For Dixie children: Teaching students what it meant to be Confederate Americans through their textbooks

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Abstract
Education in the 19th century relied heavily on school texts in order to teach American children the moral and civic responsibilities they must possess in order to become productive members of the American republic. After declaring secession, Confederate cultural nationalists took up the cause of educating the school children in the Confederate States of America in the moral and civic responsibilities determined important to the preservation of their new nation. Southerners had felt disenfranchised by the northern press and believed their children learning from these schoolbooks became weakened in their southern identity. Though some southerners were espousing the need for their own school presses before secession, it was not until the split between North and South was solidified that the cause for southern education began immediate.

This work argues that textbooks provide insight into the creation of Confederate nationalism and show how the Confederate society attempted to teach these lessons to their future generations. When writing textbooks, cultural nationalists used the models provided by their northern counterparts, but were determined to present a unique southern perspective devoid of any harmful influences from the North. While some northern lessons remained intact, Confederate textbooks preached the benevolence of slavery and the justification of this institution as instituted by God and the Bible. Confederates promoted the superiority of their cause and people and urged children to rally behind their new flag. Southern textbook authors took the North out of the American Revolution and claimed its start in the South, in attempts to relate their current struggle for independence with their forefathers. Finally, Confederates reclaimed George Washington as one of their own, a southern slave owner who remained virtuous and an inspiration to all Confederate children. These textbooks present a nationalism frozen in time. The Confederate States of America lost their country, but their attempt to create an identity remains in their textbooks and provides lessons on how education shapes students in what it means to be American.

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As soon as the Confederates laid down their arms, some picked up their pens and began to distort what they had done and why. Consider this passage from The American Journey, probably the largest textbook ever foisted on middle school students and perhaps the best-selling U.S. history textbook: The South Secedes. If by “economic reasons” it means issues with tariffs and taxes, which most people infer, then two of its three “correct answers” are wrong. The legacy of this thinking pervades Washington, too. With our monuments lying about secession, our textbooks obfuscating what the Confederacy was about, and our Army honoring Southern generals, no wonder so many Americans supported the Confederacy until recently.

Student, in classroom: I just put that I do not think that they considered themselves Americans, because they were adapting to the way Americans live. Maybe they didn't have those type of jobs where this guy immigrated from, but now he was working in a shoe store, as a skilled shoe worker. Jessica Cruz: For homework they are actually now bringing it to the self. Jessica Cruz: My philosophy in teaching is always to ask questions that don't have a yes or no answer and pretty much to just have them start thinking. And to become young historians in the sense that they would go and try to find information. So I didn't want, I want them to look at the idea of immigration and primarily the question what does it mean to be an American?