*Mississippi: A History*

by John K. Bettersworth

1959

 Revisited

by

Bo Bowen

January 18, 2022

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.”

*Mississippi: A History* by Dr. John K. Bettersworth, published in 1959, was the required textbook for students in the Mississippi public school systems in the late 1950s and 1960s. We were taught Mississippi’s history from this textbook in 1962 in the Tupelo Public School System. The textbook gave a slanted view about 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 at that time. **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.”

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.

Each Citizens’ Council was to be incorporated to protect its members, and each council would be a separate autonomous organization with a charter and by-laws. *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.”

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.”

The Mississippi Delta, well known for its agriculture and plantation history was not as well known or understood to many 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.”

How did we as junior high school students know that the history we were being taught would later be discredited, and that the language was demeaning and demoralizing to African Americans? Are students today being taught of Mississippi’s history of slavery, the politics surrounding state’s rights and the “Lost Cause?”

James M. McPherson stated “history is a continuing dialogue, between the present and the past. Interpretations of the past are subject to change in response to new evidence.” He stated, “when interpreting history, we must remain aware of our own presuppositions and expectations, seeking not to eliminate them altogether (which is impossible) but to see and account for any ways they might be distorting analysis…We should make a distinction between history (what happened) and our uses of history (what we seek to correct or change through our telling of history.”

The Mississippi textbook was published in 1959 and probably took 2-3 years to research and write and receive approval from the state to publish and distribute. If that is true, then Dr. Bettersworth was fully aware of the development of the Citizens Council which he described, but he did not fully discuss the influence the council had over their cities and counties. The *Brown v Board of Education* decision was a critical issue for Mississippi and Dr. Bettersworth would have been fully aware of the decision and what would later take place across the state to desegregate the public school system, and the controversies to follow. Did Dr. Bettersworth believe that the black man who once was a slave, depended upon his “white folks” for his keep as he described in his history of the Delta or as historian Donald Yacovone stated, “anything outside of the political narrative was not considered history and was not taught.”

Did the Mississippi history book slant or distort those events to convey political or a national perspective? Or was Dr. Bettersworth reacting to the events of the past to either shelter our thoughts about race or was he merely writing about the norm as the events took place? Generations later would revise this history based on facts, new evidence and interpretations of the events that took place from the time of publication. But even then, historical revisionism could be controversial with the re-interpretation of established historical accounts and challenging historians with opposing views.

And here we are today discussing whether the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) will move towards revising Mississippi’s history by removing the names of important people and events associated with the Civil Rights Movement. Will Mississippi’s students ever learn about the Jim Crow Laws, the KKK, Martin Luther King, Jr., Medgar Evers, James Meredith, Fannie Lou Hamer and Rosa Parks? Do we want to hide the truth, revise history and develop a history curriculum that ignores our past? How will Mississippi’s children learn about our past and chart the future when MDE committees want to just clean things up. Maybe they should just reincarnate the 1959 textbook, “Mississippi: A History.”

\* \* \*