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James W. Silver to Dean A.B. Lewis, 22 April 1959

James W. (James Wesley) Silver (1907-1988)

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April 22, 1959

Memorandum to Dean A. B. Lewis:

I have your note including the memorandum from Dean Bryant (April 21, 1959) in which he intimates that he is enclosing an "allegation" not specifically answered by me in my original memorandum to you. This "allegation" has to do with the thesis of John Ben Nelson which, according to some unknown assailant "defames the internal government of the people of Mississippi during the period of the Civil War. This thesis could well be the fruit of Dr. Silver's lectures."

This "allegation" could not very well have been "answered" by me before inasmuch as this is the first I have heard about it. But I am happy to comment on it, and I would greatly appreciate your sending these comments through Dr. Bryant and Chancellor Williams to the Board of Trustees.

It is true, I suppose, that Mr. Nelson's thesis could have been, at least in part, "the fruit of Dr. Silver's lectures," but it could also be and probably was the product of a thousand other factors. Whether I am actually being accused here the language doesn't quite make clear, but I shall assume that I am.

Now to the Nelson thesis: It was written during the summer of 1957 when I was teaching at Emory University. When I left here in June, Nelson had agreed to write his thesis on a slightly different topic; when I returned the last of August I was presented with an accomplished fact. I spent about two weeks of my vacation time trying to get the thesis in such shape that it would be accepted by the examining committee. The rewriting Nelson did was concerned mostly with organization and presentation, not the facts.

Personally, I thought that Nelson had produced a poor thesis, but mainly on the basis that he had said nothing new in it, that practically every statement of his had been made long before and had been accepted by southern historians.

Who are these southern historians? From whom did Nelson get his ideas? Here is a partial list:

James Wilford Garner, probably Mississippi's outstanding historian and political scientist of all time (and for whom the Garner Room and the Garner fellowship are named), whose book Reconstruction in Mississippi, published in 1901, contains every idea in Nelson's thesis.

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John K. Betterworth, associate dean at Mississippi State University, whose Confederate Mississippi, published in 1943, contains ten times as much information on the breakdown of law and order in Confederate Mississippi as does Nelson's thesis. Professor Betterworth is undoubtedly the most competent of today's historians on Mississippi.

Dr. Georgia Lee Tatum, professor of history at Delta State College from 1925 until her retirement a few years ago, a renowned and revered Mississippi teacher, published Disloyalty in the Confederacy in 1931.

Percy Lee Rainwater, former head of the Department of History of the University of Mississippi, who published Mississippi: Storm Center of Secession in 1938.

Frank L. Owsley, chairman of the Department of History at the University of Alabama and a "fire-eating" southerner if there ever was one, published State Rights in the Confederacy in 1925.

Albert B. Moore, Dean of the Graduate School at the University of Alabama (and chairman of the Committee on Athletics) published Conscription and Conflict in the Civil War in 1924.

Ella Lonn, the grand old lady of southern historiography and professor for forty years or more at Goucher College, published Desertion during the Civil War in 1928.

In the Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society may be found dozens of articles which contain similar ideas. These articles are by Franklin Riley, Frank Johnston, Stephen D. Lee, Alexander Bondurant, J. F. H. Claiborne, J. G. Deupree, Cleo Hearon, John S. McNeily, Goode Montgomery, Dunbar Rowland, and a host of other prominent Mississippians.

Statements similar to those made by Nelson may be found in abundance in the memoirs and reminiscences of some of the most esteemed sons and daughters of Mississippi who lived through the terrible days of the war. A few of these are: Wiley P. Harris, Horace J. Falkerson, Jefferson Davis, Reuben Davis, Varina Howell Davis, Bishop Thomas Frank Gailor, Bishop William Mercer Green, Annie Eliza Clark Jacobs (the daughter of Mississippi's Governor Charles Clark (1863-1865), Edward Mayes, Frank A. Montgomery, Susan Dabney Swedes, Benjamin L. C. Wailles, John W. Waddel, James L. Alcorn, and Benjamin Grubb Humphreys.

Although it troubles me to take time from my duties to substantiate the above statements, I shall be glad to quote chapter and verse if the Board of Trustees is so inclined. What I would prefer, of course, is simple American justice, the chance to appear in person before the Board, most preferably in the presence of my unknown accusers. I think it would be a relatively simple matter to establish that people who write such nonsense are either ignorant or malicious or both.

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The University of Mississippi is about to establish a doctoral program in history. A very easy way to discredit this program for the foreseeable future, to make the University the laughing-stock of the scholarly world, and indeed of all people of intelligence, would be to continue to harass honest people of integrity who are doing their level best to help establish the University as a center of research and scholarship. Freedom of inquiry and the right to report scholarly findings are the only roads to respectability in the area of learning and research. The truth, admittedly difficult to arrive at, defames no one, and unless there is an eternal search for it, there can be no meaning for higher education in Mississippi or anywhere else.

Just one more note. I would like to make it clear that in this particular area of Confederate Mississippi, I know whereof I speak. I have published two books and several articles on the period of the Confederacy and have been working since last June on a commemorative volume, "Mississippi in the Confederacy," to be published under the auspices of the Board of Trustees of the State Department of Archives and History and from an appropriation of the legislature of the State of Mississippi.

Respectfully submitted,

James W. Silver
Professor of History

JWS/b