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# Virginia's Embattled Textbooks

## Lessons (Learned and Not) from the Centennial Era

CAROL SHERIFF

After Lesley Gordon invited my reflection upon an inflammatory assertion in my daughter's fourth-grade textbook—the claim that thousands of African Americans had served in the Confederate army, including two battalions under the command of Stonewall Jackson—I began researching older textbooks in the hope of discovering when and how this contested claim first found its way into Virginia's classrooms. My daughter's textbook, I soon discovered, had not perpetuated an older myth, but had introduced a new one.<sup>1</sup> I also

The author would like to thank Lesley Gordon for the invitation to submit this piece and Erin Holman for copyediting it; Elise Broach, Philip Daileader, Melvin Patrick Ely, Brent Tarter, and James Whittenburg for their extremely helpful comments on earlier drafts as well as their many other contributions to this project; Margaret Tilley Musselwhite for her expert assistance with citations; Selene Sheriff for her careful proofreading; and Anna Daileader Sheriff and Benjamin Daileader Sheriff for their aid in verifying quotations and footnotes and for enduring with patience and good cheer their mother's role in Virginia's most recent textbook controversy. This project would not have been possible without the generous assistance of archivists at the Special Collections Research Center, Earl Gregg Swem Library, The College of William and Mary; the Archives Research Room at the Library of Virginia; the Greenwood Library at Longwood College; and the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. The author also thanks officials at the Virginia Department of Education for responding promptly to her Freedom of Information Act request.

1. My examination of Virginia textbooks from the 1860s through the 1990s uncovered no references to African Americans taking up arms for the Confederacy before its waning days. *Cavalier Commonwealth*, one of the 1950s textbooks to be discussed at length in this essay, notes, "Negroes did many kinds of work for the Army of Northern Virginia from the beginning.

learned that Virginia had a long history of its textbooks coming under fire for their coverage of the Civil War. For the first seventy-five years after the Confederacy's surrender, such controversies focused on the books' alleged northern bias.<sup>2</sup> But as Virginia commemorated the Civil War's centennial, coinciding as it did with the Civil Rights Movement, a public protest emerged over the state's unabashedly pro-Confederate textbooks. Those textbooks, written during the 1950s, largely reflected the conservative outlook of the state's anti-integration Democratic political machine. Ironically, it was the successful backlash against those books that helped foster a flawed review process that allowed the unsubstantiated claim about Stonewall Jackson to find its way into my daughter's textbook. Together, the two controversies—separated by half a century—bring into sharper relief where children's textbooks often go wrong: When they use history to teach civics, they risk distorting the past. Even good intentions can lead to bad history.

### "A Little Something Extra"

When my daughter brought home her brand-new Virginia Studies textbook in late September 2010, I flipped to the Civil War chapter with mixed expectations. Etched in my memory was a school-issued coloring book that a colleague's daughter had brought home a decade earlier; it asked children to color the gray uniform of the "patriotic" Robert E. Lee. At the same time, however, recent events gave me hope that Virginia was confronting its past more forthrightly. Three days earlier, I had attended a conference at Norfolk State University, a historically black university, on the theme of "Race, Slavery, and the Civil War: The Tough Stuff of American History and Memory." Sponsored by the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission—a

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But only in the last weeks of the war was a company of Negro soldiers organized in Richmond, and then it was too late for them to play an important part in the fighting." William Edwin Hemphill, Marvin Wilson Schlegel, and Sadie Ethel Engelberg, *Cavalier Commonwealth: History and Government of Virginia* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1957), 333.

2. For controversies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see Fred Arthur Bailey, "The Textbooks of the 'Lost Cause': Censorship and the Creation of Southern State Histories," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 75 (Fall 1991): 507–33; Fred Arthur Bailey, "Free Speech and the Lost Cause in the Old Dominion," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 103 (Apr. 1995): 237–66; and James M. McPherson, "Long-Legged Yankee Lies: The Southern Textbook Crusade," in *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture*, ed. Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004), 64–78.

creation of the Virginia General Assembly—the conference featured eminent scholars who spoke frankly about issues of race and public memory. Opening remarks were offered by Governor Bob McDonnell, who the previous spring had declared April “Confederate History Month,” defending his proclamation at the time by denying that slavery was central to the war; he now offered a plainspoken apology and promised that “a modern Virginia will remember that past with candor, courage and conciliation.”<sup>3</sup> Among the day’s most riveting presentations was Bruce Levine’s ten-minute synopsis of his scholarship on the “Myth of the Black Confederate,” the notion that large numbers of African Americans bore arms for the Confederacy. As I listened to him debunk what he called a “widely accepted” myth, I wondered just how widespread it was.<sup>4</sup>

I found out sooner than I expected. That conference took place on a Friday; on Monday, my daughter came home with *Our Virginia: Past and Present*.<sup>5</sup> One of three Virginia Studies textbooks listed as “approved” for the fourth grade by the Virginia Board of Education, the volume was advertised by its publisher as “correlating” with Virginia’s History and Social Studies Standards of Learning Curriculum, commonly called the SOL. The Virginia Studies SOL is designed to teach “skills for historical and geographical analysis and responsible citizenship.”<sup>6</sup> In its introduction, *Our Virginia* informs children that they will “meet Virginia’s greatest men and women and see how all their hard work and sacrifice shaped our state, our nation, and our world.”<sup>7</sup> On the book’s cover are illustrations of an unidentified Native American, Thomas Jefferson, two soldiers from the U.S. Colored Troops, and George Washington’s Mount Vernon. Among the eight individuals portrayed on

3. A text of McDonnell’s speech is available at *dailypress.com*, Sept. 24, 2010, [http://hrblogs.typepad.com/the\\_shad\\_plank/2010/09/the-full-text-of-gov-bob-mcdonnell-speech-at-norfolk-state-university.html](http://hrblogs.typepad.com/the_shad_plank/2010/09/the-full-text-of-gov-bob-mcdonnell-speech-at-norfolk-state-university.html).

4. A video of Levine’s presentation is available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJRi\\_A3RRFA&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJRi_A3RRFA&feature=player_embedded) (speech given Sept. 24, 2010; video uploaded by the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission Nov. 8, 2010). See also Bruce Levine, *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves during the Civil War* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006); Levine, “Myth and Reality: Black Confederates,” *North and South* 10 (July 2007): 40–45; Levine, “Black Confederates and Neo-Confederates: In Search of a Usable Past,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, ed. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (New York: New Press, 2006), 187–211.

5. Joy Masoff, *Our Virginia: Past and Present* (Weston, Conn.: Five Ponds, 2010).

6. Board of Education, Commonwealth of Virginia, “History and Social Science Standards of Learning Curriculum Framework 2008: Virginia Studies” (Richmond: Virginia Department of Education, 2008), 1.

7. Masoff, *Our Virginia*, 9.

the title page, one is Native American and three are African Americans. The publisher set out, in other words, to be racially inclusive.

The Civil War chapter has a promising beginning. “As new western states began to come into the Union,” the chapter’s second sentence reads, “a question arose. Should slavery be allowed in the new states or not? This question helped lead to a terrible war.” The chapter addresses slavery and its cruelties, includes an image of a Confederate recruitment poster calling for men to repel their “Abolition foes,” and gives as much attention to U. S. Grant as to Robert E. Lee.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the chapter also includes many errors. Some appear to be the result of careless editing (such as dating the first battle of Manassas in July of 1862), while others perpetuate popular misconceptions (such as describing the North as “mostly industrialized”). Some mistakes fundamentally misrepresent the nature of the war. Despite all the media attention later paid to the book’s supposedly “pro-Confederate” bias, *Our Virginia* errs largely in ascribing overly generous motivations to the Union. The chapter gives the impression that the Union was fighting from the outset to end slavery. It tells children that “by the early 1800s . . . many Northerners, both black and white, became very outspoken in the fight for emancipation” and that the “fight to end slavery was a major cause of the Civil War.” The book says that some runaway slaves “quickly joined the Union Army, where they fought bravely and with honor,” but does not mention the initial prohibition against their doing so. Slavery’s legal demise, too, is recounted incorrectly; children learn that the Emancipation Proclamation freed “all the slaves living in the Confederate States” and that slavery was “ended in all states by an amendment to the U.S. Constitution” in *January* 1865.<sup>9</sup> Nowhere does the book tell children explicitly that slavery remained legal in some parts of the Union itself throughout the war.

The book and its supplementary materials also leave very little room for nuance. I wondered how I would complete the worksheet asking students to place items in one of two boxes—“Life in the North” *versus* “Life in the South.” Among the items to be divvied up between the antebellum North and South—with no possibility for overlap—were farms, slave labor, large warehouses, taverns, clothing stores, and furniture shops. I wondered, too, how I would answer a question asking fourth graders (nine- and ten-year-olds) to explain how the following led to Virginia’s decision to secede: Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, and

8. *Ibid.*, 110, 111–12, 115, 120–21.

9. *Ibid.*, 118, 110, 123, 126.

the Missouri Compromise. Although all of these subjects appear in the chapter, the book links none of them directly to secession; doing so would require mental gymnastics, particularly in the case of the Missouri Compromise, given that the book never mentions its repeal. The same question inquires about the roles of Abraham Lincoln and John Brown, both of whose inclusion made sense to me. But it does not mention a single white Virginian—not a single person who could have voted for secession. Finally, an uneasy mix of amusement and distress overcame me as I read the following assignment: “Write the title ‘Nat Turner’ on your paper. Under the title, answer the following question. Do you think Nat Turner was a brave civil rights leader or a crazed killer?”<sup>10</sup>

There was, in other words, ample reason to worry that *Our Virginia* would misinform and confuse children about the Civil War. But one mistake in particular stood out in that regard. Under a subheading of “The Virginia Confederates,” the book tells children: “Thousands of Southern blacks fought in the Confederate ranks, including two black battalions under the command of Stonewall Jackson.”<sup>11</sup> To my knowledge, not a single piece of peer-reviewed scholarship contends that blacks served in such large numbers as soldiers (rather than laborers) in the Confederate army or that Stonewall Jackson commanded black soldiers (rather than black laborers). There are individuals and organizations who assert that blacks served in the tens, or even hundreds, of thousands in the Confederate military, but scholars such as Levine have critiqued their reliance on anecdotal references and on pension records completed by black laborers and body servants. I do not seek to revive that issue but rather to show how the assertion about Stonewall Jackson’s commanding black soldiers—an assertion that a spokesman for the Virginia Department of Education later acknowledged as “outside mainstream Civil War scholarship”—made it into a fourth-grade textbook. What renders the claim about black Confederates so controversial, as James McPherson explained to the *Washington Post*, is that “Confederate heritage groups have been making this claim for years as a way of purging their cause of its association with slavery.”<sup>12</sup> Why, then, did a textbook that otherwise puts slavery front and center in its Civil War chapter include a statement so inaccurate and controversial that

10. Ibid., 127; Bree Linton and Lisa Arnold, “*Reproducible and Assessments*” for *Our Virginia: Past and Present* (Weston, Conn.: Five Ponds, 2010), Reproducible 92.

11. Masoff, *Our Virginia*, 122.

12. Kevin Sieff, “Virginia 4th-Grade Textbook Criticized over Claims on Black Confederate Soldiers,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 20, 2010.

it became the subject of a front-page story in the *Washington Post* and of coverage by cable-television networks, the Associated Press, National Public Radio, and a host of other news organizations as far away as Estonia?<sup>13</sup>

Like a children's game of telephone, the tale took on new dimensions with each retelling, especially on blogs and Internet discussion boards. Some commentators decried scholars for sacrificing historical accuracy (as the commentators saw it) for "political correctness" in their criticisms of the textbook's assertions about black Confederates. Others transformed the story into one about *Our Virginia's* intentional Confederate bias, with some versions contending that the bias came at the behest of the state's Department of Education. Yet Virginia's Standards of Learning Curriculum does not include anything on black Confederate soldiers. When questioned by the *Post* reporter about why she included the passage about Stonewall Jackson and black soldiers, the Connecticut-based author, Joy Masoff, told him that she wanted to add "a little something extra."<sup>14</sup> While acknowledging that her claim was "controversial," Masoff maintained that it was "well-supported" and that she stood by it.<sup>15</sup> She nonetheless agreed to remove it from the book.

Although I have never seen Masoff expand upon her rationale for including the controversial assertion in the first place, the book's overall approach—with its emphasis on diversity—may support a theory advanced by my colleague Melvin Patrick Ely. One possibility, Ely speculated, was that the unsubstanti-

13. "Virginia ajalooõpik valetab lõunaosariikide poolel sõdinud neegreist," *Postimees.ee*, Oct. 26, 2010, <http://www.postimees.ee/?id=332210>. The author thanks Scott Reynolds Nelson for drawing her attention to this story.

14. Kevin Sieff, "No Expert Reviewed Disputed Va. Text," *Washington Post*, Oct. 22, 2010.

15. The *Post* article of October 20, 2010, reported that Masoff had relied on Internet sources as well as the work of Ervin L. Jordan Jr., the author of *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1995). The *Post* reported, too, that Jordan did not corroborate the textbook's claims: "There's no way of knowing that there were thousands [of black soldiers]," Jordan said. "And the claim about Jackson is totally false. I don't know where that came from." It may be that Masoff confused details on page 246 of Jordan's book, where he mentions the two black companies (not battalions) that served in the "Jackson Battalion" under Col. Scott Shipp during the war's final weeks, that is, nearly two years after Stonewall Jackson had died. Masoff subsequently issued two press releases in which she mentioned three other sources that she had consulted, none of which was a piece of scholarship written by a historian. Sieff, "Virginia 4th-Grade Textbook Criticized"; Joy Masoff, "Press Release," in Lou Scolnik (president of Five Ponds Press), e-mail message to "our friends in Virginia," Oct. 20, 2010; and Scolnik, e-mail message to "our friends in Virginia," Oct. 27, 2010, containing a statement from Joy Masoff. All e-mail messages cited in this article were obtained from the Virginia Department of Education in response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request.

ated claim about Stonewall Jackson's black troops was "someone's misguided attempt to give blacks 'agency.'" That theory seems all the more plausible in light of Masoff's statement—in response to the flap over *Our Virginia*—defending her own qualifications and intentions; she said she was "especially proud" of how she had consulted with Virginia Native Americans "to insure that the discussion of several newly revised SOLs shared their vision and viewpoint."<sup>16</sup>

Despite the author's apparent good intentions to produce a demographically inclusive book, no one—it seems—ever assessed the book's historical accuracy. Masoff, who has authored more than a dozen children's books for both the trade and the scholastic markets, does not claim to be a historian.<sup>17</sup> The book was published by Five Ponds Press, a small publisher whose president is Masoff's husband. Five Ponds did not engage a historian to review *Our Virginia*, nor did Virginia's Department of Education. Decisions to adopt the book were made at the local level, and in the school systems with which I am familiar, no historians reviewed the book at that stage in the adoption process either.

How, then, did *Our Virginia* find its way onto the state-approved list and then into fourth graders' hands?<sup>18</sup> Along with the other Virginia Studies books on the list, it was assessed by a panel of three teachers, none of whom was a history specialist; members of such review panels can express concerns about accuracy or bias, but their primary task is to assess how well the books correlate with the Standards of Learning.<sup>19</sup> The review panel did not note a

16. Lou Scolnik, e-mail message to "our friends in Virginia," containing a statement from Joy Masoff, Oct. 27, 2010 (FOIA).

17. Scolnik, e-mail message to "our friends in Virginia," containing a statement from Masoff, Oct. 27, 2010 (FOIA). In 1999, the *New York Times* identified her as an advertising designer and copywriter. Donna Greene, "Q&A/Joy Masoff; Children's Books about Heroic Life Savers," *New York Times*, June 6, 1999.

18. It is unclear just how many students have been assigned *Our Virginia*, but the number appears to be in the tens of thousands. Because adoptions are made on the local level, the Virginia Department of Education does not tally the number of adoptions. In an e-mail message to a Department of Education official, the Virginia Coordinator for Five Ponds Press stated that "over 75,000" students were using either *Our Virginia* or Five Ponds' fifth-grade U.S. history textbook. Laura Buckius (Virginia coordinator, Five Ponds Press), e-mail message to Beverly Thurston (textbook and instructional materials review coordinator, Virginia Department of Education), Feb. 24, 2011 (FOIA). In an e-mail to a *Washington Post* columnist, who had requested information about the number of copies of *Our Virginia* sold to Virginia school districts, the president of Five Ponds Press declined to divulge the information for "proprietary" reasons. Scolnik, e-mail message to Bob McCartney (*Washington Post* columnist), Jan. 6, 2011, attached to Scolnik to Betsy Barton (history and social science specialist, Virginia Department of Education), Jan. 6, 2011 (FOIA).

19. According to the "K-12 History and Social Science Textbook and Instructional Materials Review Process" that was in place when *Our Virginia* came up for review, the review "committees

single instance of inaccuracy or bias in any of three approved fourth-grade books, even though subsequent scholarly reviews would find factual errors in all of them.<sup>20</sup>

Not until the widespread media coverage of the Stonewall Jackson gaffe did the Virginia Department of Education commission scholars to review the fourth- and fifth-grade history books on its list.<sup>21</sup> One scholar called the number of inaccuracies in *Our Virginia* “appalling,” another deemed them “alarming.” The problems included omissions, internal inconsistencies, and “questionable descriptions and analyses,” with some being “so ludicrous” that one reviewer could not determine how the author could have possibly mangled the details.<sup>22</sup> Fifth graders had been issued equally flawed books. The reviewer of Masoff’s *Our America to 1865* declared the number of mistakes “horrifying.” Finding many inaccuracies in the Civil War chapter of a com-

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will be composed of a cross section of teachers, principals, administrators, content specialists, or others who have expertise with the content areas and standards.” Yet the *Washington Post* reported that no content experts reviewed the book. In a memorandum to textbook publishers dated Mar. 11, 2009, Beverly Thurston wrote that the textbooks would be assessed “primarily with respect to their correlation with the 2008 *History and Social Science Standards of Learning* and curriculum framework.” The “profile sheets” completed for each book place the assessment of accuracy and bias at the bottom of the list. “Attachment to Memorandum to Textbook Publishers from Beverly M. Thurston, Textbook and Instructional Materials Review Coordinator, Department of Education,” Mar. 11, 2009; Sieff, “No Expert Reviewed Disputed Va. Text”; “Virginia Studies Profile Sheet” for each of the three fourth-grade books. Memorandum and profile sheets were provided to the author by the Department of Education in response to a FOIA request.

20. “Virginia Studies Profile Sheet” for *Timelinks: Virginia Studies Student Edition* (Macmillan McGraw-Hill), for *Virginia Social Studies: Virginia Studies* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), and for *Our Virginia*. Although the profile sheets indicate that written comments should support ratings of “Limited” or “No Evidence,” no comments appear on any of the sheets. Information provided to the author by the Department of Education in response to a FOIA request. Christopher Einolf, “Civil War-era Content in the Two Other Virginia Studies Textbooks on the Board of Education–approved List and All United States History to 1865 Textbooks on the List,” appendix J, “Board of Education Agenda Item,” Item T., Jan. 13, 2011, [http://www.doe.virginia.gov/boe/meetings/2011/01\\_jan/agenda\\_items/item\\_t.pdf](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/boe/meetings/2011/01_jan/agenda_items/item_t.pdf).

21. Two books by Masoff—*Our Virginia* and her fifth-grade U.S. history textbook—were reviewed in their entirety; the other fourth- and fifth-grade books were reviewed for their Civil War-era content only.

22. Ronald Heinemann, “Review of *Our Virginia: Past and Present*,” Appendix G, “Board of Education Agenda Item,” Item T., Jan. 13, 2011, [http://www.doe.virginia.gov/boe/meetings/2011/01\\_jan/agenda\\_items/item\\_t.pdf](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/boe/meetings/2011/01_jan/agenda_items/item_t.pdf); Brent Tarter, “Review of *Our Virginia: Past and Present*,” Appendix I, “Board of Education Agenda Item,” Item T., Jan. 13, 2011, [http://www.doe.virginia.gov/boe/meetings/2011/01\\_jan/agenda\\_items/item\\_t.pdf](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/boe/meetings/2011/01_jan/agenda_items/item_t.pdf). Ronald Heinemann called them “appalling”; Brent Tarter called them “alarming” and made the other comments quoted here.

peting textbook, another reviewer advised that the Department of Education should “stay away from this book entirely.” In both cases, the expert readers remarked that not a single professional historian had been involved in the book’s production. Such appears to be the norm for children’s textbooks.<sup>23</sup>

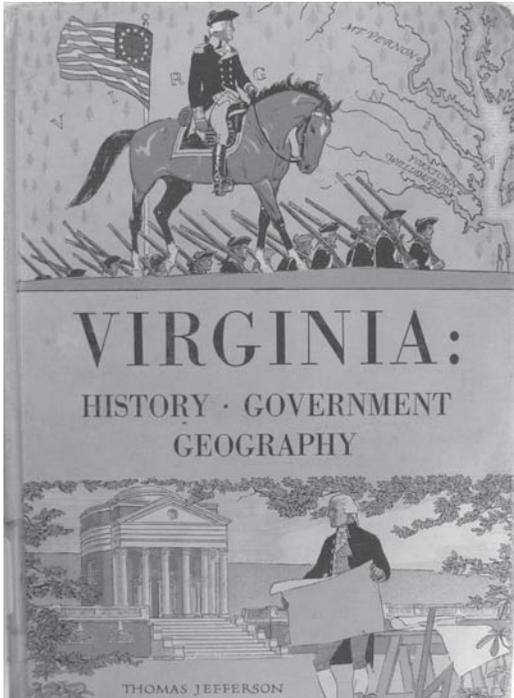
Professional historians are not necessarily skilled at writing on the elementary-school level, so it may well make sense for accomplished children’s authors to *write* history textbooks. But how can we keep authors from introducing “a little something extra” that conflicts with known historical facts? And how can we make certain that their narratives make conceptual sense, so that children are not left wondering how the Missouri Compromise led to secession? At first, the remedy seemed clear: Historians must be directly involved in the process of creating children’s textbooks, and the state must commission content experts to review all textbooks that it approves. But once I began looking into Virginia’s history of embattled textbooks, I began wavering in my convictions. The last time that the state of Virginia got deeply involved with its children’s history books, in the 1950s, its content experts succeeded at eliminating most factual inaccuracies. Those same books, however, offered clearly biased interpretations of Virginia’s past. Within their pages, the Civil War sometimes reads like a morality play for navigating the turbulent waters of school desegregation and white Virginians’ resistance to it.

### Slavery as “Comprehensive Social Security”

In 1950, the General Assembly created the Virginia History and Government Textbook Commission, whose task over its six-year life was to produce three new textbooks for use in the public schools, one each for the fourth, seventh, and senior-high (eleventh and twelfth) grades; these books would become known as the “Virginia histories.”<sup>24</sup> Collectively, they paint an almost idyllic

23. Mary Miley Theobald, “Review of *Our America: To 1865* (Five Ponds Press),” appendix K, “Board of Education Agenda Item,” Item T., Jan. 13, 2011; Einolf, “Civil War-era Content in the Two Other Virginia Studies Textbooks.” On the creation of children’s American history textbooks, which often bear the names of scholars who did not write or review their content, see Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised: What History Textbooks Have Taught Our Children about Their Country, and How and Why Those Textbooks Have Changed in Different Decades* (New York: Vintage, 1979); James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

24. On the legislative history of the commission, see Fred Roger Eichelman, “A Study of the Virginia History and Government Textbook Controversy, 1948–1972” (EdD diss., Virginia



The cover of Francis Butler Simkins's *Virginia: History, Government, Geography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957). Simkins's book was one of three works overseen by the Virginia History and Government Textbook Commission.

image of southern plantation life. Analogous to “comprehensive social security,” as the senior-high book puts it, slavery allowed “Negroes” or “servants” (almost never referred to as “slaves”) to work less hard than free laborers, to have all their daily needs met, to lead a carefree existence, and to be looked after in old age by their masters and mistresses. Although “Negroes had their problems and their troubles,” apparently few of those arose from their status as slaves. They “were not worried by the furious arguments going on between Northerners and Southerners over what should be done with them. In fact,

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Polytechnic Institute and State Univ., 1975); and Eichelman, “The Government as Textbook Writer: A Case History,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 57 (Mar. 1976): 456–58. For an examination of the controversy within the context of the Civil Rights Movement, see Adam Wesley Dean, “‘Who Controls the Past Controls the Future’: The Virginia History Textbook Controversy,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 117.4 (2009): 318–55. Neither Eichelman nor Dean uses the sources upon which I have focused my research: the minutes of the Virginia History and Government Textbook Commission and correspondence of the seventh-grade book's authors and editors. These sources allow for an analysis of the behind-the-scenes wrangling over the Virginia histories' content. For that aspect of the story, Eichelman draws upon interviews from the 1970s with commission members and authors, whose recorded memories are sometimes at odds with the written records from the 1950s.

they paid little attention to these arguments.”<sup>25</sup>

Despite the “furious arguments” over slavery in the pre-war era, slavery recedes from center stage (though it never disappears) once the books begin narrating the Civil War itself. Virginians, who loved the Union that they helped create, went to war because of constitutional principles and because of (white) southern brotherhood. During that war, a few slaves did leave their plantations, but most remained at home. They did so, not—as modern scholars would argue—because of the war’s uncertainties, but because of loyalty; they stayed to take care of their masters’ families just as their masters’ families had taken care of them in peacetime.

Written during the furor over school desegregation that rocked Virginia in the 1950s, the Virginia histories’ treatment of the Civil War era had lessons to offer children—white and black—about the present day.<sup>26</sup> By emphasizing how antebellum slavery supposedly created bonds of affection and dependence between owner and slave, the textbooks imply that segregation, too, had its benefits for both races a century later. In their portrayal of the war’s causes, the Virginia histories emphasize that southern states would not tolerate the federal government’s encroachment on their rights and institutions. Neither, one might extrapolate, should Virginians of the 1950s accept the federal government’s imposition of desegregation. Virginia’s brave soldiers stood up against the federal government’s violation of their rights, even after their cause seemed lost. Now Virginia would again fight to the bitter end, waging a campaign of “massive resistance” to obstruct federally mandated school desegregation.<sup>27</sup> As the all-black Virginia Teachers’ Association would declare in 1964, “This is not an objective history; it is Virginia’s history as a [white] Virginian sees it, or rather as he would like to keep it.”<sup>28</sup> The textbooks

25. Quotations from Hemphill, Schlegel, and Engelberg, *Cavalier Commonwealth*, 120; Francis Butler Simkins, Spotswood Hunnicutt, and Sidman P. Poole, *Virginia: History, Government, and Geography* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1957), 376.

26. For more on how the histories conveyed a modern-day message, see Dean, “Who Controls the Past Controls the Future.”

27. As Robert J. Cook has pointed out in his analysis of the Civil War’s centennial celebrations, however, some white southerners recognized that “the reality of defeat limit[ed] the war’s utility to segregationists.” See Robert J. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961–1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2007), 58.

28. [Virginia Teachers’ Association], “Suggested Outline for Consideration of a Book” [1964], box 2, folder 15, Spotswood Hunnicutt Jones Papers, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia (hereafter referred to as Hunnicutt Jones Papers). This language was applied to the seventh-grade book in particular.

thus embodied the “Virginia spirit”—past and present—so often touted by the all-white, conservative commission that oversaw their production.

### The Politics behind Virginia’s Histories

The Textbook Commission had its genesis in an earlier legislative commission—the Commission to Study the Curricula and the Teaching of Certain Matters in the Secondary Schools—established by the General Assembly in 1948 to investigate young Virginians’ knowledge of their state’s history and government, including the relationships among the local, state, and federal governments. To a legislature controlled by the ultra-conservative Democratic party machine led by Harry F. Byrd, that mandate must have seemed urgent in the year after President Harry S Truman’s Committee on Civil Rights recommended the “elimination of segregation, based on race, color, creed, or national origin, from American life.” (In the 1950s, the Byrd organization would lead the white South in resisting the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision mandating an end to public school segregation.) Chaired by the firmly pro-segregationist Lloyd C. Bird, the Commission to Study the Curricula and the Teaching of Certain Matters in the Secondary Schools—commonly known as the Bird Commission—discovered that Virginia’s children were woefully ignorant of their own state’s history and government, an ignorance it blamed principally on textbooks. It recommended that the General Assembly appoint another commission to rectify the situation.<sup>29</sup>

The General Assembly thus created the Virginia History and Government Textbook Commission. The commission’s mandate was to first consult with the State Board of Education to ascertain if any adequate textbooks existed. If none did, then the Textbook Commission should employ someone to write the necessary texts, and to arrange for other individuals to review those texts for age-appropriate syntax.<sup>30</sup> In 1951, the Textbook Commission reported

29. *The Teaching of Virginia and Local History and Government in the Public Schools . . .*, Senate Document 4 (Richmond: Commonwealth of Virginia, Division of Purchase and Printing, 1949), 9, 11; “To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights,” 1947, chapter 4, 166, Harry S Truman Library and Museum, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/civilrights/srights4.htm>. On Bird, see Brent Tarter, “Bird, Lloyd Campbell,” in *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, ed. John T. Kneebone et al. (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 1998), 1:501–502.

30. *Textbooks for Teaching Virginia History, Government and Geography, Report of the Virginia History and Government Textbook Commission to the Governor and the General Assembly of Virginia*, Senate Document 14 (Richmond: Commonwealth of Virginia, Division of Purchase and Printing, 1951), 2.

to the governor and General Assembly that it had not found any suitable existing texts, so it had arranged for new ones to be written. Because of the small market outside the state for Virginia histories, no publisher would undertake the project without a guarantee that its book would be adopted, free of competition, for a contract period of six years. But the State Board of Education, for its part, would not agree to “commit itself to adoption of a text sight unseen.”<sup>31</sup> Publishers would therefore have to agree to “revise by inclusion, amplification or elimination, any part of the manuscript if and when requested by the Commission.”<sup>32</sup> This stipulation went far beyond the General Assembly’s provision that the commission would review the textbooks for age-appropriate readability, and the Textbook Commission acknowledged “the danger of textbooks prepared and issued under the aegis of government.” It offered assurances that it wanted a “full, unbiased presentation of our history and government,” even as its members laid out what they saw as a grander purpose of the books: “to instill” in young Virginians’ “hearts and minds a greater love for Virginia and a perpetuation of her ideals.”<sup>33</sup> If it occurred to the commissioners that not everyone in Virginia held the same ideals, they did not mention it in their report.

Yet Natalie Blanton, a member of the Textbook Commission, later candidly reminded her fellow members that the commission had been “appointed as a protest so to speak” against “a left wing, new deal philosophy of life and government” and against “sleazy work as exhibited in many modern books, textbooks not excepted.”<sup>34</sup> This fear of “sleazy work” may explain in part why the Textbook Commission did not simply entrust well-respected publishers and authors to handle the task of writing new books but rather arrogated to itself the right to comb each of the three books’ manuscripts—line by line, draft after draft—for factual inaccuracies and, especially, attitudes contrary to Virginia’s ideals, as they understood them.

31. *Ibid.*, 3. The six-year period is spelled out in appendix B, “Sample Contract,” *ibid.*, 12.

32. Appendix B, “Sample Contract,” *ibid.*, 10.

33. *Ibid.*, 6.

34. Natalie Blanton, “Comments on the Seventh Grade Manuscript in Virginia History and Government,” July 22, 1954, filed with minutes for July 22, 1954, Joint Meeting of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography and Textbook Committee of State Board of Education, Virginia History and Government Textbook Commission, Minutes, 1950–1956, accession 32492, barcode B1072348, State Government Records Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond (hereafter cited as Textbook Commission Minutes). Blanton also reminded them that it was a protest against the lack of historical content in the curriculum and against “dull” books.

Appointed by Governor John S. Battle (1950–54), the Textbook Commission was composed of seven members—politicians, educators, and historians. Governor Battle claimed that the commission was “non-partisan” and that he “did not give the political attitude of the members one moment’s thought.”<sup>35</sup> But evidence suggests otherwise. The commission’s chair, Cecil Taylor—a Democratic member of the House of Delegates—acknowledged in an interview years later that the governor consulted his close political allies in making his appointments.<sup>36</sup> The commission’s other members included state senator Garland Gray, an ardent segregationist; J. Edward Moyler, an attorney who had served on the Bird Commission; Natalie Blanton, a former member of the Richmond City School Board who had worked on Battle’s gubernatorial campaign in 1949; J. P. Snead, Superintendent of Schools, Fluvanna County; J. R. V. Daniel, a historian at the Virginia State Library; and Charles J. Smith, president of Roanoke College.<sup>37</sup> When Smith resigned in 1950 because of illness, he suggested that Battle appoint Daniel A. Cannaday, a professor of history at Radford College, as his replacement. Open to the suggestion, the governor nonetheless proceeded cautiously, writing to J. Frank Wysor—a Byrd loyalist who lived in the same southwestern corner of the state as Cannaday—to ask what he knew about the Radford professor. Wysor made his own inquiries before reporting that Cannaday was an upstanding citizen, an outstanding history teacher, and a Democrat.<sup>38</sup> After Daniel died in 1952, Cecil Taylor suggested that the governor replace him with Thomas Perkins Abernethy, a distinguished professor of history at the University of Virginia; by mentioning that Garland Gray found Abernethy to be “entirely satisfactory,” Taylor implied that Abernethy’s political credentials were above reproach.<sup>39</sup>

35. John S. Battle to John E. Manhan (carbon copy), Oct. 26, 1950, “Virginia History and Government Textbook Commission,” box 59, ser. 2, Executive Papers of Governor John S. Battle, 1950–54, Office of the Governor (Record Group 3), accession 24504, barcode B1057341, State Government Records Collection, Library of Virginia.

36. Eichelman, “Study of the Virginia and History Textbook Controversy,” 33.

37. On Blanton’s political activities, see Frances S. Pollard, “Blanton, Natalie Friend McFaden,” in Kneebone et al., *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, 2:18.

38. John S. Battle to J. Frank Wysor (carbon copy), Oct. 9, 1950, and Wysor to Battle, Oct. 13, 1950, both in “Virginia History and Government Textbook Commission,” box 59, ser. 2, Executive Papers of Governor John S. Battle, 1950–54. On Wysor’s relationship to Byrd, see James R. Sweeney, “Revolt in Virginia: Harry Byrd and the 1952 Presidential Election,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 86.2 (1978): 191.

39. Cecil W. Taylor to John S. Battle, Apr. 3, 1952, “Virginia History and Government Textbook Commission,” box 59, ser. 2, Executive Papers of Governor John S. Battle.

But political orientation alone did not qualify someone for appointment to the commission, nor did it fully explain how its members approached Virginia's history. Writing in support of Abernethy's appointment, Moyler indicated the new appointee should be someone with the appropriate "academic training and professional experience" to review the books' manuscripts.<sup>40</sup> Particularly for those commissioners without academic training, but even for those with it, the presuppositions about Virginia's history that they brought to the manuscripts may have been deeply engrained rather than crassly political.<sup>41</sup> They had been schooled on an earlier generation of textbooks that presented a romanticized view of slavery and the Civil War, depicting slavery as a paternalistic institution and states' rights as the driving force behind secession.<sup>42</sup> Having learned well their own childhood civics lessons, their desire to pass on those same lessons may have been more reflexive than calculated.

When it came to selecting the publishers, the commissioners did not display a regional bias. Together with the State Board of Education, the commission contacted seventy-four publishers "in all sections of the United States," held informational sessions, and then invited a pool of sixteen publishers (not one of which was located in a former Confederate state) to respond to written questionnaires about their qualifications for handling the unusual project. The commissioners wanted to know, for example, whether the firms had editorial staffs "experienced in checking the authenticity of historical data" and "a research department experienced in historical research." Did they have the ability to secure an author who was an "authoritative historian"? One familiar with Virginia's history?<sup>43</sup> Using a process that contrasted sharply with the one that put *Our Virginia* in my daughter's hands, the Textbook Commission and the State Board of Education ranked factual accuracy high in their list of priorities.

40. J. Edward Moyler to Mrs. Wyndham [Natalie] Blanton (carbon copy), Mar. 7, 1952, "Virginia History and Textbook Commission," box 50, ser. 2, Executive Papers of Governor John S. Battle. Handwritten on the carbon copy is "Mr. Battle, The above is meant only to help you." Blanton apparently had been advocating that a "normal school teacher" replace Daniel.

41. According to Darrett Rutman, "Abernethy cherished the Old South that was for him the genteel, cultured, aristocratic society of Thomas Jefferson, which was destroyed in the course of the making of modern America." Darrett B. Rutman, "Abernethy, Thomas Perkins," in Kneebone et al., *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, 1:11.

42. See Brent Tarter, "Making History in Virginia," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 115. 1 (2007): 2-55.

43. Minutes for Mar. 14, 1951, Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography Textbook, Commission Minutes.

The commissioners selected two New York firms: Charles Scribner's Sons would publish the fourth- and seventh-grade texts, and Harper & Brothers contracted for the senior-high text.<sup>44</sup> The publishers chose the authors, in consultation with—and subject to the approval of—the Textbook Commission and the State Board of Education. Each book would have two or three coauthors, including at least one historian and one teacher. For the fourth-grade book, Scribner's chose Raymond C. Dingleline Jr., assistant professor of history at Madison College; Lena Barksdale, a children's book author; and Marion Nesbitt, an elementary-school teacher in Richmond. For the seventh-grade book, it selected Francis Butler Simkins, professor of history at Longwood College and a prominent southern historian; Spotswood Hunnicutt, a (female) high-school teacher in Williamsburg with a master's degree in history; and Sidman Parmelee Poole, a professor of geography at the University of Virginia who died before the book's completion. Margaret Robinson Simkins, Francis Simkins's wife and a school teacher, coauthored many chapters of the seventh-grade book, but despite her husband's repeated efforts to get her name on the cover, she received no official recognition.<sup>45</sup> The original lead author for the senior-high book was Marvin Wilson Schlegel (also a history professor at Longwood), but after he continually vexed the Textbook Commission, he was replaced by William Edwin Hemphill, a historian at the Virginia State Library and the editor of the *Virginia Cavalcade*, a magazine of Virginia history aimed at a broad readership. Their coauthor was a Richmond social-studies teacher named Sadie E. Engelberg.<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, only hazy evidence documents how the authors were selected. But what is clear is that the textbook commissioners quickly came to regret their decisions.

The publishers submitted the authors' manuscripts in installments, providing twenty copies, so that one could go to each member of the commission, to each member of the State Board of Education, and to selected staff members at the State Department of Education—the bureaucratic agency that oversaw the day-to-day operation of Virginia's public instruction. Final approval of the manuscripts would rest with the State Board of Education, which, like the

44. In 1952, McGraw-Hill bought Harper & Brothers' secondary-school list, including the senior-high Virginia history textbook.

45. Instead, the authors acknowledged her assistance in the book's dedication.

46. Raymond C. Dingleline Jr., Lena Barksdale, and Marion Belt Nesbitt, *Virginia's History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956); Simkins, Hunnicutt, and Poole, *Virginia*; Hemphill, Schlegel, and Engelberg, *Cavalier Commonwealth*.

commission, consisted of gubernatorial appointees, but most of the editing work belonged to the commission's textbook subcommittee, whose members included Cannaday, Abernethy, and Blanton, with Taylor serving in an ex-officio role. For each set of chapters, Cannaday, Abernethy, and Blanton prepared written comments, which sometimes ran more than a dozen single-spaced pages per reviewer. Other commission members commented more selectively, with Taylor, Gray, and Moyler concerning themselves primarily with the chapters on modern government, but they participated in the oral discussions of the entire manuscripts and took part in the decision making about whether to recommend the manuscripts to the Board of Education. At many meetings, the superintendent of public instruction read comments from Department of Education elementary- and secondary-education specialists. Written copies of the reviewers' comments were filed with the commission's minutes and sent to the publishers, who shared the reviewers' and commissioners' reactions with the authors. On a few occasions, the Textbook Commission requested an author's presence at a meeting, but the commissioners preferred to work through the publishers, so that the authors would not feel there was "anything personal in the criticisms."<sup>47</sup>

Yet authors and commissioners alike took things personally, fostering contentious relationships emerging from disagreements over the books' content. When it came to history, the most controversial topics were slavery and the Civil War. (The chapters on modern government also provoked a great deal of acrimony.) Within the correspondence of the authors and editors, as well as in the Textbook Commission's minutes, terms such as "gratuitous insults," "struggle," "battle," "attack," "victory," and "surrender" appear alongside the less frequent "diplomatic" and "compromise." As the commissioners slogged through draft after draft of the textbooks—over the course of four years—they grew increasingly contemptuous of the authors, who seemed unable or unwilling to produce manuscripts that reflected the proper "Virginia spirit." They resented the authors' rejection of their criticisms, or, even worse, their habit of incorporating the commissioners' changes in one draft only to abandon them in future drafts. Equally irksome were instances when an author tried too hard to please the commission by explicitly proclaiming Virginia's greatness rather

47. Minutes for June 16, 1954, Joint Meeting of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography and Textbook Committee of State Board of Education, Textbook Commission Minutes.

than making the point subtly, as they thought befitted the true Virginia spirit. This was a frequent complaint about Francis Simkins. “The *persistently boastful* attitude,” Cannaday seethed about one of Simkins’s drafts, “could hardly be classed in the best Virginia tradition.”<sup>48</sup> Frustrated by the way the commissioners responded to their manuscripts, the authors did not hide always their own contempt, at least not in private. Simkins called the commissioners “dirty S of bs!” while Hunnicutt declared herself “damn mad!”<sup>49</sup>

In what sometimes resembled a war of exhaustion, textbook commissioners threatened to replace authors (a threat they made good on in Schlegel’s case) and to refuse to recommend the books for publication. The authors and publishers, for their part, threatened to abandon their projects, leaving the commission with the difficult choice of accepting what it saw as a flawed textbook or having none at all. Either way, the commissioners would face public embarrassment and pressure; in 1955 the superintendent of public instruction reported “growing bitterness” from teachers and parents about the delay in approving the textbooks, which had been promised for that school year.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, having invested so much money and labor in the textbooks, the books’ editors urged that authors should not “arbitrarily reject” the commission’s suggestions, for fear the commissioners might in turn reject the manuscripts outright. Aware that the commissioners themselves did not always see eye-to-eye on the manuscripts, editors and authors strategized about which reviewers had the greatest influence on the commission and how to win majority support if unanimous approval of their books should prove unattainable. (They believed that Cannaday’s comments mattered most; Blanton’s, least.)<sup>51</sup> The often complex details of these internecine battles

48. D. A. Cannaday, “Comments on Tentative Manuscript of the Seventh Grade History Text,” [n.d.], filed with minutes for Mar. 25, 1954, Joint Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography and Textbook Committee of State Board of Education, Textbook Commission Minutes (emphasis in original).

49. Francis Butler Simkins to Spotswood Hunnicutt, Dec. [n.d.], 1955, box 1, folder 12, Hunnicutt Jones Papers; Hunnicutt to Simkins, n.d., box 2, Papers of Francis Butler Simkins, Archives and Special Collections, Greenwood Library, Longwood Univ., Farmville, Virginia.

50. Minutes for Sept. 14, 1955, Meeting of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes. Because the commissioners found the books unsatisfactory, and demanded additional revisions, all three Virginia histories were published behind schedule. The fourth-grade book was published in 1956, the other two in 1957.

51. See, for example, C. F. Board to Francis Butler Simkins, Apr. 2, Aug. 5, Aug. 19, Sept. 22, 23, 29, 1954; Jan. 20, 1955, and “Larry” [Lawrence Burnette Jr.] to Simkins, [n.d.], all in box 1, Papers of Francis Butler Simkins; Simkins to Hunnicutt, Dec. 16, 1953, box 1, folder 10, Hunnicutt Jones Papers.

await telling in another venue, but a preliminary look will suggest how the Virginia histories of the 1950s helped make it possible for my daughter's mistake-ridden textbook to gain state approval many decades later.<sup>52</sup>

### Writing, and Rewriting, Virginia's History

Unlike my daughter's textbook, those earlier Virginia histories were pro-Confederate by design. Upset that Schlegel did not adequately lay the groundwork for secession in his chapter on the constitutional era, Daniel Cannaday instructed: "This chapter should be written from the Virginia point of view, the Southern point of view, for it is to be a *Virginia* history."<sup>53</sup> Members of the textbook commission frequently told the authors to emphasize that Virginia was within her rights when she seceded, and Abernethy thought they might also tell children about the federal government's hypocrisy: after first insisting that the Union could not be dissolved, it then imposed "harsh conditions" on Virginia before allowing its return to the Union during Reconstruction.<sup>54</sup> Most emphatically, the commissioners warned from the project's outset that the authors "should *not* give the impression that slavery was the cause of the war."<sup>55</sup> Children should learn that "the Confederates fought with great courage

52. I am working on a longer manuscript, tentatively entitled "'Not a brother's war': The Civil War in Virginia's Embattled History Textbooks." That piece will compare Virginia's textbooks to other state-history textbooks. Several northern states' histories also came under attack during the 1960s for their treatment of slavery. But unlike the American history textbooks that Frances FitzGerald and James Loewen discuss, state histories did not have to appeal to a national audience, allowing for regional variations in their Civil War discussions. FitzGerald, *America Revised*; Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*.

53. Cannaday, "Comments on Tentative Manuscript of Senior High School History," [n.d.], filed with minutes for Feb. 17, 1954, Joint Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography and Textbook Committee of the State Board of Education, Textbook Commission Minutes.

54. T[homas] P[erkins] Abernethy, "Comments on Seventh Grade Text for Virginia History," Nov. 30, 1955, filed with minutes for Nov. 30, 1955, Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes.

55. "Reactions to Proposed Outline of a Textbook in Virginia History, Geography, and Government for the Seventh Grade," filed with minutes for Nov. 29, 1951, Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes. The same note predicted that the chapter on the Civil War would "be a difficult one to write." In commenting on drafts in later years, the commissioners seemed more willing to accept that slavery was a cause of the war. See, for example, "Correlation of Comments of Members of the History Commission Directed Towards Improvement of the Fourth Grade Manuscript," June 16, 1954, filed with minutes for June 16, 1954, Joint Meeting of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography and Textbook Committee of State Board of Education, Textbook Commission Minutes.

and gallantry.”<sup>56</sup> U. S. Grant, Abernethy insisted, might be portrayed as generous, but definitely not as a gentleman.<sup>57</sup> When Schlegel referred to Stonewall Jackson as “a lemon sucking soldier” and to General Richard Ewell’s wooden leg, Cannaday sharply rebuked him: “Observations of this kind do not seem to reflect the Virginian’s usual respect for the personnel and accomplishments of the Confederate officers.”<sup>58</sup>

Although this same attitude contributed to the moonlight-and-magnolia portraits of slavery in the Virginia histories, the Textbook Commission—ironically—made a careful effort not to offend African Americans (or any other Virginians, for that matter).<sup>59</sup> Eager to avoid stirring up further controversy amid the crisis over desegregation, the textbook commissioners scrutinized the textbooks’ manuscripts for passages that might be racially offensive or inflammatory.<sup>60</sup> Both black and white children would use these same textbooks, after all, even if they used them in separate schools. The Textbook Commission even “welcome[d]” input from African American staff members of the Virginia Department of Education, with “a view to discovering any statements on the Negro race that would be objectionable to the Negro people.”<sup>61</sup>

56. Abernethy, “Comments on Last Revision of Virginia History and Government for High Schools,” Sept. 27, 1956, filed with minutes for Sept. 27, 1956, Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes.

57. Abernethy, “Comments on the Seventh Grade Text for Virginia History,” Nov. 30, 1955, filed with minutes for Nov. 30, 1955, Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes.

58. Cannaday, “Detailed Observations on the Manuscript for the High School History and Government [Textbook],” Mar. 9, 1956, filed with minutes for Mar. 9, 1956, Meeting of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes.

59. The commissioners were also sensitive about treatments of class, a topic beyond this piece’s scope.

60. The commissioners worried, for example, about whether a lengthy passage on the Freedmen’s Bureau might “cause any feeling to exist if the book is to be used in the Negro schools also” or whether one book’s treatment of the Civil War era might “arouse resentment.” “Report D,” “Virginia History—Grade VII,” [n.d.], filed with minutes for Nov. 18, 1953, divider labeled “Subcommittee,” Textbook Commission Minutes; Cannaday, “Detailed Observations on the Manuscript for the High School History and Government [Textbook],” Mar. 9, 1956, filed with minutes for Mar. 9, 1956, Meeting of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes.

61. Minutes for Nov. 5, 1953, Joint Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography and Textbook Committee of State Board of Education, Textbook Commission Minutes. The State Department of Education took the initiative in seeking such input.

The commissioners worked meticulously to identify and remove any potentially offensive language in the books. The commission minutes for February 24, 1954, recorded that “colored people should be called Negroes with a capital *N* not colored.”<sup>62</sup> At the same meeting, Cannaday asserted that “*colored* people object to the term ‘mammy.’”<sup>63</sup> Abernethy insisted that “the whites” was offensive and should be changed to “white people.”<sup>64</sup> Blanton instructed Simkins to use “settler” or “Englishmen” in place of “white men” in discussing the colonial era; “We are all too conscious of color just now,” she lamented.<sup>65</sup> The commissioners reserved their most vigorous objection for the senior-high book’s use of the term “all non-Negro Virginians.” It was “fantastic,” “incorrect,” and “offensive.” The commissioners believed that Schlegel had consistently and consciously mocked Virginians, past and present. With the term “non-Negro Virginians,” he seemed to be mocking the commissioners themselves and what he saw as their efforts to erase the centrality of race from Virginia’s history.<sup>66</sup>

Although the records hint that the commissioners sometimes disagreed among themselves about how much attention should be paid to race, they

62. Minutes for Feb. 24, 1954, Joint Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography and Textbook Committee of State Board of Education, Textbook Commission Minutes.

63. Cannaday, “Comments on Tentative Manuscript of Fourth Grade History,” [n.d.], filed with minutes for Feb. 24, 1954, Joint Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography and Textbook Commission of State Board of Education, Textbook Commission Minutes (emphasis added).

64. Abernethy, “Comments on Last Revision of Virginia History and Government for High Schools,” Sept. 27, 1956, filed with minutes for Sept. 27, 1956, Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes.

65. Blanton, “Comments on the Seventh Grade Geography, History, and Government Text,” Nov. 30, 1955, filed with minutes for Nov. 30, 1955, Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes.

66. Abernethy, “Comments on Last Revision of Virginia History and Government for High Schools,” Sept. 27, 1956, filed with minutes for Sept. 27, 1956, Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes. Although it is not entirely clear whether Schlegel or Hemphill invented this term, it seems in line with Schlegel’s tone. Commissioners had previously criticized Schlegel for being “tongue-in-cheek,” sarcastic, and cynical. At the meeting at which they reached the decision to have Hemphill replace Schlegel as the lead author, the minutes note: “The group does not want to idealize Virginia History. On the other hand, they do not want to be made fun of.” Minutes for Feb. 24, 1954, Joint Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography and Textbook Committee of State Board of Education, Textbook Commission Minutes.

concurred that “great pains should be taken to see that wherever the Negro is mentioned he is treated with tact.”<sup>67</sup> Blanton went farthest, urging the authors not to remind black children of “their low-vaulted past.”<sup>68</sup> By her reckoning, the fewer references to African Americans in the book, the better.<sup>69</sup> Even Blanton, however, conceded that slavery could not be ignored entirely. But it could, and should, be deemphasized. “There have often been crises in our long life together—colored and white people,” she explained, “but the relationship has been more a background against which life has gone on than life itself.”<sup>70</sup>

Even as Blanton preferred to sidestep racial issues, others involved in the textbook project hoped to provide black children with good role models. In recounting his unhappy experiences while writing the senior-high book, Marvin Schlegel remembered that the commissioners encouraged the textbook authors to praise African Americans for “those qualities which are approved by the whites, his loyalty to his master, for example.”<sup>71</sup> (No child could read the Virginia histories of the 1950s and come away thinking that Nat Turner was a “brave civil rights leader.” The fourth-grade book makes no mention of him; the seventh-grade book labels him a “mad killer”; and the senior-high book describes him as delusional.)<sup>72</sup> Francis Simkins and Spotswood Hunnicutt, who coauthored the seventh-grade book, familiarized themselves with the work of Charlemae Rollins, an African American librarian who advocated positive portrayals of blacks in children’s literature as a means of improving race relations. Although seemingly skeptical of Rollins’s work, Simkins nonetheless asked Hunnicutt to evaluate their chapter on slavery in light of Rollins’s

67. Minutes for Nov. 30, 1955, Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes.

68. Blanton, “Comments on the History and Government High School Text,” Mar. 9, 1956, filed with minutes for Mar. 9, 1956, Meeting of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes.

69. On at least one occasion, this position reportedly led to a fierce disagreement between Blanton and an aide to Senator Garland Gray over whether to include references to race in the seventh-grade book. See Simkins to Hunnicutt, Mar. 2, 1956, box 1, folder 13, Hunnicutt Jones Papers.

70. Blanton, “Comments on the History and Government High School Text,” July 26, 1956, filed with minutes for July 26, 1956, Meeting of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes.

71. Marvin W. Schlegel, “How to Write a Virginia History Textbook,” in R. C. Simonini Jr., ed., *Virginia in History and Tradition: Institute of Southern Culture Lectures at Longwood College, 1957* (Farmville, Va.: Longwood College, 1958), 112.

72. Simkins, Hunnicutt, and Poole, *Virginia*, 384; Hemphill, Schlegel, and Engelberg, *Cavalier Commonwealth*, 225.

“critical evaluations,” and he also informed his coauthor that he planned to include “several Negro heroes” whom he had “discovered” in a Federal Writer’s Project volume on black Virginians.<sup>73</sup> But if their intentions were to present African Americans in a way that would foster better race relations, their efforts fell short. A. G. Richardson, an African American who served as associate supervisor of elementary and secondary education, bluntly criticized a later draft of their book for its portrayal of happy slaves and kind masters, as well as its failure to recognize the full extent of African Americans’ contributions to Virginia history.<sup>74</sup> Richardson’s reaction to the manuscript caught the commissioners’ attention; through the superintendent of public instruction, they issued a request that Richardson provide them with information about “the accomplishments of Negroes” for possible inclusion in the Virginia histories.<sup>75</sup>

Some commissioners kept their own lookout for black heroes. In response to a passage in the fourth-grade book about Molly Tyne, a young (white) woman whose famous but possibly mythical midnight ride alerted the Confederate army to advancing Union soldiers, historian Daniel Cannaday saw an opportunity: “Some accounts state Molly Tyne was accompanied on her ride by a Negro servant.”<sup>76</sup> But the commissioners’ favorite black hero was Booker T. Washington, who embodied the qualities that the textbook

73. Simkins to Hunnicutt, Feb. 8, 1952, box 1, folder 9, Hunnicutt Jones Papers. The book to which Simkins referred was Virginia Writers’ Project, *The Negro in Virginia: Compiled by Workers for the Writers’ Program, of the Works Projects Administration in the State of Virginia. Sponsored by the Hampton Institute* (New York: Hastings House, 1940).

74. A. G. Richardson, “Comments on the Seventh Grade Geography, History, and Government Text,” Nov. 4, 1955, filed with minutes of Nov. 30, 1955, Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes. On the portrayal of slavery, Richardson wrote, “According to this story, most Negroes lived happier and better as slaves under the kindness and consideration of their masters and mistresses, than they do today as free men.”

75. Minutes for Nov. 30, 1955, Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes. At that same meeting, the textbook subcommittee agreed that while the books should include modern-day “outstanding Negro people in all fields,” they should “not mention that they are Negro.” This approach appears to have been an attempt to appease African American critics such as Richardson while responding to Blanton’s (and perhaps others’) concerns about the books’ overemphasis on race.

76. Cannaday, “Comments on Completed Manuscript of the Fourth Grade History Text,” [n.d.], filed with minutes for June 16, 1954, Joint Meeting of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography and Textbook Committee of State Board of Education, Textbook Commission Minutes. Tyne’s servant did not, however, make it into the book; the surviving records do not indicate what led to that decision.

commissioners wanted to instill in black children. Even though Washington was just five years old in 1861, his first appearance in the senior-high book comes in the Civil War chapter. There, the authors use Washington's postwar recollections of emancipation to praise the ways freed slaves treated their former masters "respectfully."<sup>77</sup>

If the white commissioners wanted black heroes who displayed loyalty, African American educators would later criticize the books for excluding black heroes who worked to end slavery. The textbook committee of the Virginia Teachers' Association faulted the seventh-grade book for omitting Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman.<sup>78</sup> They may have wondered, too, why no blacks aside from Booker T. Washington appear in illustrations for the years 1861–65.<sup>79</sup> At Scribner's, Betty Anderson of the Art Department echoed the commissioners' concerns about offending African Americans. "As you know," she wrote from New York, "the subject of the Negro is such a 'tetchy' one right now that it is difficult to find illustrations including Negroes which do not offend." Depictions of black people, Anderson asserted, should be guided by the principle that, in Anderson's words, they "should offend no one and should be a step in appeasing some."<sup>80</sup>

The commissioners' own emphasis on tact reflected, in part, elite white Virginians' sense of themselves as genteel. Even as most of them supported segregation and disfranchisement, they sought to "manage" race relations (to borrow historian J. Douglas Smith's term) through paternalism rather than oppression. Following the lead of Douglas Southall Freeman, the editor of the *Richmond News Leader* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of Robert E. Lee, they encouraged civility as a way of fostering racial harmony. To a

77. Booker T. Washington is quoted as saying, "When Lee surrendered, all of the plantation people knew it, although all of them acted as if they were in ignorance of the fact that anything unusual had taken place." That quotation is followed by the following sentence: "They waited respectfully for their master to call them to the big house to announce that they were free." Hemphill, Schlegel, and Engelberg, *Cavalier Commonwealth*, 333.

78. [Virginia Teachers' Association], "Suggested Outline for Consideration of a Book," [1964], box 2, folder 15, Hunnicutt Jones Papers. Although Douglass does not seem to have had a connection to Virginia, Tubman may have; some records suggest that she worked briefly as a nurse at Fortress Monroe in 1865.

79. Washington's photograph in the Civil War chapter of the senior-high book is from much later in his life.

80. Betty Anderson to Spotswood Hunnicutt, May 2, 1956, Subseries 3C: Author Files 3, box 88, folder 8, Archives of Charles Scribner's Sons, 1786–2003, Co101, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton Univ. Library, Princeton, N.J.

certain extent, these genteel white Virginians encouraged blacks' economic and educational progress.<sup>81</sup> Booker T. Washington thus represented their ideal black American. In its successful bid to win the contract to publish the seventh-grade history, Charles Scribner's Sons—the same firm that had published Freeman's four-volume biography of Lee—reportedly had dangled before the Textbook Commission the prospect of Freeman's writing the textbook's preface.<sup>82</sup> Although Freeman died before the book's completion, some commissioners still hoped to inculcate his views in the state's school children. As Natalie Blanton explained, in reference to the senior-high book, "This book written by a member of the predominate race in Virginia, under the aegis of its State Department of Education and its Governor's Commission—all gentlemen and ladies we hope,—should be expected on no page to offend students who in no way can be held to be responsible for history past or history in the making. I cannot believe that what seems to me to be an over emphasis on matters of race in this book is characteristically Virginian, nor helpful." Blanton feared that by reminding black children of the "lowly" position their ancestors had held, the textbook would impede their ability to "graduate to the better place I hope [they] will have in the future."<sup>83</sup>

When they thought accuracy was at stake, though, the historians on the commission sometimes opted for candor over tact. In 1953 Cannaday complained about the seventh-grade manuscript: "The chapters on slavery seem strained and artificial in their efforts to do justice to the Negro. The emphasis on cruelty seems somewhat exaggerated."<sup>84</sup> Three years later, in response to a subsequent draft of the same book, he apparently thought that the authors had overcompensated in response to such criticisms; now he thought they understated slavery's dehumanizing aspects. "It is unjust and sounds like hypocrisy to

81. J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2002), 3–17.

82. Hunnicutt to Simkins (carbon copy), Nov. 30, 1965, box 1, folder 22, Hunnicutt Jones Papers.

83. Blanton, "Comments on the History and Government High School Text," July 26, 1956, filed with minutes for July 26, 1956, Meeting of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes.

84. "Report B," "Virginia History Grade VII," filed with minutes for Nov. 18, 1953, divider labeled "Subcommittee," Textbook Commission Minutes; although Cannaday is not identified as the author in the report itself, the minutes for that day attribute the same criticisms made in Report B, which appear to have been written by a historian, about the book's organization to him and to no one else. (The minutes indicate that Abernethy disagreed with those organizational criticisms, so he cannot be the author of Report B.)

say “The Negroes Became Virginians,” he wrote. “They were property, bought and sold, not citizens, and certainly not Virginians in the entire sense of the word. It would be more accurate to say, ‘The Negroes Became Adjusted.’”<sup>85</sup> Abernethy, for his part, wanted the authors of the high-school book to refer to slaves’ “importation” rather than their “immigration.”<sup>86</sup> His concern for candor even extended to the authors’ portrayal of the Confederacy itself. There were limits, it seems, to just how far the pro-Confederate point of view should go: He refused to see “embalmed in print” the senior-high textbook’s characterization of Gettysburg as a “stalemate.” Still, Abernethy mustered some tact of his own, suggesting “repulse” rather than “defeat.”<sup>87</sup>

### “The Virginia Spirit”

But historical accuracy alone did not make for an acceptable textbook. At their meeting of November 18, 1953, the commissioners recorded their thoughts about the seventh-grade history: “It was felt that the book technically is not so bad, but the author, Dr. Simpkins [*sic*], does not understand what Virginia stands for and consequently he has missed the point.”<sup>88</sup> The following year, the commission’s chairman, Cecil Taylor, acknowledged that Marvin Schlegel had “probably written the historical facts correctly” in the high-school text, but chided him for having “entirely missed the attitude the Commission is looking for.”<sup>89</sup> The solution was to hire a new author.

Schlegel—an outspoken, Columbia-educated Pennsylvanian—committed

85. Cannaday, “Detailed Comments on the Final Draft of the Seventh Grade Manuscript,” Feb. 17, 1956, filed with minutes for Feb. 17, 1956, Meeting of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes.

86. Abernethy, “Comments on High School Manuscript for Virginia History and Government [Textbook],” Mar. 9, 1956, filed with minutes for Mar. 9, 1956, Meeting of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes.

87. Abernethy, “Comments on High School Manuscript,” July 26, 1956, filed with minutes for July 26, 1956, Meeting of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes.

88. Minutes for Nov. 18, 1953, divider labeled “Subcommittee,” Joint Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography and Textbook Committee of State Board of Education, Textbook Commission Minutes.

89. Minutes for Mar. 25, 1954, Joint Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography and Textbook Committee of State Board of Education, Textbook Commission Minutes.

the cardinal sin: he rebuffed the Virginia spirit. In rationalizing their decision to replace him, the commissioners explained, “Dr. Schlegel is a young man brought up in the Revisionist School and the traditions of Virginia are, consequently, antagonistic to him. The implications in the manuscript are that Virginia is all wrong about the Civil War. He does not see the flavor of our traditions. If he had consulted Dunings’ [sic] School in the matter of reconstruction, his book would probably have been more acceptable to the group.”<sup>90</sup> As they considered possible replacements for Schlegel, Taylor’s mind turned to the *Virginia Cavalcade*, a publication of the Virginia State Library, because its “articles are written by people who understand the Virginia spirit, etc.”<sup>91</sup> Thus the commission selected the journal’s editor, William Edwin Hemphill, to replace Schlegel as the lead author on the senior-high book in 1954. Abernethy advised, “Hemphill should have a carte blanche to change this history as he goes along. He should feel free to change the point of view and to dress up the story.”<sup>92</sup> But Hemphill proved less willing to dress up the story than the commissioners had hoped. He arrived at their meeting of November 9, 1956 with a ninety-seven-page response to their criticisms of his manuscript. (He also brought an abridged version of eighteen pages; the commissioners opted to discuss it instead.)<sup>93</sup> Publicly, though, Hemphill took a more measured approach, later acknowledging, “At times I went farther than I wanted to on the Southern viewpoint, but I felt the good of the book as a whole was worth it.”<sup>94</sup>

Francis Butler Simkins grumbled continuously about the commissioners’ editing of the seventh-grade book, but he increasingly bent to their will, especially after witnessing Schlegel’s fate. (As departmental colleagues at Longwood, the two authors compared their textbook-writing experiences.) Simkins was a South Carolinian by birth and a renowned scholar of the

90. Minutes for Feb. 17, 1954, Joint Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography and Textbook Commission of State Board of Education, Textbook Commission Minutes.

91. Minutes for Feb. 24, 1954, Joint Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government and Geography and Textbook Committee of State Board of Education, Textbook Commission Minutes.

92. Minutes for Mar. 25, 1954, Joint Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography and Textbook Committee of State Board of Education, Textbook Commission Minutes.

93. Minutes for Nov. 9, 1956, Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes.

94. Jo Hyde, “Three New Textbooks Now in Use,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Sept. 23, 1957, clipping in box 1, folder 2, Hunnicutt Jones Papers.

American South who emphasized slavery's centrality to the war even as he made demeaning references to African Americans—worrying the commissioners on both counts. (Simkins's complex racial views made him equally at ease citing, on the one hand, John Hope Franklin and Melville Herskovitz and, on the other, Ulrich B. Phillips.<sup>95</sup>) Initially, Simkins expressed a willingness to make changes to the textbook's manuscript, but only "where no principles are involved."<sup>96</sup> As the commissioners rejected the first four drafts of the manuscript and began considering "finding someone else who could rework this book and breathe into it the spir[i]t of Virginia," Simkins gradually softened his principles, acknowledging that the fifth and final version of the book took a "romantic" approach.<sup>97</sup> "On one hundred and one points I left things out to please those who I agreed to be my bosses," he reminded his coauthor in 1963.<sup>98</sup> As the seventh-grade book came under increasing attack, Simkins distanced himself further from its contents, privately calling the book "more a bid to make money than a work of scholarship" and "an excursion in civics with scholarly inclinations subordinated." Still, he took pride in the book's factual accuracy, which he attributed to the same rigorous review process that contributed to the book's romantic nature.<sup>99</sup>

Despite their frequent invocation of the Virginia spirit, the commissioners never defined it for the authors. Either you felt it, or you did not—and neither Schlegel nor Simkins did.<sup>100</sup> Yet the commissioners offered hints of what

95. Simkins to Hunnicutt Jones, Mar. 9, 1963, box 1, folder 20, Hunnicutt Jones Papers (Hunnicutt married Catesby Jones in 1960 and changed her name but still published the book's second edition under "Hunnicutt"); "Additions to the Revision of Virginia: History, Government, Geography," box 2, folder 28, Hunnicutt Jones Papers; Francis B. Simkins, "Communication From a Textbook Writer," *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, Nov. 6, 1965. On the complex and evolving nature of Simkins's racial ideology, see James S. Humphreys, *Francis Butler Simkins: A Life* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2008). Once considered a racial progressive, whose scholarship had challenged the Dunning School by crediting African Americans and northerners for their accomplishments during Reconstruction, Simkins now argued for the "everlasting" nature of white supremacy.

96. Simkins to Hunnicutt, July 14, 1952, box 1, folder 9, Hunnicutt Jones Papers.

97. Minutes for Nov. 18, 1953, Joint Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography and Textbook Committee of State Board of Education, Textbook Commission Minutes; Simkins to Hunnicutt, Feb. 23, 1958, box 1, folder 15, Hunnicutt Jones Papers.

98. Simkins to Hunnicutt Jones, Apr. 6, 1963, box 1, folder 20, Hunnicutt Jones Papers.

99. Simkins to Hunnicutt Jones, Apr. 16, 1963, box 1, folder 20, Simkins to Hunnicutt Jones, Oct. [19?], 1965, box 1, folder 22, both in Hunnicutt Jones Papers.

100. Even after meeting in person with the commissioners, Simkins complained to Hunnicutt about the "nebulous" nature of the Virginia spirit. Simkins to Hunnicutt, Dec. 16, 1953, box 1,

they had in mind, such as when Cannaday informed Schlegel, “In the book as a whole many opportunities are overlooked for emphasizing generous and kindly traits in the Virginia spirit.”<sup>101</sup> Between Blanton’s aversion to mentioning blacks’ “lowly” status and Cannaday’s insistence on capturing white Virginians’ generous and kindly traits, it is no wonder that the Virginia histories portray slavery as benignly as they do. Still, the commissioners worried; they knew the books’ handling of slavery would “come under close scrutiny.” After reading one iteration of Simkins’s manuscript in the spring of 1955, Cannaday once again posed the question he and others had been asking for years, but this time more pointedly: “Is the matter of slavery presented in the very ablest manner and best light?”<sup>102</sup> Infused with the Virginia spirit, Cannaday saw no contradiction in that inquiry.

### “Books Say Slaves Had a Fair Deal”

But others did. The Virginia histories sparked immediate and enduring controversy. Before the project had even gotten underway, an editorial in the *Virginia Journal of Education*, the official organ of the then-all-white Virginia Education Association, wondered about the “precedent-shattering undertaking” of government-written textbooks: “If and when the Commission gets down to the business of writing textbooks, who will be asked to review them to see that they are impartial, objective and fair?”<sup>103</sup> Almost as soon as the

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folder 10, Hunnicutt Jones Papers. The book’s published version provided this explanation and observation: “As a people, Virginians think and act much alike. It is for this reason that the Old Dominion developed a spirit of its own—without which it would not be the Virginia we know and love. This spirit is made up of courtesy, neighborliness, hospitality, a deep religious faith, respect for leadership, and an ambition to promote the public welfare. So long as this spirit of Virginia lasts, so long will Virginia’s present be worthy of her past.” Simkins, Hunnicutt, and Poole, *Virginia*, 550.

101. Cannaday, “Comments on Tentative Manuscript of Senior High School History,” [n.d.], filed with minutes for Feb. 17, 1954, Joint Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography and Textbook Committee of the State Board of Education, Textbook Commission Minutes.

102. Cannaday, “Comments on Revised Geography, History, and Government Text for the Seventh Grade . . .,” Apr. 20, 1955, filed with minutes for Apr. 20, 1955, Meeting of Subcommittee of Commission to Prepare Textbook on Virginia History, Government, and Geography, Textbook Commission Minutes.

103. “A Textbook without Prejudice,” *Virginia Journal of Education* 44 (Oct. 1950): 10. See also Benjamin Muse, “‘Official’ Historians Face Tough Task,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 21, 1951; Muse wondered specifically how the state histories would cover slavery, the Civil War, and other potentially racially charged issues.

Virginia histories arrived in classrooms, critics charged that they did indeed lack impartiality, objectivity, and fairness. Among the most vocal early critics were two individuals who earlier had been intimately involved with the project: Marvin Schlegel, the original lead author of the senior-high textbook, and Lawrence Burnette Jr., an editor at Charles Scribner's Sons who had worked on the fourth- and seventh-grade books. Both spoke publicly in 1957 about how the textbook-writing process had been influenced by the commissioners' fixation with the Virginia spirit. "If the historian believes that Virginians were influenced in their attitude toward slavery by the profits derived from owning slaves," Schlegel reported, "he would be violating the custom by mentioning it." Burnette chimed in about how "any attempt to challenge popular misconception [was] simply dismissed as 'revisionistic.' A scholar accustomed to basing his work on documents, authority, and expert opinion is rudely shocked when he learns that the ultimate authority in Virginia history is *vox populi*."<sup>104</sup> The press reported controversies over the books' "Southern viewpoint," including disagreements between authors and commissioners over what to call the Civil War.<sup>105</sup> In a review published in the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Herbert C. Bradshaw, a staff member at the *Durham Morning News*, remarked upon the conservative nature of that (white) *vox populi* as it was reflected in the fourth- and seventh-grade books, which "present history from the traditional, romantic approach." He particularly questioned the seventh-grade book's portrayal of slavery while also noting its "surprising omission of reference to the background of racial segregation."<sup>106</sup>

By 1966, the negative publicity intensified to the point where an editor at Scribner's told Spotswood Hunnicutt, coauthor of the seventh-grade book, "If you have been keeping all of these [press] items concerning the VIRGINIA HISTORIES, you must have quite a dossier now."<sup>107</sup> The books had by then come out in revised editions under the auspices of the Virginia Department of Education. Because of financial considerations, neither the publishers nor the state wanted to alter the original book plates, making anything beyond

104. Schlegel, "How to Write a Virginia History Textbook," 109; Lawrence Burnette Jr., "Editorial Problems in Virginia History," in Simonini, *Virginia in History and Tradition*, 119.

105. Hyde, "Three New Textbooks Now in Use," Hunnicutt Jones Papers; "New Textbooks on Virginia History," *Virginia Journal of Education* 51 (Nov. 1957): 12.

106. Herbert C. Bradshaw, untitled review, *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 66.1 (1958): 91–93.

107. Paul Millane to Hunnicutt Jones, May 19, 1966, box 2, folder 6, Hunnicutt Jones Papers.

minimal revisions impossible, even had the authors (or anyone in a position of authority) desired more substantial changes. As the Civil Rights Movement gathered steam, and as the NAACP campaigned to improve portrayals of African Americans in American history textbooks nationwide, the press's interest in the Virginia histories intensified. The racially progressive *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot* ran a three-part series in 1965 highlighting how educators and parents criticized the Virginia histories.<sup>108</sup> One article bore the headline "Books Say Slaves Had a Fair Deal." Another quoted Marvin Schlegel as saying that history, as taught in schools, "is a method of indoctrination. It is taught as a mythology of our society, embodying our ideals."<sup>109</sup> A white columnist for the *Washington Post* asked whether Virginia's children did not deserve a more "candid treatment" of their state's past than the state-commissioned textbooks offered.<sup>110</sup> The Virginia Council on Human Relations, whose stated purpose was to end discrimination and segregation, campaigned against the books, distributing fliers outlining their shortcomings, particularly in their coverage of slavery, and encouraging a grassroots campaign to demand their revision, if not their complete removal from the state's classrooms. "Why not have books on the side of the future instead of the past?" the Council asked.<sup>111</sup>

108. The paper was "the only major white newspaper in the state that urged compliance with the *Brown* decision from the outset," writes J. Douglas Smith in *Managing White Supremacy*, 296.

109. William K. Stevens, *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, Oct. 26, 27, 28, 1965. The headline "Books Say Slaves Had a Fair Deal" ran on October 27; the quotation from Schlegel is in "Textbook Authors' Aim: A Conservative Rural Audience," October 28. The paper also ran an editorial, "How Not to Write History," on October 28, letters to the editor from readers on November 4 and November 10, and a letter to the editor, "Communication from a Textbook Writer," by Simkins on November 6. In it, Simkins wrote, "The 'peculiar institution' of the South did not create a Second Heaven but it did bring the Negro barbarian into the circle of American civilization. Its good points are judicially appraised by such eminent scholars as Ulrich B. Phillips and Lewis C. Gray. It would be absurd for the writers of a textbook for the children of Virginia to join in the chorus of scholars now engaged in defaming the history of Virginia and other Southern states."

110. Helen Dewar, "Virginia History Textbooks Need Reworking," *Washington Post*, Dec. 1, 1966. For more on the press coverage of the histories, see Eichelman, "Study of the Virginia History and Government Textbook Controversy," and Dean, "Who Controls the Past Controls the Future."

111. Virginia Council on Human Relations, "What Picture of America Does Your Child Receive from His School Books? Reviewing Virginia Textbooks," [1966], folder for "Textbook Comm. of State Board of Education," box 142, Executive Departments, ser. 1: 1970 (accession 28050), Executive Papers of Governor A. Linwood Holton Jr., Office of the Governor (Record Group 3), barcode B1053732, State Government Records Collection, Library of Virginia; Richard Corrigan, "Integrated Texts Aim of Va. Rights Council," *Washington Post*, Aug. 13, 1966; "School Texts Held Unfair to Negroes," *Washington Post*, Aug. 15, 1970. The Holton papers include textbook-related documents that predated his administration.

Whether in response to such appeals or on their own initiative, individuals pressured the Department of Education and their local school boards to stop using the texts; two northern Virginian school boards did.<sup>112</sup> The Virginia Council for the Social Studies, whose membership included teachers who used the books in their classrooms, called the books “ridiculous” and “reprehensible.”<sup>113</sup> In light of such criticisms, Spotswood Hunnicutt (by that time the only surviving member of the seventh-grade author team) reported in 1968 that she had pursued a “crash reading program” on African American history in preparation for the seventh-grade book’s third edition, even though she doubted that she could meet the criticisms without rewriting most of the book.<sup>114</sup> The Department of Education assured her that a major rewrite would not be necessary; instead, as she worked on revisions, she tweaked a few sentences to make slavery appear less benevolent, and she inserted a reference to Harriet Tubman.<sup>115</sup>

Yet the book never made it into a third edition. Under increasing public pressure to adopt a “multi-ethnic” curriculum and to eliminate controversial books, the State Board of Education announced in 1972 that the Virginia histories were being decommissioned—“thrown in the trash basket,” as one reporter put it.<sup>116</sup> When some school systems failed to dispose of them, the governor got involved. The administrations that had overseen the writing of the textbooks had championed segregation. Now, the administration of Linwood Holton (1970–74) took a firm stand for integration; Holton, the state’s first Republican governor since Reconstruction, made national headlines

112. In 1966, an editor at Scribner’s reported to Hunnicutt Jones about his meeting with Virginia’s education officials about the state-commissioned texts. In reference to the superintendent of public instruction, the editor wrote, “Although he didn’t complain about it, I gathered from others that he has been much harassed in the past by people ranging from well-meaning educators to out and out crackpots on all kinds of matters relating to the VIRGINIA HISTORIES.” Millane to Hunnicutt Jones, May 19, 1966, box 2, folder 6, Hunnicutt Jones Papers; Dan B. Fleming, “Rewriting Virginia History: Sugar-Coated or Plain?” *Journal of Virginia Education* 73 (Dec. 1979): 15.

113. Marvin W. Schlegel, “What’s Wrong with Virginia History Textbooks,” *Virginia Journal of Education* 64 (Sept. 1970): 10.

114. Hunnicutt Jones to Millane (carbon copy), Feb. 9, 1968, box 2, folder 6, Hunnicutt Jones Papers.

115. “Suggested Outline for Revisions—7th grade text, *Virginia: History, Government, Geography*,” [1968 or 1969], box 2, folder 15, Hunnicutt Jones Papers.

116. See, for example, Gayle Tunnell, “7th-Grade Text in Virginia Offers Controversial View of Slavery,” *Washington Post*, July 7, 1970; Robert L. Asher, “Reading of ‘History’ in Old Dominion’s Schools,” opinion piece, *Washington Post*, Aug. 15, 1970. On “trash basket,” see unidentified clipping—“School Book Policy to Change in 1973”—in box 2, folder 26, Hunnicutt Jones Papers.

in 1970 when he voluntarily sent his own children to predominantly black public schools in Richmond. His special assistant for minority affairs, William B. Robertson—the first African American to hold an influential public office under a post-Reconstruction governor—pressured the Department of Education and school superintendents to stop using the Virginia histories, which are “excellent examples of propaganda, especially when it comes to the issue of slavery.” Robertson offered assurances that he did “not want to re-fight the Civil War,” but the textbooks still had their staunch defenders.<sup>117</sup> Despite Governor Holton’s initial emphatic demand that the books be withdrawn from classrooms “immediately,” he softened his stance after conferring with the president of the Virginia Board of Education. Rather than insisting that the textbooks be withdrawn by “negative directive,” the governor would accede to their being phased out. To do otherwise “would cause furor that might cause adverse legislative reaction.”<sup>118</sup> The books remained in some classrooms until at least the late 1970s.<sup>119</sup>

### The Virginia Histories’ Legacy

Neither the textbooks themselves nor the controversy surrounding them have entirely faded from public memory. I have been struck by the number of people who, when they have seen my copies of the state-commissioned Virginia histories, have remarked that they remember them from their childhoods; the fourth-grade book, they say, told particularly interesting stories. But not everyone remembers the books fondly. A columnist for the *Richmond*

117. William B. Robertson to Hugh D. Koontz III (carbon copy), June 22, 1972, folder for “History Books & Minorities,” box 100, Executive Departments (Education, History Books, Minorities), ser. 4: 1973–74 (accession 28795), Executive Papers of Governor A. Linwood Holton Jr. Robertson was quoting from his address to the State Board of Education and State Superintendents.

118. Handwritten notes on William B. Robertson to Robert I. Green (carbon copy), Jan. 10, 1973, box 100, Executive Departments (Education, History Books, Minorities), ser. 4: 1973–74 (accession 28795), Executive Papers of Governor A. Linwood Holton Jr. Holton confirmed the handwriting was his in a phone conversation with the author on June 24, 2011. The word *immediately* is underlined five times.

119. In 1977, the *Washington Post* published a letter to the editor from a parent complaining about the coverage of slavery in the fourth-grade state-commissioned book. Pat Lang, “Textbook Teachings,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 4, 1977. Fleming, “Rewriting Virginia History,” 14. Fleming noted that while the books were mostly used as references, “some districts still rebind the old fourth grade books.”

*Times-Dispatch*, writing in October of 2010 about the controversy over *Our Virginia*'s references to black Confederates, observed, "Such revisionism resonates in Virginia, where state-sanctioned textbooks a half-century ago unabashedly perpetuated the myth of the contented slave." When I first read the column, I was puzzled by the author's reference to the allegedly "Confederate-friendly version of history" found in my daughter's textbook.<sup>120</sup> Months later, having familiarized myself with those earlier Virginia histories, I now have a much clearer sense of what led the columnist, and many others, to make that assumption.

Because of the backlash against the Virginia histories, the Department of Education and legislators distanced themselves from the textbook-writing process, opening the door for the more laissez-faire review process that put *Our Virginia* in fourth graders' backpacks. When Spotswood Hunnicutt met with education officials in 1968, she felt they "carefully sidestepped the subject of the Negro," in part because—in light of the stinging criticisms in the press—they were "being very careful not to be guilty of infringing upon academic freedom by dictating to textbook authors."<sup>121</sup> In explaining the textbook-adoption process the following year, the president of the State Board of Education asserted, "It is not the responsibility or the practice of the Board or any of its committees to request inclusion of material or to dictate the contents of textbooks offered for consideration. That responsibility belongs to the publishers who are associated with leading experts in the various subject fields."<sup>122</sup> In 1972, when the Virginia State Board of Education declared that the Virginia histories were no longer "basal textbooks," it began creating a list of approved textbooks from which local school districts could choose. The Board of Education would no longer dictate which history books children would read.<sup>123</sup> A legislative effort to ensure once again that children learned their history from books that "preserve the Virginia tradition" failed in committee in both 1974 and 1975.<sup>124</sup> By

120. Michael Paul Williams, "Textbook's Civil War Claim Exposes Issues," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Oct. 26, 2010.

121. Hunnicutt Jones to Millane (carbon copy), Feb. 9, 1968, box 2, folder 6, Hunnicutt Jones Papers.

122. Quoted in Mary Grace Taylor, "Travelogue of a Textbook, or How Textbooks Are Selected in Virginia," *Virginia Journal of Education* 62 (Apr. 1969): 29.

123. Ken Ringle, "Va. Will Update History Courses, Board Votes to Allow Use of New Textbooks," *Washington Post*, Jan. 29, 1972. The new policy allowed, too, for books to be removed from the "approved" list at any time.

124. Eichelman, "The Government as Textbook Writer," 458. In this instance, the government would have selected, not written, the books.

the 1980s, teachers complained about the absence of suitable teaching material, a concern that has only intensified in recent years with the immense pressures on teachers, principals, and local school districts to prepare their students well for the Standards of Learning exam.<sup>125</sup>

Today's Department of Education continues to distance itself from the writing of textbooks, but its practical influence on their content remains profound.<sup>126</sup> With a review process that apparently values correlation with the Standards of Learning curriculum above accuracy, the department indirectly influences not only what gets into textbooks but what does not. When asked, after the *Our Virginia* story broke, to review the other fourth-grade books on the state-approved list, Christopher Einolf, who teaches at DePaul University, discovered several errors of fact in their Civil War chapters. He seemed more struck, however, by the books' significant lacunae, such as their failure to mention the African American Virginians who fled to Fortress Monroe, giving rise to the Union's contraband-of-war policy. (They are not mentioned in *Our Virginia* either.) In response to such criticisms, one publisher defended itself by saying that "the grade 4 Virginia Standards of Learning do not require such details."<sup>127</sup> Five Ponds, too, invoked the SOLs, suggesting that the reviewers raised some issues that "go beyond the SOLs and most likely should not be changed."<sup>128</sup> By this logic, if the SOLs, with their focus on Virginia history, fail to mention the Kansas-Nebraska Act, then a publisher has no need to inform children that the Missouri Compromise was repealed.

Even as the state still influences textbooks' content, the review process that led to *Our Virginia*'s approval can be described as perfunctory, at best—a far cry from the microscopic review process applied to the Virginia histories

125. Fleming, "Rewriting Virginia History," 13–16. To fill the void, the school board of Fairfax County—one of the first counties to stop using the Virginia histories—produced its own fourth-grade history, which some other school districts then adopted. See Dean, "Who Controls the Past Controls the Future," and Ina Lee Shelden, "New View of the Old Dominion," *Washington Post*, Sept. 6, 1979.

126. When Five Ponds Press sought advice on how to revise *Our Virginia* to make it acceptable, a staff member at the Department of Education replied that the Board of Education and Department of Education "do not work with any textbook companies to write, edit, or promote their books." Linda Wallinger (assistant superintendent for instruction), e-mail message to Laura Buckius, Feb. 27, 2011 (FOIA).

127. Einolf, "Civil War-era Content in the Two Other Virginia Studies Textbooks"; Carol Davis (McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.), e-mail message to Beverly Thurston, Jan. 20, 2011 (FOIA). The publisher's quotation appears in interlined text in Einolf's report, sent as an attachment to the e-mail. Einolf is at the School of Public Service at DePaul.

128. Lou Scolnik, e-mail message to Beverly Thurston, Jan. 3, 2011 (FOIA).

of the 1950s. I was, as someone pointed out, probably the first historian to read the book—and I did so in a parental, not a professional, capacity. Had the story about Stonewall Jackson's black Confederates not made national headlines, there is reason to believe that no other historians would have ever read the book, unless they, too, happened to have a fourth grader in a school district that assigned it. But public pressure, which earlier had encouraged the governor to apologize for his declaration of "Confederate History Month," now led the Department of Education to commission expert reviews, which in turn led the Board of Education to remove *Our Virginia* from its approved list. What took nearly twenty years in the case of the centennial-era textbooks took just five months as a "modern Virginia" marked the war's sesquicentennial, in a world profoundly changed not only in its racial attitudes but also in the speed and extent of its communications.

In March 2011, the state adopted new regulations requiring publishers to provide certifications of accuracy from three content experts for every textbook, in every discipline, on its approved list and to correct any errors subsequently found.<sup>129</sup> But the Department of Education, to my knowledge, has made no promises that its own review committees—the groups that will determine whether a book is approved for use in Virginia's classrooms—will henceforth consult its own independent content specialists, an omission I have publicly criticized. "The more safeguards in place, the better," I told the *Washington Post*.<sup>130</sup>

After dipping into the history of Virginia's textbooks, I have not reversed my opinion, but I no longer see state-commissioned expert reviewers as a panacea. I have seen what can result from too many reviewers weighing in; the textbooks of the 1950s often offer a mishmash of conflicting interpretations, seemingly the result of authors responding to multiple reviewers' criticisms even as they tried to adhere to their own scholarly judgments. Accomplished scholars can—and do—disagree with one another. Sometimes, too, a fine line separates fact from interpretation. Francis Simkins defended his portrayal of happy slaves as a matter of interpretation, a view that he could support by citing scholarly sources.<sup>131</sup>

129. The new process, approved by the Virginia Department of Education on March 24, 2011, is outlined at "Textbook Review and Approval," Virginia Department of Education, [http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/textbooks/review\\_process/index.shtml#revised](http://www.doe.virginia.gov/instruction/textbooks/review_process/index.shtml#revised).

130. Kevin Sieff, "Proposed Bill Would Overhaul Va. Textbook Adoption Process," *Washington Post*, Jan. 2, 2011.

131. Simkins, "Communication from a Textbook Writer."

Fourth-grade textbooks, which are by necessity superficial, cannot easily capture historical complexities. Moreover, as long as they strive to teach “responsible citizenship”—to emphasize the “hard work” and “sacrifice” of our forebears—they will tend to gloss over discomfiting episodes in our history or to turn the past into a mythological story of heroes and villains. (Was Nat Turner a “brave civil rights leader” or a “crazed killer”?) By approaching history as a civics lesson, we risk reading the past in light of our own cultural imperatives, which would pose dangers even if those imperatives were not as bitterly contested as they sometimes turn out to be.

Fourth graders, at least in our school district, never did learn about Stonewall Jackson’s two black battalions. Before children had finished their unit on the American Revolution, the Virginia Board of Education withdrew its approval of *Our Virginia*, prompting some school districts to recall the books. By the time this article appears, a second edition may well be in use, as the Virginia Board of Education has agreed to put it through an expedited review process.<sup>132</sup> The board had little choice. Rather than refund money to school districts that had purchased the flawed books, Five Ponds offered to supply corrected editions.<sup>133</sup> Most districts, having just bought new textbooks in 2010, can no longer afford to purchase alternative texts from a different publisher. Even as I put the final touches on this essay, the Department of Education has announced that scholars have finished reviewing the second edition, which will soon be made available for public review and comment before the Board of Education reaches its final determination on whether *Our Virginia* belongs on the state-approved list of fourth-grade textbooks.

I am eager to see whether this new version of *Our Virginia* will improve upon the publisher’s first attempt to respond to scholarly criticisms of its content. In January 2011—within weeks of the state’s releasing its expert reviews

132. Patricia I. Wright (superintendent of public instruction, Virginia Department of Education) to Lou Scolnik, Mar. 29, 2011 (FOIA).

133. Initially, Five Ponds announced it would provide school districts with stickers to cover up the sentence about black Confederates and Stonewall Jackson and would remove “the one controversial sentence” in its second edition. In early January 2011, it indicated that it would offer second editions of the books to school districts at a significant discount (“over 80% off the full price”). Later that month, after the Department of Education made public the critical reviews of *Our Virginia*, Five Ponds announced it would replace the books at no cost. Lou Scolnik, e-mail message to “the VA DOE, District Superintendents, and members of the Social Studies Consortium,” Oct. 21, 2010 (FOIA); Scolnik, e-mail message to Beverly Thurston, Jan. 3, 2011 (FOIA); Scolnik, e-mail message to “our friends in Virginia,” Jan. 9, 2011 (FOIA).

of the book's inaccuracies, omissions, and internal inconsistencies—Five Ponds posted a “corrected” electronic version of *Our Virginia*. One evening in mid-March, my daughter reported that her class had read aloud the chapter on Reconstruction. “I’m not sure you want to know this, Mom,” she began, bracing herself for my reaction. “It still includes the part about forty acres and a mule,” a reference to a sentence about the Freedmen’s Bureau that one of the state’s expert reviewers had emphatically flagged as a myth.<sup>134</sup> As it happened, I had spent that same day researching the Virginia histories of an earlier era, and that perspective guided my reaction as I listened to the latest episode in the continuing story of *Our Virginia*: Like the otherwise tactful Spotswood Hunnicutt, I was “damn mad!”

134. On January 3, 2011, the Department of Education e-mailed Five Ponds Press the experts’ reports, which included one by Brent Tarter at the Library of Virginia, which noted, “About the Freedmen’s Bureau: there never was a forty acres and a mule program, which has been exposed as a myth for more than 125 years. Take that falsehood out.” In an e-mail attachment sent to the Department of Education on January 19, 2011, Five Ponds indicated that it would change the sentence. On January 24, 2011, the president of Five Ponds Press informed the Department of Education, “We have updated the PDF files of the student book online to reflect ALL confirmed changes noted on the lists of all three DOE scholars” (capitalization in original). Yet the forty-acres-and-a-mule reference remained in the electronic version at least until July 14, 2011. Patricia I. Wright makes reference to the January 3 e-mail in Wright to Lou Scolnik, Jan. 31, 2011 (FOIA). See also Brent Tarter, “Review of *Our Virginia Past and Present*,” appendix I, item T, Jan. 13, 2011; Scolnik, e-mail message to Betsy Barton and Beverly Thurston, Jan. 19, 2011 (FOIA); Scolnik, e-mail message to Thurston, Jan. 24, 2011 (FOIA); Five Ponds Press, electronic copy of *Our Virginia: Past and Present*, accessed July 14, 2011, [http://www.fivepondspressbooks.com/studentbooks/G4\\_silent/Chap8/index.html](http://www.fivepondspressbooks.com/studentbooks/G4_silent/Chap8/index.html). A user name and password are required to access the book’s electronic version.