

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Civil rights milestones among Tennessee items facing cuts

By ERIK SCHELZIG - Associated Press - Sunday, October 2, 2016

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Major milestones in the civil rights movements for minorities and women are among a slew of Tennessee historical events, names and places that would no longer be required learning under a proposed overhaul of the social studies curriculum.

Other items dropped from the draft changes to the lesson plans would include the Cherokee origins of the state's name, why Tennessee is known as the Volunteer State, details of a labor insurrection among coal miners in the 1890s and several major Civil War battles fought around the state.

Tennessee State Historian Carroll Van West in a letter to the review committee

urges members to abandon the changes that he said "constitute a whole scale change in what students will learn about their history, their communities, and state."

"Tennessee history, in these proposed standards, is not considered as fundamental to the education of our students," said Van West, a professor at Middle Tennessee State University. "A sense of identity and pride of place are so important to a community's pulling together and prospering."

The proposed changes are part of a review of standards conducted every six years. The draft standards follow recommendations made by educators around the state about what should be taught in U.S. history courses in first, fourth, fifth, eighth and 11th grades.

The Tennessee items that would be removed from required history courses in include:  
— The Highlander Folk School, once a major player in the civil rights movement that counted Rosa Parks among its alumni and Martin Luther King Jr., Eleanor Roosevelt and folk singer Pete Seeger among its supporters.



In this Sept. 1, 2007, file photo, Hollis Watkins speaks to participants during a gathering held at the Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market, Tenn. Under proposed changes to Tennessee's social studies curriculum, public school students would no longer be required to be taught about the social justice school that counts Rosa Parks among its alumni and Martin Luther King Jr., Eleanor Roosevelt and folk singer Pete Seeger among its supporters.



In this May 6, 2002, file photo, Barry Thacker, president of the Coal Creek Watershed Association, visits a monument to about 200 miners killed in the Fraterville Mine explosion in 1902 in what is now called Rocky Top, Tenn. Under proposed changes to Tennessee's social studies curriculum, public school students would no longer be required to be taught about coal mining in the state or about the labor strife in the 1890s that led to the state banning the practice of leasing inmates to private companies.

— The tent city movement in western Tennessee that sprang up in the early 1960s when white property owners evicted hundreds black tenant farms in retaliation for demanding the right to vote.

— Nashville suffragette Anne Dudley's efforts to get lawmakers to make Tennessee the 36th and deciding state to ratify the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920, giving women the right to vote. A statue honoring Dudley and four other suffrage leaders was installed in Nashville's Centennial Park in August.

— Pulitzer Prize-winning West Tennessee author Alex Haley's novel, "Roots: The Saga of an American Family," and the television miniseries that became a national phenomenon

when it aired in 1977.

Laura Encalade, the director of policy and research at the State Board of Education, said teachers were struggling to cover the breadth of required teaching topics.

The draft standards reflect efforts to streamline the standards to make them "more manageable for teachers and for students as well," she said.

"There was just a lot of content to cover each year and really too many standards for teachers to be able to reasonably get through in a single year as to the level of the depth and the rigor," Encalade said.

But that effort to simplify the standards has disproportionately come at the cost of Tennessee state history, said Barry Thacker, the founder of an educational nonprofit called the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation.

One of the historical events that would be removed from the standards is the Coal Creek War that broke out in 1891 when miners revolted against the state's program to lease prisoners to private companies. The labor strife ultimately led the state Legislature to ban the practice of convict leasing.

"For the state board of education to say that those individuals and what they sacrificed is not important, I don't think that's right," Thacker said. "They are significant part of Tennessee history and they should be remembered."

While the 1862 Battle of Shiloh, bloodiest in American history to that point, would remain in the lesson plans, a series of other key encounters around the state would come out, including the battles of Nashville, Franklin, Chickamauga and Fort Donelson.

The Union victory at Fort Donelson in 1862 first made a name for its commander, Ulysses S. Grant, and led within days to Nashville becoming the first Confederate state capital to fall to the North.

Grant boasted after the battle that: "Fort Donelson will hereafter be marked in capitals on the maps of our united country." But not in Tennessee lesson plans if the changes are approved.

State Rep. Steve McDaniel, a Civil War battle re-enactor from Parker's Crossroads, said he understands the pressures faced by teachers because they "only have a certain amount of time in a day to teach and we've required them to teach more."

But the Republican lawmaker who sponsored a new law this year to make it more difficult to remove Confederate symbols and statues from public places, added that any deleting of any state historical facts from the standards "needs very careful review by the public and by Tennessee's historians."

For Van West, the state historian, the bid to dial back state history from the curriculum comes at a particularly inopportune time with construction underway on an ambitious new \$160 million state museum in Nashville.

If the proposed standards are approved, he said, "in many cases the new State Museum will explore concepts and chapters in our history that never are covered in Tennessee classrooms."

The proposed standards are posted on the State Board of Education's website at <https://apps.tn.gov/tcas>, though they don't indicate which historical events have been removed from the previous standards. Public comments will be accepted until the standard recommendation committee's next meeting on Oct. 28.



In this May 16, 1974, file photo, writer Alex Haley, a West Tennessee native who traced his family back to Africa is pictured in his San Francisco apartment. Under proposed changes to Tennessee's social studies curriculum, public school students would no longer be required to be taught about Haley and the impact of his Pulitzer-prize winning book "Roots: The Saga of an American Family."