

UC Irvine
2025

Title

The American Civil War: Textbooks, Teaching, and Discrepancy in K-12 Historical Education

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8sv5v56v>

Author

Josserand, Jenna

Publication Date

2025-12-01

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

The American Civil War: Textbooks, Teaching, and Discrepancy in K-12 Historical Education

Jenna Josserand | jjossera@uci.edu

<https://sites.google.com/uci.edu/jennajosserand-ufdhproject/home>

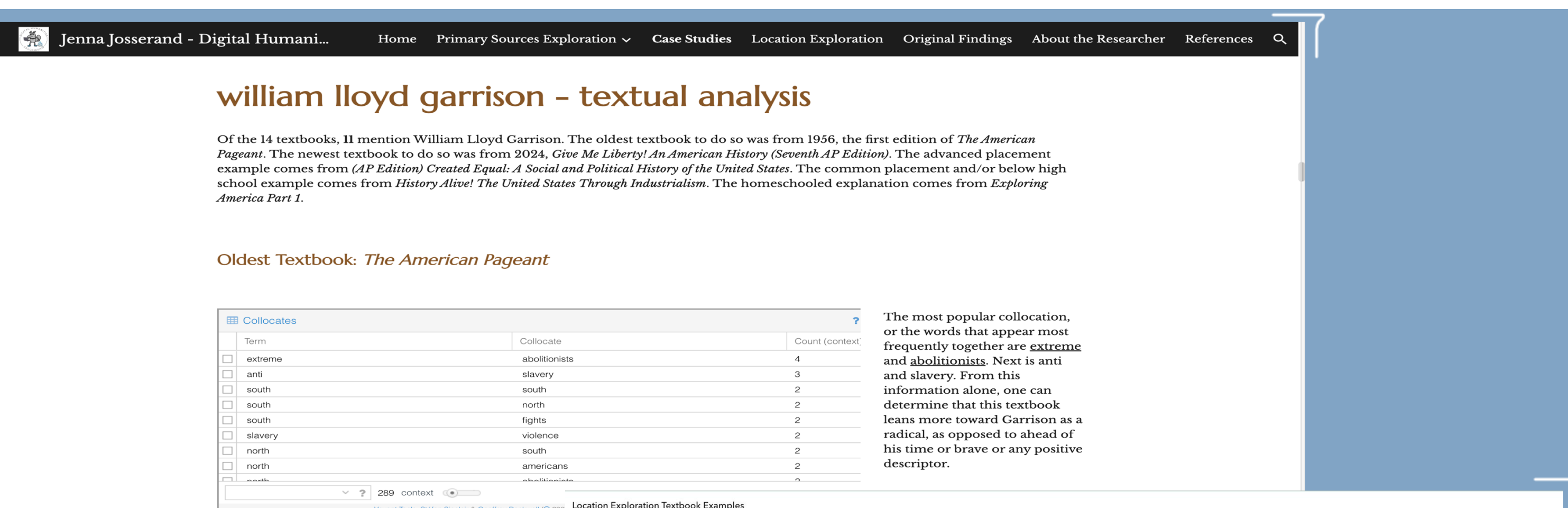
Research Question

How are the causes, development, and realization of the American Civil War being taught in K-12 American schools? To what extent do these ideas vary across time and location?

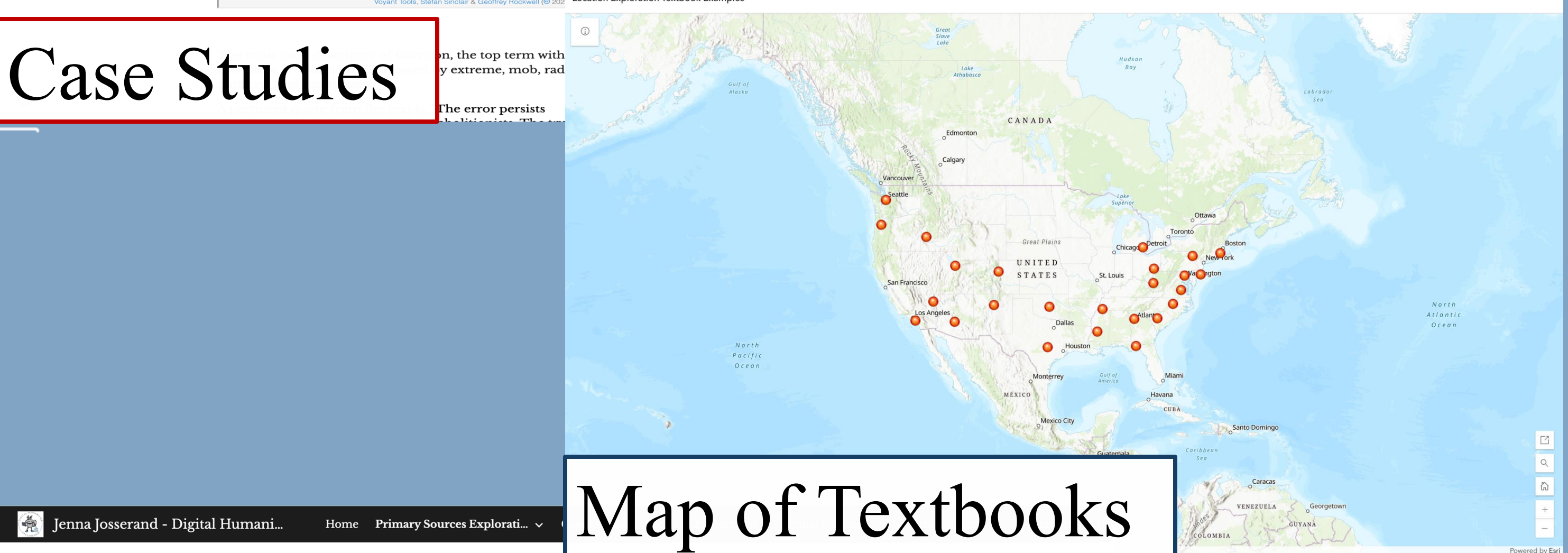
Methodology

Fourteen primary sources are analyzed with textual analysis, using Digital Humanities methods like Voyant Tools, my analysis, and ZotGPT. One recommended textbook from twenty-five states is mapped using ArcGIS. “Case studies” are chosen from the oldest textbook, the newest textbook, the most advanced textbook, the lowest level textbook, and the non-public school textbook, all used to prove bias. Everything is presented on a Google Site.

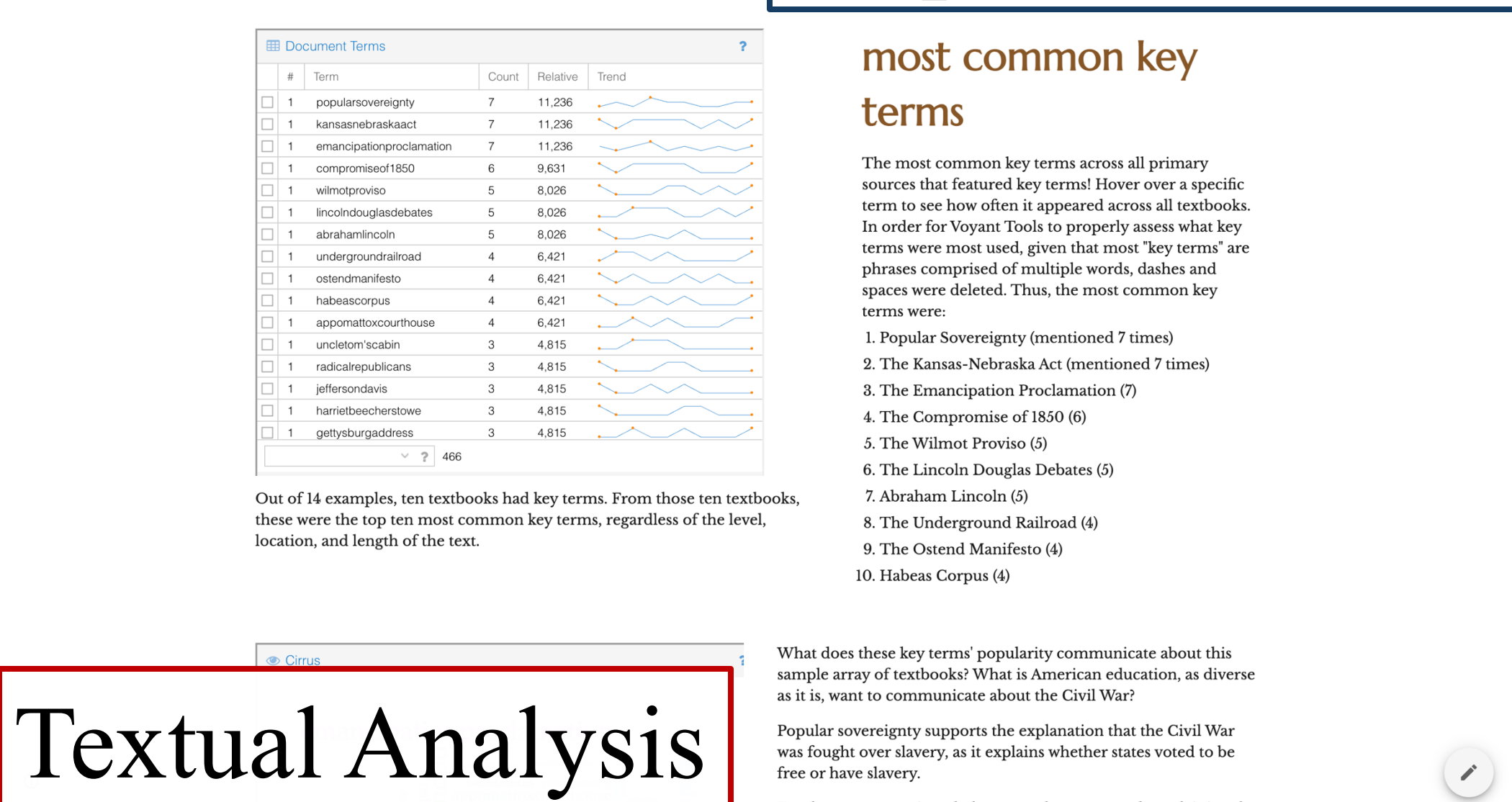
Case studies, pictured below, are of William Lloyd Garrison, Stephen A. Douglas, the caning of Charles Sumner, and John Brown. I selected these people/events because they were among the most controversial, and their respective descriptions revealed a lot about the textbooks' level of bias.



Case Studies



Map of Textbooks



Interesting Quotes – Case Studies

“Some of [the abolitionists] came to hate the Garrisonians even more than they hated slavery itself” (*The American Pageant*, 1956).

“Spare, gray-bearded, iron-willed, and narrowly ignorant, [John Brown] was dedicated to the abolitionist cause. The power of his glittering gray eyes was such, so he claimed, that his stare could force a dog or cat to slink out of a room” (*The American Pageant*, 1956).

“While the reasons for the war are complex, racial slavery played a primary role” (*America’s History for the AP Course 8th edition*, 2014).

“Causes: conflicts over slavery and states’ rights, Lincoln’s election as president, the secession of southern states, the attack on Fort Sumter” (*American Anthem: Modern American History California Teacher’s Edition*, 2007).

“Thus, the war began not as one between slave soil and free soil, but one for the Union-- with slaveholders on both sides and many proslavery sympathizers in the North” (*The American Pageant 13th Edition*, 2006).



Themes

- Explanation: enslavement (cited by 11 textbooks) versus sectional conflict
- Vocabulary: African Americans versus “blacks”/”slaves” versus enslaved
- War Cost: estimated from 600,000 to 1,000,000 + \$15,000,000,000
- Non-High School texts agreed that slavery was the cause of the war
- AP texts thought the war fought over slavery; CP texts thought the war fought to bring the Union back together
- Teacher’s editions and student editions generally very similar in bias
- Homeschooled, evangelical text explicitly blames slavery

Findings

- Firstly, it was shocking to see how difficult it was to find recommended textbooks for each state. For some states, I used random examples from districts, but some states did not have even that information available.
- The case studies were decidedly and purposefully controversial, and it was expected that some of the older textbooks, like *The American Pageant* from 1956 would use more opinionated language, leaning more conservative. The most advanced textbooks used the most impartial, descriptive language, while below advanced books glossed over violence. Newer textbooks lean more to liberalism, citing how many of these case studies had racist views, as well as demonstrating their effect on the war.
- Some textbooks refused to offer a singular explanation for the war. This is, of course, a more advanced way of viewing history. However, most textbooks outrightly gave slavery as the cause of the war. Some textbooks, however, did not.
- The most popular key term was popular sovereignty, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the Emancipation Proclamation. These key terms lend themselves to an enslavement-centric explanation of the war.

Primary Sources

History Alive! The United States Through Industrialism
The American Pageant
(AP Edition) Created Equal: A Social and Political History of the United States
American History: A Survey (Eleventh Edition)
America's History: For the AP Course (Eleventh Edition)
Give Me Liberty! An American History (Seventh AP Edition)
History Alive! Pursuing American Ideals (Student Edition)
The American Pageant (Thirteenth Edition)
American Anthem: Modern American History (California Teacher's Edition)
The American Pageant (Seventeenth Edition) (AP Teacher's Edition)
Exploring America Part 1
Core Knowledge Domain 9: The US Civil War
America's History For the AP Course: Eighth Edition
Collegiate Example: Virginia Tech



Thanks to Madelynn Dickerson, Dr. Samantha de Vera, Nicole Arnold, Nichoas Friendt, Stephen McGill, and everyone in the UFDH program!