

Mississippi: A History

by John K. Betterworth

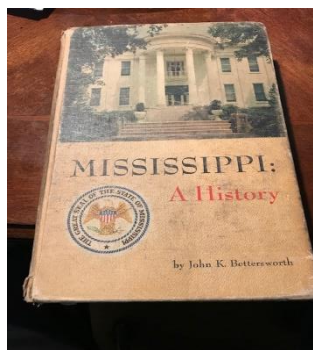
1959

2021 Review

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November 29, 2021

This is in response to Donna Ladd’s November 15, 2021, *Mississippi Free Press* article “The Hate They Censor: Purging KKK Truth and Angie Thomas To Bury Lessons of History.” Ms. Ladd stated “the way the Mississippi Free Press counters this intensely disturbing effort to rewrite history to make white folks comfortable and unbothered is through telling the difficult historic stories ourselves. We are unpacking hidden history right here in our own state and showing their connections to other states far from the South.”¹



Mississippi: A History by John K. Betterworth, published in 1959, was the Mississippi history textbook used by students in the Tupelo public school system in the late 1950s into the 1960s. I was taught Mississippi’s history from this textbook in 1962, later purchasing it in 1963. The textbook gave a different slant on slavery, the white Citizens’ Council, and integration, as well as providing students subject matter dealing with Black Mississippians and politics that we now know was wrong, misleading, and inaccurate. The chapter “The Ways of Politics and Public Life since 1920” stated “Mississippians would take nothing lying down. In 1948, they were in the Dixiecrat forefront. In the fifties, as the integration campaign of the federal government threatened the white

Democracy of Mississippi, vigorous measures were taken to preserve the established social and political order. In the midst of the crisis there appeared in Mississippi a strong Citizens' Council movement, which was set up on a local and statewide basis and maintained ties with affiliated organizations all over the South."²

The white Citizens' Council formed in the Mississippi Delta in 1954 mounted an organized resistance campaign against the Supreme Court's *Brown v Board of Education* integration decree. The council promoted private school education and claimed they were defending states' rights. "Pledged to maintain white supremacy, the councils foreswore violence but did their best to intimidate blacks" and used their influence to "reduce, if not cut off entirely, the flow of commerce and credit" to Black people who attempted to register to vote or who supported school desegregation.³

Each Citizens' Council throughout the state was to be incorporated to protect its members, and each council would be a separate autonomous organization with a charter and by-laws.⁴ *Mississippi: A History* did not dispute the Council's campaign of intimidation but instead provided the following purposes outlined in the Charter of Incorporation of Citizens' Council for cities and counties:

"To be a civic improvement organization and society for the promotion and maintenance of peace, good order and domestic tranquility...

To work for the maintenance and preservation of the Constitution of the State of Mississippi and of the powers reserved to the States of the United States by the Federal Constitution.

To encourage the free discussion by Mississippians of those problems upon the solution of which depends the welfare and prosperity of the State of Mississippi.

To disseminate facts to the citizens of Mississippi with reference to the serious problems confronting them; and to encourage the peaceful, lawful and orderly solution of those problems.”⁵

The State of Mississippi created the State Sovereignty Commission in 1956 to combat the integration crusade. The Mississippi history textbook noted “[t]he Commission was expected to devise ways and means of resisting federal encroachments on state sovereignty, and it was to carry the Mississippi gospel to the rest of the country.”⁶

The Mississippi Delta is well known for its agriculture and plantation history but was not as well known or understood as much to students in Northeast Mississippi. *Mississippi: A History* stated “[i]n slavery days its characteristic pattern of a wealthy landowning class depending upon a huge labor force to produce the prize crop of the Cotton Kingdom, long staple cotton. Today the plantation persists. The Negro who was once a slave, now works for hire, though he has continued to depend upon his “white folks” for his keep.”⁷

How did we as junior high school students know the Mississippi history we were being taught would later be discredited, and that the language was demeaning and demoralizing to African Americans. And now the Critical Race Theory (CRT) campaign theoretically wants our students to go back and resurrect *Mississippi: A History*, and never learn how race affected the history of our state?

I do not remember reading or discussing the contents of the Appendix, “MISSISSIPPI WORDS” in *Mississippi: A History*. I should have. The Appendix includes fourteen selections

of literature, music, oratory, and folklore. The description of the Appendix is clear: “Mississippi Words are to be read and reread; to be remembered – even memorized. In them Mississippi will still be speaking down through the years.”⁸

The following selected “words” provides examples in the Appendix we should be remembering. The language and references expressed in the following examples were acceptable at that time the textbook was published but are no longer acceptable today:

“Way Down South in Mississippi

(Official State Song, adopted in 1948) by Verne Barnes and Josie Gautier

3rd verse:

“...Way Down South in Mississippi

Old Plantations bask in the sun

Darkies sing in Mississippi

Evenings after labor is done.

The melons ripen sweeter

Where bright camellias spread good cheer

And God is Loved in Mississippi

Home and church her people hold dear.”⁹

* * *

“Prayer” from

“Christmas Night in the Quarters” by Irwin Russell

“O Mahsr! Let dis gath’rin’ fin’ a blessin’ in yo’ sight!

Don’t jedge us hard fur what we does – you knows it’s

Christmus-night;

An’ all de balunace ob de yeah we does as right’s we kin.

Ef dancin’s wrong, O Mahsr! Let de time excuse

De sin!

We labors in de vineya'd, wukikn' hard an' wukin'
 true;
 Now, shorelyh you won't notus, ef we eats a grape or
 two,
 An' takes a little holiday, -a leetle restin'-spell,-
 Bekase, nex' week, we'll start in fresh, an' labor twicet
 as well."¹⁰

* * *

The Bonnie Blue Flag, by Harry McCarthy

“We are a band of brothers, and native to the soil,
 Fighting for the property we gain'd by honest toil;
 And when our rights were threaten'd, the cry rose near and far,
 Hurrah for the Bonnie Blue Flag, that bears a Single Star!

Chorus: Hurrah! Hurrah! For Southern Rights; hurrah!

Hurrah! for the Bonnie Blue Flag, that bears a Single Star.”

As long as the Union was faithful to her trust,
 Like friends and like brothers, kind were we and just;
 But now, when Northern treachery attempts our rights to mar,
 We hoist on high the Bonnie Blue Flag, that bears a Single Star.”¹¹

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¹*Mississippi Free Press*, www.mississippifreepress.org, November 15, 2021.

²*Mississippi: A History*, John K. Bettersworth, Mississippi State University, The Steck Company, Publishers, Austin, Texas, 1959, pg. 437.

³Wikipedia, Citizens Council. Accessed August 23, 2019.

⁴Association of Citizens' Councils of Mississippi, 2nd Annual Report, August 1956.

⁵*Mississippi: A History*. pgs. 437-438.

⁶ *Ibid.* p.438.

⁷ *Ibid.* pgs. 11-12.

⁸ *Ibid.* pgs. 553-564.

⁹ *Ibid.* pg. 554.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p 557.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p 559.