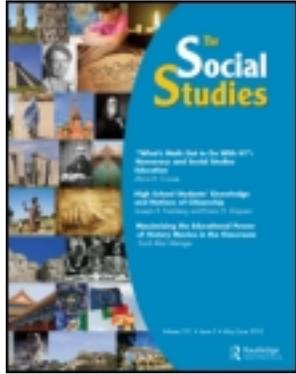


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## The Social Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vtss20>

### Representing African American Women in U.S. History Textbooks

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Version of record first published: 30 Nov 2012.

To cite this article: Jessica B. Schocker & Christine Woysner (2013): Representing African American Women in U.S. History Textbooks, *The Social Studies*, 104:1, 23-31

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2012.655346>

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# Representing African American Women in U.S. History Textbooks

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This article addresses the dearth of African American women in high school U.S. history textbooks. The authors conducted a content analysis of the images in an African American history textbook and found that black women are underrepresented. Women are found in less than 15 percent of the images in the African American history text, while they make up nearly 30–50 percent of the images in two mainstream texts that the authors analyzed. The authors use Rachel Mattson's five heuristics to show how to incorporate images of black women in more meaningful ways in the curriculum: sourcing, inside-the-frame/outside-the-frame, intertextuality, framing historical questions, and using visual codes and conventions.

**Keywords:** African American, black, women, textbooks, diversity, multicultural education

Research has well established the fact that women are significantly underrepresented in the text and images in high school U.S. history textbooks. Several studies over the last three decades have analyzed women in mainstream texts and have concluded that a handful of women are repeatedly included, and the women portrayed are generally on the conservative end of the political spectrum. These analyses conclude that black women are virtually absent from mainstream high school U.S. history texts, which is consonant with other studies on diversity in textbooks (e.g., Clark, Allard, and Mahoney 2004; Tetreault 1986; Trecker 1971).

In this article we focus exclusively on the dearth of African American women in textbooks and examine whether they are more widely represented in a black high school history textbook produced by a major publisher (Hine, Hine, and Harrold 2006). Then, we use these findings to consider and include African American women in the social studies curriculum. We conducted a content analysis of the images in the black history textbook to see whether women were similarly underrepresented in a text dedicated to the history of a minority group. Finally, we compared our findings to the data on women in mainstream U.S. history textbooks. The data below indicate that black women are not represented by a greater percentage in the African American history textbook than they are in mainstream American history textbooks.

By focusing solely on images we accomplish two goals. First, the research has shown that women are more likely to appear in textbook images than they are in the narrative, so by isolating one variable we are able to study the more abundant source of women in textbooks (Tetreault 1986). Second, examining images affords us the opportunity to add to the conversation on inclusivity of women by investigating *how* women are portrayed in the African American history textbook. Recent studies have begun to address art and images in teaching history as well as how women are represented in the social studies curriculum (e.g., Masur 1998; Mattson 2010; Weis 2009). After presenting an overview of our findings, we consider how images of black women could strengthen the social studies curriculum by drawing on five heuristics outlined by education researcher Rachel Mattson. We showcase strategies to help classroom teachers and curriculum specialists effectively integrate images of women of color by using images obtained through the Library of Congress online archives. This article was prepared in part with the support of a Teaching with Primary Sources Grant awarded by the Library of Congress and a Research Incentive Fund at Temple University.

## Theoretical Framework

We have used the work of bell hooks to help frame our research queries in this article. In particular, her essays found in *Teaching to Transgress* are rich with ideas that delve deeply into critical race theory and help us to explore the importance of continuing to revolutionize history

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**Table 1.** Raw Numbers of Black Women, White Women, and Men

<i>Book Title</i>	<i>Total Number of Women</i>	<i>Number of Black Women</i>	<i>Number of White Women</i>	<i>Number of Men</i>
<i>African American History</i>	156	132	24	926
<i>The Americans</i>	306*	53	232	686
<i>America: Pathways to the Present</i>	238*	50	157	682

\*Figures include all women in the textbooks (e.g., black, white, Latina, Asian, American Indian, etc.) except group images, which were impossible to accurately count. The black history textbook did not include any images of women who were not identifiable as black or white, with the exception of two group pictures where races were not identifiable.

education such that it includes the diverse experiences of black women. hooks suggests that as teachers have begun to address cultural diversity in the classroom, the innately slow process has inspired hope that education could lead to the practice of freedom, freedom that only comes from understanding. However, this process may slow further when educators feel limited by their existing knowledge (hooks 1994). Teachers who do not have a background in the history of African American women may rely heavily on their textbooks. This article provides evidence that popular textbooks used in American history classes do not provide the necessary images to help teach the diverse experiences of black women and provides a practical approach for teachers to expand their pedagogical practice to do so.

Another issue many teachers face in attempting to teach about a diverse range of women in their American history classes is the fear of emotional or heated discussions ensuing among students that may be intimidating (hooks 1994). Social studies teachers in particular are charged with the task of teaching difficult and controversial subjects such as race and gender to go beyond shallow curriculum topics. To do this, the teacher must be highly skilled in both content and pedagogy (Cline 1953). For example, research has indicated that teachers who thoughtfully plan and prepare students to discuss controversial issues experience significantly greater success than those who do not (Hess 2002). This article introduces pedagogical strategies for teaching about African American women and issues of race in ways that are provocative, but also organized and “safe” to a certain extent. As hooks (1994) would suggest, teachers who focus on making the classroom environment too “safe” must be aware that sometimes “safe” can stifle the potential for true understanding. We hope that our strategies empower teachers with the skills to broach the inclusion of diverse women in the curriculum and to address issues that are considered sensitive or controversial.

### Images of African American Women—Methodology

Because studies of women in U.S. history textbooks have been widely covered, we conducted a content analysis of an African American history textbook produced by a major publisher that is currently adopted by the School District of Philadelphia, a district that has been one of the first to

institute a high school course dedicated to African American history. We counted how often women and men were portrayed in the images and compared our data from the African American history textbook with the findings on mainstream U.S. history textbooks in how often women are pictured. For the comparison, we counted the number of women by randomly choosing two mainstream U.S. history textbooks that appear in other content analyses. Second, we conducted an exploratory analysis of how black women are portrayed. For example, are the women upper class or lower class, famous or not, with their men or independent? Are the images photographs, paintings, portraits, or allegorical figures? Do the images of women depict a wide variety of experiences of women in history? To what extent do the images depict stereotypes?

Table 1 reveals the raw numbers of black and white women, as well as a count of the men, in the textbook *African American History*, compared to the two mainstream texts we chose: *The Americans* (Danzer et al. 2006) and *America: Pathways to the Present* (Cayton, Perry, and Winkler 1998). We found the African American history textbook had the same issues the mainstream U.S. history textbooks have with the imbalance in images of women and men. However, we were surprised to learn that the percentage of women to men in the black history text was much smaller than that of the two mainstream texts; women are found in only 14.4 percent of the images, whereas they make up 44.6 percent and 34.1 percent, respectively, of the images in the two mainstream texts we analyzed. This finding challenges our assumption that a text that places race at the center of its narrative would also do the same with gender.

Our findings do indicate, however, that more images of black women are available than are used in the mainstream American history textbooks when one looks solely at raw numbers. There are more than twice the number of black women pictured in *African American History* than in the two mainstream texts. Because we do not believe that raw numbers can tell the complete story, we then explored *how* the textbook images portrayed women.

### Portrayal of Women

In the second phase of our analysis we explored how black women are portrayed in the African American textbook,

compared to the mainstream American history texts. In the black history text, the pictures showed a broader spectrum of the experiences of black women than the mainstream American history texts. In the mainstream American history texts, the majority of the black women pictured are shown as slaves or as leaders of movements rising up against slavery. While *African American History* includes pictures of female slaves, it also has images of female artists, business owners, and politicians. Moreover, the pictures of enslaved women are more explicit than in the mainstream American history books; instead of the stereotypical images of slaves working fields, this textbook includes images of families being torn apart. This has a more humanizing effect, invoking emotion that is difficult to teach and discuss without images. There is rich power in these teaching opportunities, something that is missing from the average U.S. history textbook. Future research should extend beyond our exploratory approach to operationalize and code these images. Collecting more precise data would allow for a more thorough understanding of the differences in the portrayal of women in the texts.

The black history textbook, despite showing more images of black women in raw numbers than the mainstream U.S. history textbooks (see Table 1 above), still does not provide enough images to supplement the curriculum; more images would allow for more complex juxtapositions, which we hope strives toward hooks' notion of going beyond the safe. While the raw number of women in the African American history text is higher than the two mainstream American history texts, we suggest that with what we know of the power of images as a teaching tool, we cannot stop at "enough." We argue that a more varied representation of black women in all American history textbooks, even the African American history text, is essential for the images to be a powerful teaching tool. We now turn to how images can be identified and used by teachers to provide a deeper foundation from which to plan educational experiences.

### Representing Black Women in U.S. History

In light of our findings, we do not wish to make the case to just add more women. From the past several decades of research on gender in the social studies, we understand that this is not the only way to remedy the dearth of women of color in the history curriculum (see Noddings 2001). Moreover, we are not going to introduce a series of famous black women to supplement the text, because we wish to move beyond contribution history. Instead, we focus on interpreting images and drawing on other fields to enhance the social studies curriculum. For example, media literacy studies have indicated the power of images in developing understanding (e.g., Hobbs 2005; Schwarz 2005). Images also hold the potential to help students tap into higher-order thinking skills, such as cultivating empathy, emphasizing a historical concept, or encouraging students to consider

alternative perspectives (see Werner 2002; Gaudelli 2009). Finally, given that digitized sources are readily available through such sites as the Library of Congress, enriching the social studies curriculum with women of color is easier now than it has ever been.

We turn to one scholar's proposal for helping both students and scholars infer meaning from images. Rachel Mattson presents five "tactical heuristics," or "interpretive devices" that can be used in construing the meaning of historical images and contexts, which involves a different approach than decoding and interpreting text. These five heuristics are sourcing, inside-the-frame/outside-the-frame, intertextuality, framing historical questions, and using visual codes and conventions. As we proceed, it is important to remember that this type of undertaking, like traditional historical analysis, is interpretive and does not always conclude with students finding the one correct answer. The research shows that this type of investigation is useful also for revealing what students already know and for helping them use context knowledge to interpret historical sources, whether text or image. We use Rachel Mattson's tactical heuristics in our teaching examples below. In her chapter (2010, 28–29) she did not apply these heuristics to actual classroom practice. In what follows, we apply each heuristic in with images of black women in an effort to suggest the myriad possibilities that lay in such innovative approaches. We also drew upon the work of Levstik and Barton (2005) in the interpretation of history and Wineburg (2010) in the applications of interpretations in the classroom. All images used were obtained via the Library of Congress digital collections; links to all images can be found in the Appendix.

First, sourcing asks the viewer to read a document and interpret it. We begin with the image of Johanna Lesley, a former enslaved woman, in a 1937 photograph (see Figure 1). With images and photographs, students should consider who created the image and why. Who took the picture? What ideas or thoughts did the photographer wish to convey? One might also ask how trustworthy this source might be. In other words, is it authentic or constructed to convey a political stance or cultivate an emotional response? We like that the image of Lesley shows a strong and confident woman. While slavery is a central part of most mainstream U.S. history texts, this image from the Southern Writers' Project has the potential to teach students not only about those who lived under extreme oppression but of the process of recalling and recording the past.

Second, inside-the-frame/outside-the-frame has students looking both at the image itself and the production of the image. The goal is to encourage students to slow down the viewing process. We use the example from the topic of African American women's labor. Most textbooks do not include images of the nuanced and varied experiences of working women, and often assumptions are based on a white, middle-class understanding that women did not work outside the home. However, black women have



**Figure 1.** Joanna Lesley, ex-slave, Bracketville.

been employed in waged labor for a very long time in this country, often working as domestics and in factories. They also have been business owners, teachers, and community leaders (see Jones 1985; Hine and Thompson 1998).

The next two images (Figure 2 and Figure 3) are of black women in the late nineteenth century. In the first image, they are sorting tobacco at the T. B. Williams Tobacco Company in Richmond, Virginia (1899). In the next photograph, women students at Agricultural and Mechanical College in Greensboro, North Carolina, are shown cutting and fitting clothing in class (1899). Students should be asked to look closely at the photographs to describe what they see inside the frame. What images, objects, or people are portrayed? What historical events are depicted? The idea is to spend some time looking at the image and describing what appears in the composition using the technique of close looking (Woysner 2006). Students could be asked to work individually to identify details of the images before discussing with a partner or small group to thoroughly compile details. After this process, the students will be equipped with a comprehensive familiarity of the image and prepared for the second phase of this approach.



**Figure 2.** African Americans, mostly women, sorting tobacco at the T.B. Williams Tobacco Co., Richmond, Virginia.

Then, looking outside the frame, the students should find the title of the work. What other information can be gleaned about the image, its creator, or the time period? After an investigation of the image details, the students will be prepared to seek answers to these questions, drawing upon historical knowledge of the time period. Furthermore, this is an opportunity for students to become historians, to conduct research, and to answer questions they asked during their inside-the-frame explorations. For example, students could be asked to think about why sorting tobacco is done by women and to make inferences about who these women are, where they might be working, and what purpose they serve. Moreover, showing images of productive African Americans can be interpreted as a positive portrayal, but a more subtle interpretation is that young, black women



**Figure 3.** Cutting and Fitting.

were prepared for a life of subservience through manual labor and were often discouraged from traditional academic achievement in school. Nonetheless, black women often were the primary wage earners in their households, so waged labor helped them sustain their families (Jones 1985).

Third, intertextuality refers to reading texts and images together to develop context understanding as well as content understanding of a time period and/or event. As Mattson explains, students should “read written sources that relate to the material contained within and outside the frame of the image” (2010, 28). For this heuristic, we return to the first image of Johanna Lesley to ponder it alongside written testimony to bring forth a deeper, fuller understanding of the meaning of the image. In particular, students can investigate the Works Progress Administration’s project to collect oral histories of the freed people. The narratives were collected as part of the Southern Writers’ Project (SWP) from 1936 to 1938. The oral histories are available—both as text and sound recordings—on the Library of Congress’ website. There are more than two thousand interviews cataloged and thorough scholarly yet accessible explanations of the effort and the time period can be found on the website as well (see <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html> and <http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/0104/slaves.html>). The oral histories are reflections on life as a slave, but they also raise questions about the interviewing process and historical memory. After exploring the narratives, students can discuss the power of combining texts and images to tell a more complete story of the past. Students will not only gain more information about this specific topic but can learn to seek a variety of images in the future where only text is available, and vice versa.

The fourth heuristic, context, refers to viewing the ideas portrayed in an image as part of larger contexts of historical questions and debates. For this next heuristic we focus on women’s higher education at the turn of the twentieth century. Therefore, we selected two photographs of black college women at two different institutions. The first image (Figure 4) is of four college women in Atlanta, Georgia, circa 1900. They are likely students at the all-female Spelman Seminary, which was founded in 1881. Spelman, which became a college in 1924, is the nation’s oldest Historically Black College and University (HBCU) for women. Founded by the Woman’s American Baptist Home Mission Society, and funded by philanthropist Laura Spelman Rockefeller, the college—at the time this photo was taken—had just made the transition from an emphasis on preparing nurses, teachers, and missionaries to a focus on a rigorous, liberal arts curriculum similar to that found at men’s colleges (Guy-Sheftall and Steward 1981).

Students could be shown this first image and asked to guess who the women are and what experience unites them. After going around the room asking students to offer visual observations, then they could make guesses



**Figure 4.** Four African American women seated on the steps of building at Atlanta University, Georgia.

and inferences. This whole-group strategy is a way for the class to have a large discussion that is guided and productive, including all students in the room. Once students looked closely at the picture and made inferences based on context clues, a teacher could encourage deeper levels of thinking by asking the students to consider the college experience of these women. Taking historical context into consideration, students could infer some of the challenges that may have been presented to these women. Working in small groups, they could develop narratives describing the experience of these women as they embarked upon higher education in the 1900s. As high school students prepare for their own futures as potential college students, personal connections could be made, deepening the level of understanding.

Figure 5 shows African American women students of Tuskegee Institute marching in what appears to be a graduation procession. Tuskegee was a very different type of higher education institution, having been founded originally to educate African Americans for a life of subservience. Manual training was the emphasis of this “college” curriculum. Students could compare the images of college women and consider the different courses of study they were exposed to; they could even research the histories of these two institutions online—Spelman and Tuskegee—to see how the missions of each were different, yet similar (see Anderson 1988). They may even consider the purposes of higher education for African American women during this time period. Why would they attend? What job prospects were open to them at this time? To further develop an understanding of context, students can research the well-known women to have attended Spelman and Tuskegee. This type of research would be an excellent opportunity for students to work independently or in small groups. Gaining understanding of the past through the lens of specific individuals humanizes the history that can seem



**Figure 5.** 25th Anniversary of Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, 1906; Women in procession.

so detached in textbook narratives. This type of inquiry work requires a deeper understanding of historical context and the human experience. Students who partake in this level of critical thinking not only might be more capable of understanding history they could also become more skillful at interpreting current events.

Finally, Mattson argues that teachers need to encourage creativity in students by helping them take risks in interpreting visual codes and conventions of artwork. We use images from the Civil Rights Movement to illustrate her point about using the visual codes and conventions of artists in teaching history. One of the most famous civil rights images is that of Elizabeth Eckford, one of the “Little Rock Nine,” integrating Little Rock’s Central High School in 1957. (See Figure 6.) This popular image shows Eckford being jeered by White students as she enters the school. Although both mainstream textbooks show versions of images from this scene, neither one does a satisfactory job of encouraging a thorough analysis of the image by students. For example, *The Americans* shows the image with a brief explanation in an image caption. Then, in the text, the story of the Little Rock Nine is told from an “all-knowing,” storytelling perspective that does not encourage critical thinking, perspective taking, risk taking, or interpretation of visual codes



**Figure 6.** Troops block Negro students at school.

as Mattson suggests. *America: Pathways to the Present* includes a similar image without any text support, with only a short caption describing the photo. Without encouraging a deeper exploration of these photos, their inclusion in the textbook is much less powerful. We believe that many students will not have the opportunity to explore this kind of image unless teachers supplement the standard curriculum and consider Mattson’s heuristics (see Trecker 1971; Beals 1994).

We make suggestions for how this image could be better supported beyond what the texts offer. Teachers could start by spending a substantial amount of time looking closely at this photograph. There is much nuanced detail in these images that requires a discerning analysis. Students could be prompted to notice the stature and posture of Eckford or to make inferences about what her eyes may look like behind her sunglasses. Students could be asked what the white woman in the background is doing and then probed to ask why she is screaming. Through a series of well-planned and scaffolded questions based on the academic and experience levels of a particular group of students, teachers could guide a class through a discussion of perspective taking. For example: How do you think the black woman is able to maintain her composure? What may have happened leading up to this day? Who is the white woman and why is she angry? Students could be asked to use a strategy where they imagine the women switching places (Woysner 2006). How would the scene change if the woman walking into the school were white and the protestor black? These questions would help provide a framework for a productive discussion about sensitive material, which Hess (2002) has indicated is extremely important, though often daunting for teachers.

Mattson gives the example of juxtapositions as used by artists as a narrative method for their work. She asks, “What kinds of creative methods, ideas, and notions does the artist deploy?” (2010, 29). Interpreting or creating juxtapositions models disciplinary analysis for students and



**Figure 7.** African American students arriving at Central High School, Little Rock, Arkansas, in U.S. Army car.

invites them to demonstrate their understanding (see Weis 2009). In other words, when students create or interpret juxtapositions they are imitating the real work of historians and museum curators. We juxtapose the image of Eckford with other images of women in the Civil Rights Movement. See Figure 7 taken on the same day, which shows the danger and gravity of the situation with the students' transportation to Central High School in a United States Army vehicle. Figure 8 depicts Vivian Malone entering Foster Auditorium to register for classes at the University of Alabama. Malone and Eckford can be compared, and their experiences juxtaposed, to facilitate an understanding of the hard lines that had to be crossed, both figuratively and literally, by women during the Civil Rights Movement.

After looking closely at and juxtaposing these images, students could be asked to write an inner dialogue of thoughts Eckford and Malone may have had while taking their famous walks. Students could conduct additional



**Figure 8.** Vivian Malone entering Foster Auditorium to register for classes at the University of Alabama.

research about the life experiences of Malone and Eckford and ultimately determine how the different experiences of individuals, past or present, impact their experiences and perceptions of the same world events.

In Figure 8, students could note the photographers and make comparisons to press coverage in the present day when major events are taking place. Students could be asked to write a "current events article" to accompany the image after discussing and analyzing its meaning. For a more advanced project, students could create a movie documentary about the experiences of women during the Civil Rights Movement, using images and documents. Overall, however, the juxtapositions highlight the efforts of young black women in the fight for equality.

### Limitations

It is important to consider the limitations of this article. While our study is intended to be exploratory, we do rely on our data and perceptions to draw conclusions and frame our interpretations of the textbook images and suggestions for practice. This poses two potential issues. First, we judged the race of the women in textbook images either by looking at context clues from the text or by making an inference based on visual cues alone. This is problematic because it may be impossible to be absolutely sure of a person's race based on an image without context. Many black women throughout history, particularly before the Civil Rights Movement and the advent of equal opportunity regardless of race in education, attempted to "pass" as white. For example, Mancini (2001–2002) describes the experience of Anita Florence Hemmings. She was the first black graduate of Vassar, who passed as white until her suspicious roommate sparked an investigation that confirmed Hemmings' race, albeit too late to stop Hemmings from graduating with her class in 1897.

Passing was more common among the middle class for a number of reasons, one of which being that many light skinned blacks were chosen as slaves for apprenticeships, allowing them to move into the skilled workforce once free (Piper 1996). This reality may confound the ability to draw conclusions about the intersection of race and class based on the interpretation of images. Furthermore, many blacks who made the decision to pass for white had to disown and separate from their families to successfully carry on with their new identities (Piper 1996). In this case, it is possible images exist where we may never be able to determine who might be black or white, because these people may have successfully detached from all identifying roots. We suggest that in future research this conundrum continues to be noted, and perhaps the number of women whose races are not clearly identifiable should be counted and noted.

Second, we make claims about differences in the types of women portrayed in the mainstream texts and the African American text. For example, we perceived more images of

a variety of black women in the African American history text. Future research should develop codes for interpreting these images so more precise results can be collected and analyzed. In particular, specified strategies for determining economic class, social role, and race of women in all of the textbook images would allow for the collection of data that compares the numbers and percentages of each type of portrayal by book.

## Conclusion

This article sought to explore how widely African American women are represented in a black history textbook in comparison to two mainstream U.S. history textbooks. Our findings reveal that black women are not represented fully enough in any of the U.S. history textbooks, which leads us to suggest that there are significant gaps in the social studies curriculum. One way to remedy the situation is to draw on widely available images of women online, in particular from the Library of Congress's vast Internet database, to work toward bell hooks' notion of a fuller, challenging history curriculum. These images are easy to access, and with some thoughtful planning, such as applying the strategies suggested above, they can be extremely powerful in supporting the teaching of a representative history.

We found that although the percentage of women pictured is still low in comparison to men, the black history textbook shows women in a variety of nonstereotypical public and political roles. Arguably, mainstream U.S. history textbooks today do not scratch the surface of available images of black women that could be used as teaching tools. We have provided examples of how teachers can incorporate images that are readily available on the Library of Congress's website to enhance student learning through the application of ideas from art and photography. These approaches hold the potential to provide a more equal representation of women until textbooks and other teaching materials are more inclusive of a greater variety of black women. Moreover, by drawing on current research on teaching history with art and images, this article shows how to include black women in the history curriculum in thoughtful ways that go beyond an additive or contribution approach.

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**Appendix**

Figure 1

Johanna Lesley, ex-slave, Bracketville

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/AMALL:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28esn1998-129%29%29>

Figure 2

African Americans, mostly women, sorting tobacco at the T. B. Williams Tobacco Co., Richmond, Virginia

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2001705878/>

Figure 3

Cutting and fitting

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/97510089/>

Figure 4

Four African American women seated on steps of building at Atlanta University, Georgia

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/95507126/>

Figure 5

25th Anniversary of Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, 1906; Women in procession.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004668171/>

Figure 6

Troops block Negro students at school

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/00649675/>

Figure 7

African American students arriving at Central High School, Little Rock, Arkansas, in U.S. Army car

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civilrights/images/cr0013s.jpg>

Figure 8

Vivian Malone entering Foster Auditorium to register for classes at the University of Alabama

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004666305/>