*Editor’s Note: This is an adaptation of Sam Wineburg’s keynote address to the 2015 AASLH annual meeting in Louisville.1*

*For full audio of his talk, go to* [*http://on.aaslh.org/Wineburg2015*](http://on.aaslh.org/Wineburg2015)*.*

The point I want to make today might initially sound peculiar for those of you familiar with my work. My claim is that historical thinking is not about history.

To illustrate, let me tell you a story about a news item that appeared back in October 2010. The *Washington Post* broke a story about a fourth-grade textbook in Virginia called *Our Virginia, Past and Present*. The book contains a description of the role played by African Americans in the Civil War.2

Now, if you are a movie aficionado, and have seen *Glory* and the stories of the 54th Massachusetts, and the 180,000 African Americans who served the Union forces, constituting over 10 percent of the Union forces, then you might expect that to be the focus of this section.

Wrong. *Our Virginia, Past and Present* presented Virginia fourth-graders with little known historical information: “Thousands of Southern blacks fought in the Confederate ranks, including two battalions under the command of Stonewall Jackson.”3

Now this had to be at the height of the Civil War because, as y’all recall, Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson died from friendly fire by his own troops on May 10, 1863.

It has long been known that the Confederate army forced slaves into service as cooks and laborers who provided backup support for weapons-bearing troops. We know of dozens of cases like this. We even have some scattered photographs of slaves suited up in uniform sitting next to their masters.

But that’s not what we’re talking about. We are talking about the formal mustering of thousands of black soldiers under Jackson alone, and by extension, thousands more under other generals, who trained them in weaponry and taught them to fight for the South. All at a time when the North was still debating the issue of enlisting black troops.

What evidence supports these claims? The only document that we have from the Confederacy about drafting African American soldiers comes in the waning days of the war, a last-ditch effort less than three weeks before the surrender at Appomattox. If thousands of blacks were already bearing arms for the Confederacy, why did the South have to enact General Orders 14, on March 23, 1865, a proposal so controversial that its drafters felt compelled to issue a disclaimer at the bottom: “Nothing in this act shall be construed to authorize a change in the relation which the said slaves shall bear toward their owners.”4

Where would *Our Virginia, Past and Present* find backing for a claim rejected out of hand by every reputable Civil War historian we could think of? There is no documentation for these claims, no records, none of the sources we would expect make mention of them. We can find no evidence for claims that so contravene common sense and, I might add, human nature. What would slaves be fighting for, anyway? Their “right” to remain shackled?

When the *Washington Post* asked Joy Masoff for her sources, she reported that she turned to the Internet for research. Her publisher, Five Ponds Press, sent the Post three of the links Masoff used, all of which traced back to the same source: the Sons of the Confederate Veterans, “A patriotic, historical and educational organization, founded in 1896, dedicated to honoring the sacrifices of the Confederate soldier and sailor and to preserving Southern Culture.”5

Our first inclination might be to have a little chuckle at Ms. Masoff’s expense. And I don’t think any of us would dispute that it’s unfortunate that her assertions ended up in a textbook for fourth-graders. But I want to strike a serious note and suggest that Ms. Masoff is not so different from you and me.

We live in an age when going to the library means turning on our laptops and making sure that we have a wireless connection. Being on the Web and searching for information is about being in a fundamentally new relationship to information from how anyone who learned to do research a generation ago went about it.

Back in the uncomplicated pre-Web days, libraries and archives were places of quiet stability and authority. At age ten, when I did my first research paper (a report on the mystery of the Bermuda Triangle), going to the library meant being inducted into a sacred order where one learned hieroglyphics in order to decipher the *Readers Guide to Periodic Literature*.

It was obviously never the case that just because something was printed meant that it was true. At the same time, we often ceded authority to established publishers. We relied on them to make sure that what we read was accurate, that it had gone through rounds of criticism before it reached our eyes. Only a small number of us were actual authors. Most of us consumed information that others had produced.

The reality we inhabit, that our children inhabit, that those kids who come on field trips to our institutions inhabit, is a very, very different reality. The Internet has obliterated authority. You need no one’s permission to create a website. You need no papers signed to put up a YouTube video. You need no one’s stamp of approval to post a picture on Instagram. You can Tweet to your heart’s content - some of you are doing so this very moment. We live in an age when you can practice historiography without a license. Go ahead - Be an author! What determines whether you go viral is not the blessing from some university egghead, but from the digital mob.6

Think back to claims that our president was born in Kenya. This was a claim embraced by many prominent people, including a current Republican candidate for president. And there on YouTube was an actual tape, a tape of Sarah Obama, the president’s grandmother, being interviewed by an American cleric about the circumstances of our president’s birth.7

So I wanted to do an experiment with the generation often referred to as digital natives. I was asked to give a talk at a highly regarded independent school. The administration had assembled their sophomore and junior classes, over 100 students. I asked these kids how many of them had heard that President Obama had been born in Kenya. Sophisticated and well-healed, they looked at me as if I were from outer space.

But then, knowing teenagers as I do, I appealed to their bravado. “I assume,” I said, “that if you are so certain, you all must have examined the evidence. I assume all of you have heard the tape of Sarah Obama, the president’s paternal grandmother, talking about being ‘present’ at her grandson’s birth. Just so I can be sure, please raise your hand if you’ve listened to this tape.” No hands went in the air. “Soooooo,” I taunted them, “you’re judging a claim without looking at the evidence?” And then - those of you who work with teenagers will recognize this move - I asked them, “Are you open-minded or closed?” I’ve yet to meet a teenager who admits to close-mindedness.

I played the tape. Sarah Obama, a woman who had never left Kenya, claimed that she was “present” at her grandson’s birth. Someone’s a liar. Either an 86-year-old woman or the President of the United States. Now, with a little bit of nudging, students started to motivate some questions. Had the tape been doctored? No, it had been examined forensically. It was authentic. What about the material that comes before and after the part I played--a lovely question, very pertinent to historical thinking. Another wanted to know if the translation into English was correct, an astute question because Sarah Obama was speaking Swahili, not her native language. What happens to this word “present” as it moves from Luo, Sarah Obama’s native language, to her broken Swahili and then into English? Does it mean she was physically present? Or, that she merely *heard* of her grandson’s birth?

“What else would we want to know about the tape?” I pressed on. But it seemed that I had exhausted the bank of student questions. Despite the fact that many of these digital natives were headed to top colleges, they were still babes in the woods when it came to asking rudimentary questions of historical thinking: Who authored this tape, how did it come to be? Who was this Bishop Ron McCrae, the head of the Anabaptist Church of North America, the man heard speaking to Sarah Obama’s interpreter? How would we find out? Such questions - the A’s, B’s, and C’s of historical thinking - were anything but intuitive to this group of bright teenagers.

Let me suggest, then, that it is one thing to be a digital native and quite another to be digitally intelligent. Long before the Internet, Thomas Jefferson argued for the wisdom of the yeoman farmer, a person who would think, discern, and come to reasoned conclusions in the face of conflicting information. Today, when practically everything has changed about how we get our information, what does informed citizenship mean?

The most critical question facing young people today is not how to find information. Google has done a great job with that. We’re bombarded by stuff. The real question is whether that information, once found, should be believed. And according to some recent studies young people are not doing so well in that department.

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1 Talk given to the annual meeting of the AASLH, Louisville, KY, 17 September, 2015.

2 Kevin Sieff, “Virginia Fourth Grade Textbook Criticized over Claims on Black Confederate Soldiers,” Washington Post 10 October 2010.

3 Ibid.

4 See [www.freedmen.umd.edu/csenlist.htm](http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/csenlist.htm).

5 See the fact sheet at [www.scv.org/documents/edpapers/blackhistory.pdf](http://www.scv.org/documents/edpapers/blackhistory.pdf).

6 Karen Nahon and Jeff Hemsley, Going Viral (Polity: Cambridge, UK), 2013.

7 See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGWcD5OHm08](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGWcD5OHm08).