

Story of America¹

By Robert L. Middlekauff²

This book contains few of the crudities that textbooks sometimes offer about Negroes. At times it shrinks before the tender sensibilities of the South, as, for example, in its elaborate explanation of why it refers to the Civil War as the "Civil War" ("The most common [name] but not the most correct") and as the "War Between the States" (page 211). It sometimes strives to be fair in treating controversial points either by maintaining a gray impartiality or by belaboring both sides (the true and the good, it seems to assume, in such cases, are always in the middle, halfway between the two sides). There are some striking omissions—the NAACP is not mentioned, nor are most Negro leaders in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and most court cases affecting Negro civil rights are ignored. And clumsy organization robs the book of some of its limited force (examples follow).

After saying all this, I would still say that this text is much better than several others I examined. Despite omissions it makes a serious attempt to trace a variety of Negro experiences. And in the process it shows that the Negro has suffered in America but it does not romanticize him.

Slavery

The book assumes that the origins of Negro slavery were solely economic: because land was cheap in the colonies and white labor expensive, it holds, Negroes were imported. This emphasis upon slavery as an economic institution is maintained throughout the book. There is no suggestion that slavery developed over a period of time until it was recognized in law in the 1660s nor is there a hint that the Negro's color contributed to his enslavement. (The book may intend to suggest that the unfree status of Negroes gradually hardened into slavery, for it refers to the human cargo of 1619 as "the first Negro servants," but thereafter it uses the word "slaves.") Slave life is ignored in the book, and nothing is said about the psychological and social effects of the institution.

In most places the treatment of slavery is factual, though no facts are given about broad areas of slavery. There is one admirable assessment of slavery: "The benefits of slavery were all on the side of the owners. As the anti-slavery speakers said, nobody ever asked to be a

¹ Ralph V. Harlow and Ruth Elizabeth Miller, *Story of America* (Revised edition). New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1957. This is a high school textbook.

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