

## THE STATUS OF TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY\*

James Cook  
Floyd College

In an interview in 1980, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and novelist Robert Penn Warren remarked sadly that "history today is almost ceasing to be studied." "There's an appalling ignorance and contempt for history," Warren observed, "It is considered a dead subject. People are not interested in the past; they are not interested in understanding human nature . . . Today people are interested only in now and tomorrow. They don't seem to realize that you can't see the future without the past."<sup>1</sup> Little has occurred in the subsequent decade, I suspect, that would have changed Warren's views. The "Me" generation of the 1980s with its emphasis on yuppies, materialism, and instant gratification has not been particularly concerned about America's heritage. Even the plethora of books, films, speeches, displays, and parades that commemorated the bicentennial of American independence and the writing of the Constitution and Bill of Rights failed to generate the expected enthusiasm in understanding America's origins.

Contemporary students generally are "turned off" to history despite textbooks which are clearly written and appealingly packaged with color illustrations and charts. The textbooks also place more emphasis on women, ethnic minorities, and social history to make them more relevant to today's students, and there are usually helpful study guides to assist the students. To supplement the texts and lectures, teachers have at their disposal extensive slide collections, film series, and videotapes to enhance learning. Never before have so many audiovisual aids been available for classroom use. Many of them, I should add, are excellent. In addition, both public and commercial television have presented highly-publicized interviews, historical dramas, and docudramas on subjects ranging from Peter the Great to the Civil Rights Movement, from George Washington to Joe McCarthy. In short, students have to go to considerable effort to avoid learning history. Unfortunately, they do.

In a report entitled *A Nation at Risk* the National Commission on Excellence in Education concluded that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people."<sup>2</sup> That report, published in April of 1983, stimulated much discussion about the status of education in America and prompted additional studies.

In 1987, Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr. published a report on the first national assessment of history and literature entitled *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* The assessment revealed that eleventh graders know very little history or literature. In this instance, a representative sample of 7,812 students took the test, which consisted of 141 multiple-choice questions on

history. The committee of scholars that compiled the test attempted to prepare questions that covered fundamental material that students of this age might reasonably be expected to know. Indeed the committee's aim was to ask questions on United States history that "most students *ought* to be able to answer correctly."<sup>3</sup>

The results were astounding. Surely everyone should know that Columbus reached the New World before 1750 (31.9 percent did not); that the Constitution was written between 1750 and 1800 (39.1 percent did not); that the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred between 1939 and 1943 (40 percent did not); and that Watergate occurred after 1950 (35.5 percent did not). Fewer than one student in four (24.7 percent) knew that Lincoln's administration took place between 1860 and 1880. Less than one in three (32.2 percent) knew that the Civil War occurred between 1850 and 1900. Only 38 percent knew that Jamestown was founded before 1750.<sup>4</sup> The ignorance of these eleventh graders was not confined to chronology and dates. One student in five (20.8 percent) did not know that George Washington commanded the American army during the Revolution; almost one in three (32.2 percent) did not know that Lincoln wrote the Emancipation Proclamation. Less than two students in five (39.5 percent) could identify the Dred Scott decision. Oddly, 83.8 percent knew that Harriet Tubman helped slaves escape to the North, but only 22.8 percent correctly identified Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan as leaders of the women's movement in the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> As a result of such answers, the authors concluded that "our eleventh graders as a whole are ignorant of much that they should know."<sup>6</sup> The over-all grade for the history portion of the national test was 55 percent.<sup>7</sup> In short, they flunked.

Concerned by such results, the National Endowment for the Humanities contracted with the Gallup Organization to measure students' command of basic historical and literary knowledge in the last year of their undergraduate education. Nearly 700 college seniors took this test in the spring of 1989. It consisted of 87 questions--38 on literature and 49 on important historical figures, dates, and events. More than one-third of the 87 questions were originally designed for the 1986 test administered to 17-year-olds--questions that high school students should be able to answer correctly. On these questions alone, 49 percent of the college seniors still would receive failing grades.<sup>8</sup> On the history portion of this test, nearly four in ten (39 percent) graduating seniors failed to answer at least 60 percent of the questions. This survey showed "that college seniors, even after having completed almost four full years of undergraduate work, did not know a number of facts that are considered important for prospective citizens to know."<sup>9</sup>

One of the scholars who prepared questions for the test given to the 17-year-olds was Professor E. D. Hirsch, Jr. of the University of Virginia. He is



also the author of the best-seller *Cultural Literacy*, published in 1987. Hirsch is concerned about the ignorance of today's students and the ominous trends that are apparent in education. He notes that verbal SAT scores have declined dramatically in the past fifteen years. Moreover, "it is now clear that not only our disadvantaged but also our best educated and most talented young people are showing diminished verbal skills. To be precise, out of a constant pool of about a million test takers each year, 56 percent more students scored above 600 in 1972 than did so in 1984. More startling yet, the percentage drop was even greater for those scoring above 650--73 percent.<sup>10</sup> Hirsch concludes: "We cannot assume that young people today know things that were known in the past by almost every literate person in the culture."<sup>11</sup>

Are these dismal national statistics applicable to Georgia? Not exactly. At least SAT scores are not dropping in the University System. The latest data from the University System indicates that freshmen who entered the System in 1988-89 and attempted at least 5 hours had an average SAT of 873.<sup>12</sup> Within the System there is considerable variation. Georgia Tech had the highest SAT average 1175, the University of Georgia's average was 1013, Georgia State's was 930, Floyd's was 777, and Atlanta Metropolitan's was 657.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the average of 873 has remained constant for three years, and the average now has shown slight improvement over the past twelve years. In 1977-78 the SAT average was 854 and in 1978-79 it was 862.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Georgia runs counter to the national pattern of decline Hirsch describes, but Georgia's SAT average is still low.

Since World War II Georgia has made noteworthy efforts to improve public education at all levels. This fact was humorously evident at a symposium on Georgia's governors from Arnall to Busbee held at Abraham Baldwin College in 1985. As the governors were described in chronological order--Ellis Arnall, M. E. Thompson, Herman Talmadge, Marvin Griffin, Ernest Vandiver, Carl Sanders, Lester Maddox, Jimmy Carter, and George Busbee--it was soon apparent that each one had made education a high priority on his administration. Each one, the audience was told, was "Georgia's education governor." Realistically, several of these governors could indeed present convincing evidence to support the claim of being "Georgia's education governor."<sup>15</sup> This emphasis on education was continued with Busbee's successor, Joe Frank Harris, who made Quality Based Education the centerpiece of his administration.

A reasonable expectation was that increased expenditures and mandated reforms in education would produce better students and higher scores. Unfortunately, that is not yet the case. On April 11, nine days ago, the newspapers reported that fewer than two-thirds of Georgia high school graduates who enter the state's public colleges and universities are prepared for college work. Even among those who have earned special "college prep" diplomas,

almost one-fifth must take remedial courses.<sup>16</sup> Surprisingly, the figures have gotten worse since QBE began. As state Senator John Foster, head of the Senate Education Committee, remarked: "This shows that we still have a lot of work to do in Georgia as far as preparing our youngsters for college."<sup>17</sup>

Recent conversations with college history professors reinforces Senator Foster's view that not enough of Georgia's high school graduates are adequately prepared for college. Professor Fred Roach of Kennesaw State College, formerly head of the History Department, laments that the quality of students has "declined significantly" during the past five to eight years. As a consequence, he has been forced to delete about one-third of the information from his surveys. Lacking motivation, the students now refuse to handle it, he explains.<sup>18</sup> At West Georgia College, Professor Al Hanser, head of the History Department, finds today's student better motivated, but "ignorant, appallingly so."<sup>19</sup> Professor Lester Stephens, head of the History Department at the University of Georgia, sees little change in the quality of students, but complains that they can neither analyze material nor write good papers.<sup>20</sup>

In my own experience in teaching survey courses in American history, first at Georgia State and for the past twenty years at Floyd College, I too have noticed a decline in the knowledge of American history that students possess. In fact, as a result of painful experience, I must now assume that entering freshmen have almost no history background whatsoever. There are exceptions, to be sure, but rare is the student entering my class who knows how people lived in colonial America, or what happened in the Reconstruction era, or why the United States went to war in 1775 or in 1917. For all they know, the New Deal may be a new TV quiz show. The students are abysmally ignorant of history, but they are not stupid. They are capable of learning and, when properly motivated and instructed, they do.

In searching for solutions to our educational dilemmas, the term "innovative teaching methods" frequently is bandied about. Administrators love it, particularly those administrators who have limited classroom experience and who have never produced an innovative method themselves. They are fond of it because it sounds so good and shifts responsibility to the classroom teacher. While many so-called innovative methods must be classed as failed experiments, some, in fact, work. In the 1988 issue of *Proceedings and Papers of the Georgia Association of Historians*, Professor Roger Warlick of Armstrong State College describes how he incorporated local history into his Historical Research Methodology course with success.<sup>21</sup> Working cooperatively with the Historic Savannah Foundation, he assigned his students the task of dating original construction and major alterations in historically significant buildings in old Savannah. The students were also to identify the architects or builders and any other information which would more fully establish the historical context of the



buildings. In accomplishing their tasks, students had to make use of census records, city directories, death and marriage records, wills, newspapers on microfilm, church records, and other materials. The students, Dr. Warlick reports, became immersed in their projects. The result was a heightening of their historical consciousness and a considerable boost to their academic self-esteem. The students had learned by doing. Local history, it seems, has much potential for teachers, archivists, and local historians who are willing to work together to plan suitable projects for students.

Learning through travel is another innovative method that works. In June I will be taking my seventh class on an eight-day bus tour of Charlottesville, Washington, and Williamsburg. Based on my own observations and student comments and evaluations, this program has been quite successful. After seeing Monticello, Montpelier, Mount Vernon, the Lee-Custis Mansion, and Ford's Theater, the students are eager to learn more about the individuals who made those places famous. After a full-day guided tour of Colonial Williamsburg and viewing an eighteenth-century play, they gain insight into the colonial period that textbooks cannot provide. The course requires a research paper and a final exam in addition to a hectic week of sightseeing, and the students receive five quarter hours of credit for American history (History 251).

Although some academicians are highly critical of the traditional lecture, I believe it is still an effective method of imparting information to students. I also believe that the majority of students respond well to history lectures, if the professor knows his subject well and presents it with enthusiasm. Students, obviously, do not respond well to uninformed instructors who are bored with their own subject.

While boring lectures may contribute to some of the problems, the greater problem seems to be that students are not hearing history lectures at all, boring or exciting. At the lower levels, history has often been replaced by social science, civics, human development, or other courses deemed more "relevant" for preparing students for the modern world. At the college level history has to share the Social Science are with psychology, sociology, economics, anthropology, geography, political science, etc. The result is a broader curriculum with numerous electives and less emphasis on history. The terrible scores the college seniors made in history are not surprising when you consider that those students may have taken only one five-hour history course during their four years of college. We in academia like to think (or at least hope) that we are making progress. With regard to history, I doubt that we are. Back in the mid-1960s, when I worked in the Dean's Office at Georgia State University, all students who received a bachelor of arts degree from that institution were required to take twenty hours of history--ten hours in western civilization and ten hours in American history. Now, to the best of my

knowledge, no college in the University System requires twenty hours of history in the Core Curriculum. Most require ten hours and some institutions require only five hours. When a generation of students takes fewer history courses, it should not be surprising if it knows less history than its predecessors. Students cannot learn history if they are not exposed to it.

Abe Lincoln used to say, "We cannot escape history," but we can escape a knowledge of it, and our present generation of students has succeeded pretty well in doing so.<sup>22</sup> If our society wants the next generation of students to know more about our nation's heritage, it does not need more studies, books, surveys, speeches, or meetings to determine why Johnny doesn't know history. We have had plenty of them already. It simply needs to require more history, taught by competent instructors, at the high school and undergraduate college level. Only by taking history courses will our students learn history.

## NOTES

\*This paper is the text of a speech delivered at the annual convention of the Society of Georgian Archivists in Rome, Georgia, on April 20, 1990.

<sup>1</sup>"A Conversation With Robert Penn Warren," *U.S. News & World Report*, August 18, 1980, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in United States Department of Education, *The Nation Responds* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1984), 5.

<sup>3</sup>Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?: A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 24.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 54-59.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>8</sup>Gallup Organization, *A Survey of College Seniors: Knowledge of History and Literature* (Princeton: The Gallup Organization, 1989), 1.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 1, 4.

<sup>10</sup>E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 5.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>12</sup>Haskin R. Pounds and Robert S. Anderson, *University System of Georgia Normative Data for the 1988-89 Freshman Class* (Atlanta: Regents of the University System of Georgia, 1990), 5.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.



<sup>15</sup>Harold P. Henderson and Gary L. Roberts, eds., *Georgia Governors in an Age of Change: From Ellis Arnall to George Busbee* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988).

<sup>16</sup>*Atlanta Journal*, 11 April 1990.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>Samuel Fred Roach telephone interview with the author, 27 March 1990.

<sup>19</sup>Al Stephen Hanser telephone interview with the author, 29 March 1990.

<sup>20</sup>Lester D. Stephens telephone interview with the author, 4 April 1990.

<sup>21</sup>Roger Warlick, "Transforming Research Methodology From Dry Bones to Gourmet Treat," *Proceedings and Papers of the Georgia Association of Historians*, 9 (1988): 103-107.

<sup>22</sup>Thomas A. Bailey, *The Man in the Street* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1964), 45.