Georgia's history. They do not complement the image of the docile, happy Negro, or that of the benevolent, kind white.

Fortunately, the text's coverage of modern racial problems is somewhat improved, though hardly adequate. A surprisingly objective discussion of the school integration crisis of 1954-65 and the growing impact of the Negro voter on the state's political life prevent the work from being a thoroughly dismaying apology for racist concepts. Not mentioned, however, is the fact that the 1965 voting rights law was responsible for much of the Negro's political activity. Nor is the Negro revolution <u>per se</u> adequately dealt with. The 1964 civil rights act and its effects on Georgia's populace are not considered. The freedom riders, the demonstrations at Albany and Savannah, and the racial overtones of the Goldwater victory

in 1964 are also ignored. And most significantly, neither Martin Luther King nor the Southern Christian Leadership Conference receive the slightest notice. The greatest social upheaval the nation has ever witnessed centered for years about this man and this organization. The changes they helped render affect the lives of every American, not just Georgians. Yet they are accorded not a single line of text, although the Atlanta Braves merit two captioned photographs.[31]

The civil rights struggle of the last decade and a half, however, has not failed to leave its imprint on the mind of the Deep South White. Changes of attitude are reflected in two state histories recently adopted. Mississippi Yesterday and Today, a basic revision of Mississippi: A History published in 1964 and updated in 1967, is replacing the earlier work. The planter's description of the lazy slaves is deleted and the subject discussed much more objectively. It is noted that some slaves were abused and that whites feared slave uprisings. Yet the planter continues to be portrayed as a kindly figure who took a paternal interest in his slaves. The violence on which the system rested ultimately is ignored. The Negro during Reconstruction emerges dishonest and ignorant, his faults magnified and his constructive measures unmentioned. The corruption of Lieutenant Governor A. K. Davis and Superintendent of Education T. W. Cardoza is recorded, the service of Senator Blanche Ki Bruce is not. Again, the disenfranchisement of the Negro in the 1890's is objectively assessed while the racial bitterness and violence of the era is overlooked. The treatment of the modern era is much improved. The section explaining that Negroes favored segregated schools has been completely cut. The racial issues that rejuvenated the state's Republican Party, the riot at Ole Miss over James Meredith's admission, and the racial murders of Medgar Evers and the Philadelphia threesome are all recounted. But here the author's phraseology tends to defend the defenders of the Old Order. Ross Barnett, despite the Meredith incident "continued to be considered nationally as a

champion of constitutional government." The description of the Oxford riot is terminated thusly: "A disturbance followed, involving first marshalls with tear gas and later federal troops with fixed bayonets. Mississippians who remembered their state's history recalled that a hundred years earlier, in a war whose centennial was then being observed, there had been federal troops at Oxford!" The State Sovereignty Commission's providing New England newsmen with tours of the state is described as a "gesture which caused favorable and sympathetic reactions on the part of a number of these who came and saw." The implication is clear. [32]

Adopted this year by the state of Alabama, The Land Called Alabama also reflects gradually changing attitudes. Its coverage of slavery is weak, and again the planter emerges as a kindly gentleman concerned for the comfort of his charges and interested in encouraging their family and spiritual life. Again, abuses of slaves and the fear of insurrection are mentioned while the basic brutality of the system is ignored. But the author's treatment of Reconstruction is balanced, both the sins and the contributions of the Radicals are noted. Disenfranchisement and its connections with Populism are also fairly covered. In the modern era, the violent reaction to the 1954 Supreme Court ruling is discussed, as are the effects of the 1964 and 1965 Civil Rights Acts. An entire section is devoted to the Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma struggles, including the violence and the murders. The roles played by both Dr. King and George Wallace are objectively described. The author notes that Wallace "was unable to prevent the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which he made the main target of his speeches." These events are recorded in a straightforward narrative void of any implications. [33]

From a reading of six of the seven texts considered in this brief study, certain conclusions about their treatment of the Negro can hardly be avoided. The first is that the Negro is never portrayed as an actor; rather, he is always acted upon, always described as a passive agent. The Negro's positive contributions to society--his support of reform measures during Reconstruction, his role in the Alliance and Populist Party, his dogged pursuit of equality--have been slighted. Even in Mississippi Yesterday and Today an event of the significance of the 1954 Supreme Court desegregation ruling is treated as a happenstance. There is no indication that the Negro's protest against inferior segregated schools led to the decision and all the connected legal activity in the state which followed it. The second is that there is a deliberate attempt to perpetuate the image of the Negro as an emotional, trusting, lazy child like creature. Granted that every author is somewhat a prisoner of his times, it is inconceivable that the authors of six of these seven texts were totally unaware of evidence which sharply contrasted with the view of the Negro which they chose to present. Another inescapable conclusion is that the Negro is made to seem to prefer his position, for almost no attention is given his efforts to become an active member of society. Quite obviously, a conscious effort has also been made to preserve the image of the white man as the Negro's friend and protector, always kind and benevolent. Any suspicion that slavery and segregation rested upon brutality and violence, either threatened or applied, is avoided. Unfortunately, the texts simply reflect the beliefs of the white majority who control the South's educational systems; at times they even cater to those beliefs. The extent of the catering ranges from pure supporting propaganda in Know Alabama to a

heavily qualified objectivity in Mississippi Yesterday and Today and Empire Builders of Georgia.

Just as certain conclusions must be drawn from the books, certain unavoidable implications stem from the conclusions drawn. Rather obviously such a distorted image of the Negro as that presented by the texts can do little good for children, black or white. How can black children taught from such texts develop a sense of pride in their race? How, on the other hand, can white children come to understand why so much criticism is leveled by those outside their culture at practices which their formal education, at the very least, does not condemn? How can they be expected to understand the racial revolution in which they are participants? Taken as a group, the six texts are a powerful justification for the demands of many Southern blacks for the teaching of Negro history in public schools. Certainly their presentation of the Negro implies that "education" completely controlled by a white majority can hardly be the key to the solution of the area's racial problems, as so many whites have for so long maintained. For under such a system, "education" simply incorporates the majority's prejudices rather than challenging them.

Yet, if the youth of the Deep South, black and white, are ever to come to an understanding of one another, the unfounded myths of the past must be destroyed. Unless the youth of the South do understand and appreciate one another, the traditional roadblock to the area's social, educational, and economic progress will continue to take its toll. For the area's youth to see clearly where they are going, they must know where they have

been, and why they have been there. Such an understanding will be difficult to achieve if the black man's history, and the effects of the white man upon it, are not better told in the public schools. Malcolm C. McMillian's The Land Called Alabama is a significant step in this direction. Hopefully, others will follow.

Dr. Melton McLaurin
Department of History
University of South Alabama

NOTES

[1]Frank Owsley, John C. Stewart, and Gordon T. Chappell, Know Alabama (Northport, Ala: Colonial Press, 1965). It should be noted that this is a revised edition, revised by Viola Ayer and Frances Roberts.

[2]Louise Maynard and Ruth Aultman, Our Georgia (Austin, Texas: The Steck Company, 1959).

[3]John K. Bettersworth, Mississippi: A History (Austin, Texas: The Steck Company, 1959).

[4]Charles G. Summersell, Alabama History for Schools (3rd Edition; revised, Northport, Ala: Colonia Press, 1965).

[5]Ruth Suddeth, Isa L. Osterhout, and George L. Hutcheson, Empire Builders of Georgia (4th edition; Austin, Texas: Steck-Vaughn Company, 1966).

[6]Our Georgia, 71.

[7]Ibid.,87-88.

[8]Ibid., 93.

[9]Ibid., 53-68,23-65, 117-20, 155-56.

[10]Ibid., 150-151.

[11]Know Alabama, 115.

[12]Ibid, 117-19

[13]All of the material taken from Alabama History is contained in pages 228-35.

[14]Mississippi: A History, 241-44.

[15]Empire Builders, 193-95.

[16]Know Alabama, 178-79.

[17]Ibid., 179.

[18]Ibid., 177-79

[19]Ibid., 205-07, 233-35.

[20] Alabama History, 340, 345.

[21] Ibid., 453-489.

[22] Ibid., 405, 499-507.

[23] Mississippi: A History, 344, 354-55, 361-66, 376-81.

[24] Ibid., 376-81.

[25] Ibid., 346, 382-83.

[26] Ibid., 394-97.

[27] Ibid., 419-31.

[28] Ibid., 484.

[29] Empire Builders, 248-55.

[30] Ibid., 256.

[31] Ibid., 315-17, 284-87.

[32] John K. Bettersworth, Mississippi Yesterday and Today (Austin, Texas: Steck-Vaughn Company, 1967), 144-45, 227-34, 262-69, 313-21.

[33] Malcolm C. McMillan, The Land Called Alabama (Austin, Texas: Steck-Vaughn Company, 1968), 131-36, 240-31, 299-301, 275-77, 347-50, 385-89.