

U.S. History Textbooks and Agricultural History

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Assumptions

- Agriculture matters in U.S. history
 - We can't tell the story of the United States without paying close attention, at key moments, to agriculture
- Study more about farming/agriculture than rural history
- Textbooks found in my office are a representative sample of U.S. history textbooks as a whole
- Focused on the “most important” events in U.S. history

Most important agricultural history events in U.S. history

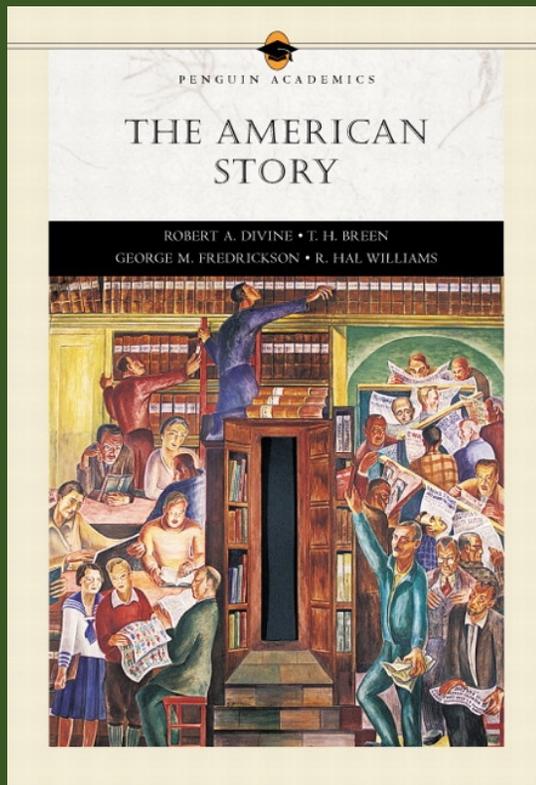
1. Neolithic Revolution
2. Columbian Exchange
3. Triangular Trade and Slavery
4. Cronon's *Changes in the Land* idea (includes tobacco, English ideal of land ownership, Jefferson's yeoman farmers, etc.)
5. Slavery/Cotton; U.S. expansion related to such
6. Jim Crow and Sharecropping
7. Rise of Mechanization
8. Dust Bowl
9. Rise of Agribusiness
10. Green Revolution

**chronological order
Definitely a subjective list!
Surely not all-encompassing

Conclusions

- In general, more attention paid to agriculture in the first half of the survey than second half
 - Agriculture deemed especially important in study of cotton/slavery/etc.
 - Agriculture not seen as important after industrialization
- Agriculture most often used either to tell black history or southern history (with Midwestern history thrown as an “honorable mention”)
- Some attention paid to agribusiness
- Green Revolution not mentioned in any textbooks I surveyed

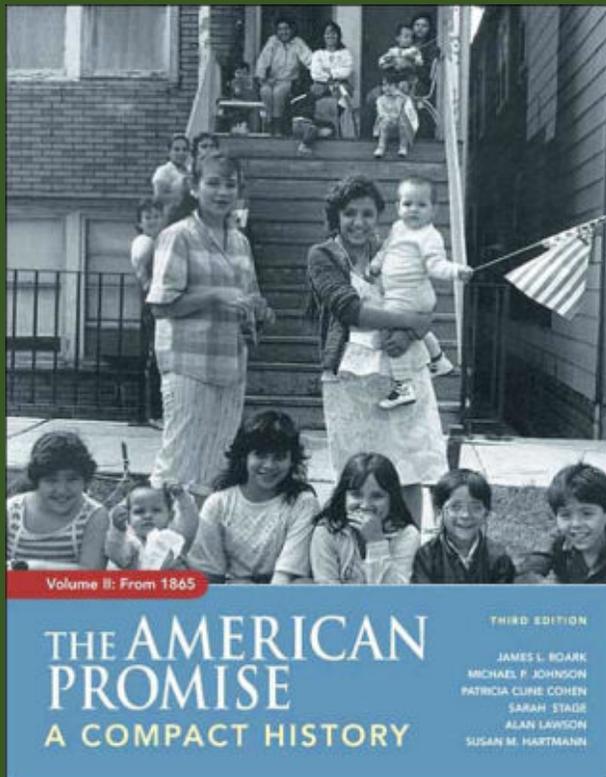
Divine et al, *The American Story*



- Broad coverage of agriculture, but largely superficial
- Spends most time talking about agriculture when things are going wrong
- Coverage more on Midwestern/Western whites than others (such as cotton/slavery)

2002; 1,118 pages

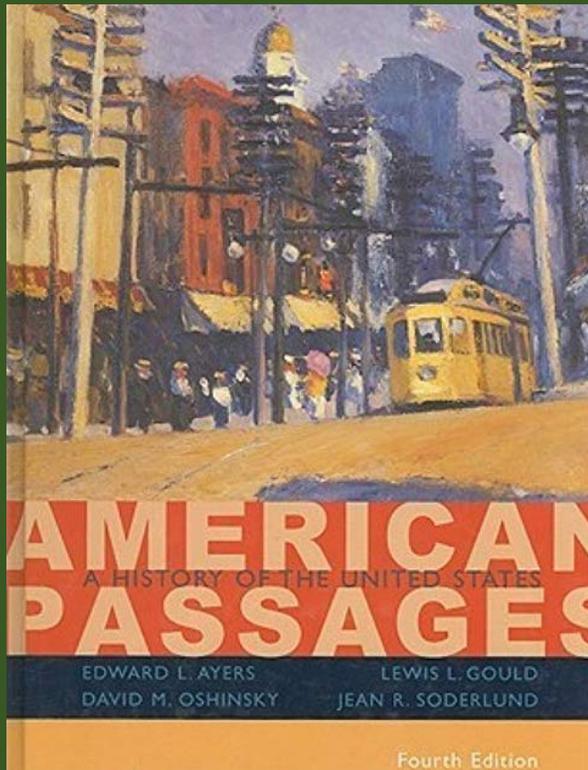
Roark et al, *The American Promise*



- Does mention agriculture a decent amount, but typically in terms of the politics/people involved
 - Ex. Latinx history with Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and *bracero* program
- Very good job discussing farming as business
 - Rise of agribusiness
 - This fits ideals of post-Civil War industrialization
- Only had post-1865 text to review

Third Edition, 2007; 439 pages

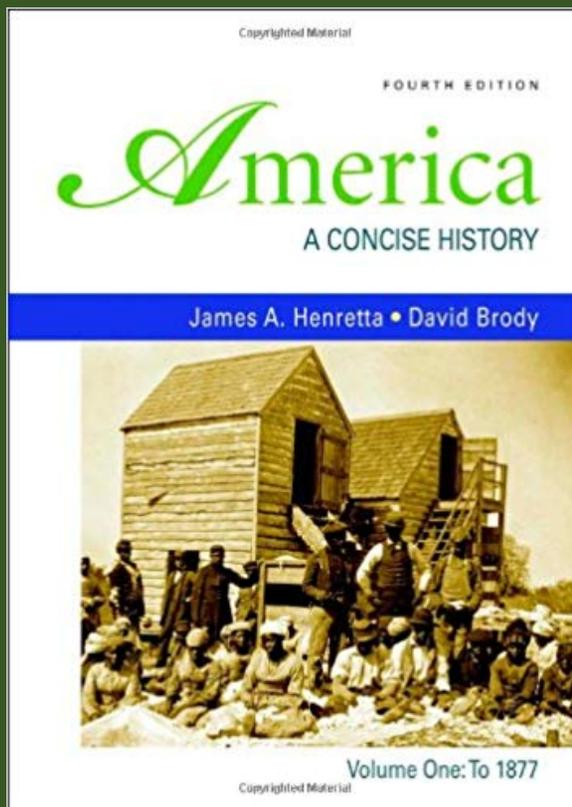
Ayers et al, *American Passages*



- Mixed coverage of agriculture
- Mostly agriculture as social relations
- Best treatment is of Midwestern/white farmers
 - But black & Latino farmers included some

Fourth Edition, 2009; 976 pages

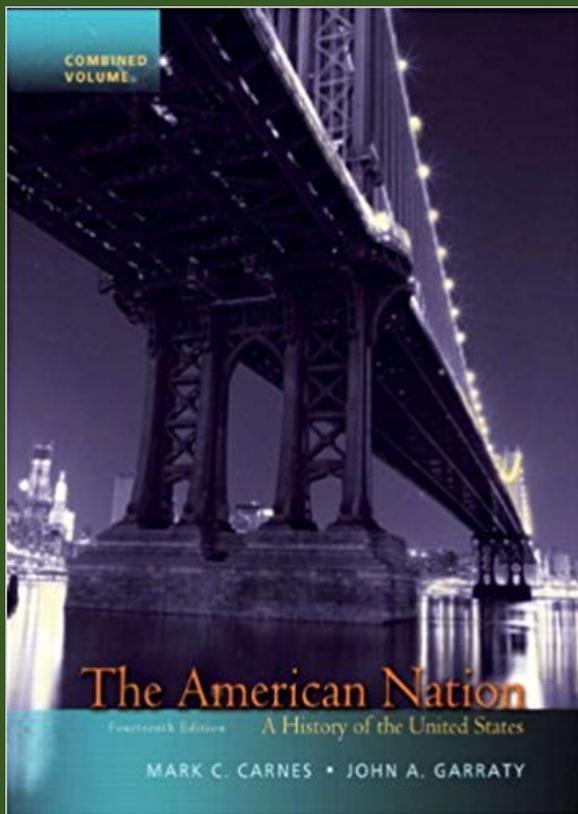
Henretta & Brody, *America: A Concise History*



- Probably best text for agriculture
 - Makes it central to what's going on in the United States in many ways
- Especially connects agriculture and slavery/race relations
- Only had pre-1877 text to review

Fourth Edition, 2010; 463 pages

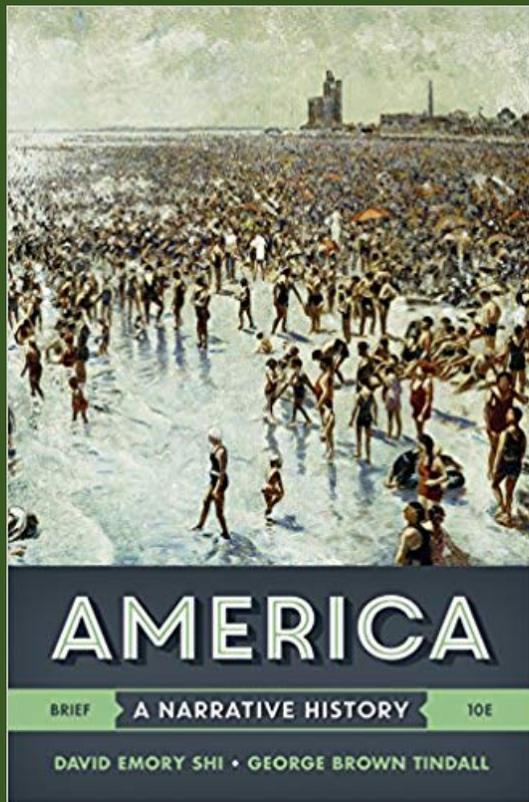
Carnes & Garraty, *The American Nation*



- More a military/political history
- Not a significant focus on agriculture at all
 - Ex. Jim Crow section barely mentions sharecropping

Fourteenth Edition, 2011; 881 pages

Shi & Brown, *America: A Narrative History*



- In general very little attention paid to agricultural factors
 - Almost all discussion that happens is related to southern problems
- Agricultural history recast as social history
 - Ex. when talking about the Dust Bowl says very little about the Dust Bowl and its causes but talks about the people affected much more

Brief Tenth Edition, 2016; 1,249 pages

What can we supplement?

- Jared Diamond, “Worst Mistake in Human History”
- Peggy Thomas & Layne Johnson, *Farmer George Plants a Nation* (Honesdale, PA: Calkins Creek Books, 2013)
 - Intended for younger students
- Mark Fiege’s “King Cotton” chapter in *The Republic of Nature* (2012)
- Lisa Brady, “The Wilderness of War” (more environmental history than agricultural)
- Ted Steinberg’s “Death of the Organic City” chapter from *Down to Earth* (2002)

What can we do?

- Convince our colleagues that agriculture wasn't just important "back then"
 - Everyone on this panel has at least part (or most/all) of their research agenda in the twentieth century