

History Wars, Then and Now: The Politics of Unity in American History Textbooks before the Civil War



History matters. It shapes our perceptions of the present, our understanding of who we are, and it ultimately helps us determine the inheritances that we must carry forward or overcome for the next generation.

That's why it's not surprising that history engages the attention of politicians. Since the ["history wars"](#) of the 1990s, Americans have been acutely aware that our efforts to write our past are shaped by the needs of the present.

We should be thankful that history remains a source of public concern, that Americans continue to recognize history's relevance. It is a healthy reminder that the liberal arts—that the study of culture—is of vital importance to a democracy.

Recently, the Republican National Committee condemned revisions of the College Board's Advanced Placement standards for being overly critical of the United States and downplaying American accomplishments. In response, [the American Historical Association](#) offered a defense of the new standards, and [teachers and students in Jefferson County](#), Colorado, walked out of class to protest what they saw as conservative efforts to censor the truth about American history, making [front-page news](#). Meanwhile, [in Texas](#), where history standards have long made news, conservatives and liberals continue to fight about what is inaccurate and what is political, while [Oklahoma](#) considered cutting funding for the new AP standards. Responding to this [criticism](#), the College

Board [revised](#) the standards.



The Star-Spangled Banner. Courtesy of the Armed Forces History Division, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

We should be thankful that history remains a source of [public concern](#), that Americans continue to recognize history's relevance. It is a healthy reminder that the liberal arts—that the study of culture—is of vital importance to a democracy. And it is because of the particular need of history in a democracy that these conflicts are so intense.

In fact, these conflicts have existed ever since history was introduced into the curriculum. When the public schools expanded after the 1830s, history was a relative newcomer. Historical essays and biographies had been part of primers and readers for a long time, but educators now sought to teach young Americans the history of their country.

History textbook writers were influenced by new ideas about student learning that emphasized critical thinking. Early textbooks, such as the English author John Robinson's *An Easy Grammar of History, Ancient and Modern* (1807), had urged students "to commit all the historical facts to memory." This practice lasted much longer than it should have—in the *Little House* series, Laura Ingalls, aged 15, earns her teaching certificate because she impresses a superintendent by reciting from memory an outline of the first half of American history.

In contrast, Emma Willard's widely assigned *History of the United States* (1843) condemned teaching history through memorization. History should engage all the "faculties" and offer a "frame-work" of interpretation. Moreover, Willard continued, students should start with the history of their own nation because—as the influential Swiss educator Johann Pestalozzi taught—"the natural order of things must be regarded," and each child starts with "himself the centre of the world" and moves outward.



Frontispiece portrait of Emma Hart Willard, engraved by H.W. Smith (after painting by J. Ames), taken from *The Life of Emma Willard*, by John Lord (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1873). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

By studying the past, Americans came to see progress. To Americans, the past was a long tale of struggle between liberty and despotism. History would place common school students not just in the stream of time, but in the stream of *American* time. Students were urged to think of the present as the result of the

flow of events, which began with Native Americans and the earliest European settlers, but ultimately climaxed in the colonists' efforts to resist English tyranny and establish a republic.

Textbook authors hoped that young Americans would come to see themselves as citizens who inherited a past and were now responsible for carrying the torch of liberty forward. Progress, it turned out, relied on citizens living up to their duties. Thus, to Willard, historical study would lead to "improvement in individual and national virtue."

Even as American history became tasked with cultivating national unity, students learned much about the history and geography of the world. World history and geography textbooks divided the world into societies, each at different stages of "civilization." Despite scientific pretensions, the most popular world history and geography textbooks presented people around the world, especially those outside of Europe, from an ethnocentric perspective. Samuel Goodrich's best-selling *Peter Parley's Common School History* (1841) concluded, "the whole of Asia is involved in darkness as to the character of God, and the destiny of man; and thus we see, that the conduct of mankind is such as might be expected, where such ignorance and such error prevail." Relying on the Old Testament for much of his ancient history, Parley wrote that "in all those countries where the Christian religion is unknown, the greater part of the people are ignorant, degraded, and miserable."

Samuel Mitchell, in his popular *A System of Modern Geography* (1848), began the history of the world with "our first parents, Adam and Eve." The world's diversity was due to environmental, cultural, and other "causes which we do not understand." Mitchell classified the peoples of the world into five races, "the European or Caucasian, Asiatic or Mongolian, American, Malay, and African or negro," but then moved from classification to judgment: "The European or Caucasian is the most noble of the five races of men. It excels all others in learning and in the arts, and includes the most powerful nations of ancient and modern times." Christians were described as "those who believe in Christ, as the Saviour of Mankind"; other religions were described as simply incorrect. "Mahomed" was a "religious imposter," while "Pagans and Heathens" believed in "false Gods" or worshipped animals.



"The Village School," engraving, chine collé, by Alfred Jones (after painting by Beaume), for *Godey's Lady's Book*, (New York, c. 1842). From the Alfred Jones Collection, courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Classifying the world by race was made more complicated by America's own racial politics. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, debates raged about whether all the world's peoples originated from common parents—Adam and Eve—or whether different races emerged from different stock, what was known as

polygenesis. The latter had the benefit of justifying white domination of African Americans, but the drawback of violating the clear text of the Bible, leading many Americans to feel uncomfortable about it. Thus, most common school students would have learned of common creation and that diversity followed humanity's ejection from the Garden of Eden.

If world history and geography textbooks emphasized difference, the goal of American history textbooks was unity. They sought to teach Americans of their special role to play in the drama of history. Benson Lossing's *A Primer History of the United States, for Schools or Families* (1857) stated that "every one born in this free and beautiful country, should be proud of it, thankful to God for it, and willing to do everything that is right to keep it free and good," concluding, "and to make you feel so, is one great reason why I wish you to listen to the whole story attentively."

To history textbook authors, the success of the American experiment depended on two things—first, protecting liberty, and second, upholding the union of the states. The second required students to put aside their regional interests to see North and South as part of a common nation. Union was vital to protecting fragile American liberty in a hostile world. Textbooks thus focused much of their energy on Americans' efforts to come together for liberty, most notably during seventeenth-century crises over the king's authority during the Glorious Revolution. From the very earliest moments, textbook writers argued, American colonists were willing to come together against the forces of tyranny.

Marcus Willson's *History of the United States* (1846) argued that in the colonial era, despite having separate governments, the colonists "were socially united as one people, by the identity of their language, laws, and customs, and the ties of a common kindred; and still more by a common participation in the vicissitudes of peril and suffering through which they had passed." The colonists were also united by their shared commitment to "the republican, or liberal party." Ignoring the divisive nature of the Revolution, Willson argued that "the Declaration of Independence was every where received by the people with demonstrations of joy."

To Willson, the New World was committed to freedom, the Old World to tyranny. Thus, Bacon's Rebellion in seventeenth-century Virginia was about "justice, freedom, and humanity." Rhode Island was notable for religious freedom. New York's settlers struggled against the Duke of York—the future King James II—for representative assemblies. The Revolution pitted British "desire for power" against Americans' "abhorrence of oppression."

Willson offered a balanced appraisal of the conflict between Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans, but then sought to transcend partisan and sectional conflict in an imagined West, where "rail-roads and canals, navigable rivers and inland seas, by the facilities of communication which they open, bring closely together the most distant sections of the Union" to "harmonize the diversity of feelings and of interests which would otherwise arise." If

Americans did not “cultivate a spirit of mutual concession and harmony in our national councils,” however, the experiment could fail, and the cost of failure was high: “The monarchies of the Old World are looking upon us with jealousy, and predicting the day of our ruin.” Americans must thus embrace “the Union, one and *inseparable*.” Young people were asked whether they would be willing, like their Revolutionary forefathers, to “die freemen, rather than live as slaves.” Samuel Goodrich’s revised *A Pictorial History of the United States* (1852) admonished young Americans to “cherish the sentiment of love to our country” and “gratitude to Heaven for all that has been done to exalt our native land.”

Textbook authors did not ignore Native Americans. Willson recognized that Native Americans had their own “history, customs, religion, traditions, &c.” but his story was just not about them. Willson also shared a common perception that Native American ways of life were backward, noting that the Cherokee were the “most civilized,” suggesting that others were less so.

Goodrich was more dismissive. Yet, Goodrich recognized Native Americans’ importance in history. His book closed with a chapter on “the Indian Race.” Despite how little we may know of Native Americans’ origins, Goodrich wrote, we can anticipate “their fate”: “the white race” would overwhelm Native America “to the everlasting shame of civilized man.”

Emma Willard began her history with the earliest settlers crossing the Bering Strait, and then turned to the powerful Indian confederacies that antedated Columbus’s arrival, an approach not that different from recent scholarship. She also made clear that in America’s wars, Native Americans were powerful adversaries. Americans before the Civil War knew well that Native Americans were geopolitical players for control of the continent, something [historians](#) are now emphasizing once again.

Textbooks were less explicit about slavery since one of their avowed goals was to use history to unite Americans across sectional boundaries. Yet slavery was not ignored. Goodrich portrayed the slave trade as cruel and asked students to sympathize with the intense suffering of African captives on European slavers. In his *A Pictorial History of the United States* (1844), he devoted a chapter to slavery and efforts to abolish it. Willard emphasized the horrors of the Atlantic crossing, describing captives on ships “crowded, and they are manacled. Water and food fail; disease agonizes their frames. They shriek,—they seek to burst their chains, that they may plunge into the deep,” preferring death to enslavement in the New World.

Southerners worried about this. In fact, U.S. history textbooks seemed to exacerbate sectional tensions despite their efforts to do otherwise. An 1844 Alabama advertisement promoted schoolbooks “carefully revised and freed from all objectionable pieces.” The editor of the influential Southern magazine *DeBow’s Review*, criticizing Goodrich, urged in 1856 that “our school books . . . should be written, prepared and published by southern men” who, unlike

Goodrich, would not corrupt their history with “the inexpressible horrors of slavery.” A Southern commercial convention in Savannah called for schoolbooks “to elevate and purify the education of the South,” by not allowing “our foes to compose our songs and prepare our nursery tales.” North Carolina’s Calvin Henderson Wiley published his *North Carolina Reader* to prove to Southern students “that mind and industry are not confined to one end of the Union.”

Thus, then, as now, efforts to teach history in the common schools fell apart on issues of race and labor. Southerners in particular worried about the implications of teaching young Americans critical lessons about the past, especially when that history involved questions about the South’s labor regime.

Reading these textbooks a century later, we also see the prejudices that shaped Northern writers, especially in relation to other cultures and religions. Some of the prejudices were self-conscious, others widely shared assumptions of the time. This is not an excuse, but a reminder that certain judgments are easier in hindsight. A hundred years from now, historians will no doubt look back on our textbooks and wonder about—and criticize—our own prejudices, whether known to us or not.

For textbook writers in the antebellum era, the most pressing problem was America’s survival. The country was young; there was much uncertainty about its future. Slavery threatened to divide the new nation, destroying its experiment in liberty. History textbooks thus urged young Americans to take their civic obligations seriously, to see themselves as responsible actors who would have to work together to resolve the nation’s problems. They urged unity.

Today, we have our concerns. The content of our historical textbooks—the insights we seek to share—reflect today’s issues: discrimination, inequality, and the challenges of forging common stories for a diverse nation. In other words, today’s history wars give expression to the same aspirations as those in the past, to use history not just to inform the present, but also to shape the future.

Successful criticism, however, depends on the existence of a “we”—on a community of citizens engaged in a project with a common past and a shared future. The politics of unity are not some relic of a bygone era. We must continue to tell stories that will bring us together, but we should never imagine that we can tell only part of the story to make ourselves whole.

Because we use history to gain insight on the present, because it brings us together and tears us apart, it can never escape politics. The danger is not that history—or historians—will have politics, but that politics can overwhelm historical judgment. We must therefore be vigilant that all who write and teach history maintain a deep respect for the historical craft, for its use of evidence and methods, and an appreciation of context. That may in fact be the best that we can do.

Further Reading

On American conceptions of history and historical writing, see Eileen Cheng, *The Plain and Noble Garb of Truth: Nationalism & Impartiality in American Historical Writing, 1784-1860* (2008); E.C. McInnis, "History's Purpose in Antebellum Textbooks," *American Educational History Journal* 39:1 (2012); and George Callcott, *History in the United States 1800-1860: Its Practice and Purpose* (1960).

David Thelen, "Making History and Making the United States," *Journal of American Studies* 32:3 (1998) and Peter Onuf, "American Exceptionalism and National Identity," *American Political Thought* 1:1 (2012) explore the relationship between history and nation-making.

For nationalism in antebellum history textbooks, see David B. Tyack, *Seeking Common Ground: Public Schools in a Diverse Society* (2003), chapter 2; William Reese, *Origins of the American High School* (1995), chapter 6, and Ruth Elson, *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the 19th Century* (1964). For thoughtful assessments, see Margaret Nash, "Contested Identities: Nationalism, Regionalism, & Patriotism in Early American Textbooks," *History of Education Quarterly* 49:4 (2009), and Martin Bruckner, "Lessons in Geography: Maps, Spellers, and Other Grammars of Nationalism in the Early Republic," *American Quarterly* 51:2 (1999).

On the South, in addition to Edgar Knight's classic *Public Education in the South* (1922), see Keith Whitescarver, "Schoolbooks, Publishers, and Southern Nationalists: Reforming the Curriculum in North Carolina's Schools, 1850-1861," *North Carolina Historical Review* LXXIX:1 (January 2002): 28-49, and Irving Gershenberg, "Southern Values and Public Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 10:4 (1970).

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