

Books, Bombs, and Barricades: The Kanawha County  
Textbook War and Its Role in the Rise of Educational  
Conservatism in West Virginia

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Growing up in West Virginia, I was taught a multitude of historic events that are not widely known outside of the state. Things like the Battle of Blair Mountain, John Henry, and Blennerhassett Island are all woven into the tapestry of West Virginia's identity. The Kanawha County Textbook War was a pivotal moment in defining West Virginia as a whole. When I first learned about the War, I did not believe that it was real, that something like this could happen in my state. My mother used to tell me stories about the War, but she never went into detail; however, in 8th grade West Virginia History class, I finally realized the full extent of the War. I wanted to share this vital West Virginia historical event with everyone.

I first conducted my research through internet sources, like West Virginia Public Broadcasting and The West Virginia Encyclopedia. After I found these resources, I found Trey Kay's radio documentary on the War named "The Great Textbook War", this was a huge inspiration for my documentary. After a few more months of online research, I traveled to the West Virginia State Archives to comb through newspapers, books, and reports and then to the Kanawha County School Board office to look through board meeting minutes from this period. Then I contacted both Jim Lewis and Alice Moore for interviews. Jim Lewis met with me when I went to Charleston to go to the State Archives. Alice and I spoke over the phone.

I chose the documentary category since this will be my third year in the same category. I originally chose this category because I enjoy storytelling and I believe that the best way to do this is visually. I get to connect with my audience in a way that no other categories can.

The Kanawha County Textbook War relates to this year's theme of Conflict and Compromise in History because there were multiple different conflicts that all lead to one specific compromise. In the beginning, the main conflict was only between the board members, whether these new books would be approved to be in the schools. After this initial conflict leaked out into the public, the conflict morphed into whether people agreed with these books being in the hands of their children or not. This conflict grew and grew until it finally erupted into violence, school bombings from anti-textbook forces and pro-textbook forces attacking news reporters. The community was now under immense stress and was at the point of giving up, until Alice Moore emerged with her guidelines for the adoption of textbooks inside of the Kanawha County School District. Upon board approval of the guidelines, the conflict settled down and children started going back to school. The School Board's decision to give principals veto power over books, which was proposed by Alice Moore in an earlier meeting, was also a vital compromise to end the War, allowing individual schools to decide what is best for their children to learn.