

## Column: What we learn, and don't, about slavery in school



**Mary Schmich Contact Reporter** Chicago Tribune

I've been trying lately to remember what I learned in grade school about slavery and the Civil War and the history of black people in the United States.

When I tunnel that far back in my mind I glimpse a few words: Underground Railroad. Plantation. Mulatto. Indentured. Eli Whitney. Cotton gin. Gettysburg.

I remember sitting in Miss Birch's sixth-grade class in Macon, Ga., and feeling the fascination of those words, vaguely shadowed by dread, but I have no memory of them being stitched together into a coherent story.

I carry a few images in my memory, too, colorful, romanticized paintings reduced to textbook size: Black people in cotton fields. White colonnaded mansions. Soldiers in blue or gray uniforms on rocky battlefields.

If I was taught to draw a narrative line from the cotton fields to the battlefields, I don't remember it, and if there was a line from any of it to my life as a child, I didn't see it.

In the 1960s, when I was in grade school, there was no Black History Month, a designation given to February in the United States only in 1976, and it was only as an adult that I began to piece those classroom scraps together into something like real history.

And the more I've learned, the more I've wondered: What was I taught in school?

Whatever it was, I'm sure it was far from the full truth. And the sadder fact? What kids learn in school today still is.

According to a new report from the Southern Poverty Law Center, "Teaching Hard History," schools all over the country still do a poor job of teaching about slavery, a history that's important because, in the report's words, "Slavery is not an aberration in American history; it is at the heart of our history, a main event, a central foundational story."

Even many schools that do a decent job teaching about the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s, the report says, fall short on laying the historical foundation.

A few of its other conclusions:

All over the country, slavery is taught without context, emphasizing "feel good" stories and progress more than the hard, ugly stuff.

It's taught as if the enslavement of Africans was an exclusively Southern institution, when, in fact, slavery existed throughout the American colonies, was protected by the Constitution and was woven into the national economy for decades after the Civil War.

It's taught without connection to the ideology of white supremacy that developed to sustain it.

And it's taught without connection to how it continues to shape all of us as Americans.

Teaching the history of slavery comes with unique challenges, even for teachers who want to teach it well.

“How do they talk about slavery’s legacy of racial violence in their classrooms without making their black students feel singled out?” asks the report, which relies on a survey of nearly 1,800 teachers. “How do they discuss it without engendering feelings of guilt, anger or defensiveness among their white students?”

The teachers’ struggles to teach well were mirrored in the survey of 1,000 high school seniors, who had trouble correctly answering questions on the topic.

Teaching history of any kind is complicated. All stories of the past are incomplete. What we value and understand shifts.

Our understanding of slavery is complicated by the fact that so many Americans treat the study of its history as if it were a sporting event in which they’re obliged to pick a team.

Team Black or Team White? Team Red or Team Blue? Team Remember or Team Move On?

But black history — which is American history — isn’t sport. There are no sides, no teams.

We’re all in this together, which is why I grow more curious all the time about what I’ve learned, and how and where.

A few months ago, in my quest to understand the history I was taught in school, I called the public library in Macon, Ga., to see if it had textbooks from that time. I was particularly interested in knowing what we were taught about the Civil War: Who were the heroes and villains? What were we taught about the reasons for the war?

I spoke with a librarian who regretted to say they didn’t carry the textbooks. I asked if she’d grown up in Macon. She had, and she’d gone to school there in the ’60s and ’70s.

I asked her what she was taught about the Civil War. She laughed ruefully.

“Not much,” she said. “There was Fort Sumter, then there was the war, and then it ended.”

She’s black and I’m white and neither of us had been taught much, which we agreed was pretty weird.

Black History Month is a good time to ask yourself where you learned your history and to consider what you may not know.

The full report, “Teaching Hard History,” is at <http://bit.ly/2BLKLS5>, and as it notes, quoting the writer James Baldwin:

“History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history.”

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