Dennis Mitchell, a professor of history and chair of the Division of Arts & Sciences at Mississippi State University-Meridian, is playing a major role in the rediscovery and updating of the Magnolia State’s travel from pre-history to the 21st century.

Released earlier this year by University Press of Mississippi, his book entitled "A New History of Mississippi" includes more than 600 pages of photos and narratives. Containing both familiar and untold stories that have marked Mississippi’s past, it is the first of its type compiled since the 1976 bicentennial history over four decades ago.

Mitchell, who grew up just across the state line in Florence, Alabama, said he developed a love of history and biography early in life.

"From elementary school, I loved reading history and biography," he said. "The history that I was taught back then was approved by the (United) Daughters of the Confederacy."

He said it did not take long for him to realize he was only getting part of the story. As an avid reader who frequently used the town library, he came to realize discrepancies between the UDC-approved texts and other books available beyond the school grounds.

That realization ultimately led to a personal distrust of what teachers were telling him and, he added, helped launch his path toward discovering history on his own.

After completing a bachelor’s degree at Florence State University (now University of North Alabama), Mitchell began advance studies in history at the University of Mississippi, where he would receive a master’s degree in 1973 and a doctorate in 1976.

As he was finishing graduate school, the Magnolia State found itself in the midst of controversy about the content of public school textbooks. As it turned out, Mitchell would serve in 1980 on a state committee that was helping set the history curriculum for schools.
He is proud to say that the committee was successful in getting a new history adopted, adding, “We co-authored a textbook, which was the most widely used,” and “is just now being phased out.”

For Mitchell, undertaking the writing of a 21st century edition of the state’s history was the culmination of 30-plus years of teaching the subject, as well as an appreciation of the need for an updated view of the past.

Also, feeling there are many lessons still to be learned, a fresh look back should give all who love Mississippi an opportunity to reflect anew upon the past and hopefully learn from it, he said.

“Mississippi can’t make all the changes it needs to until Mississippians understand the past,” he said. “People still believe in the myths about Mississippi’s history.”

He continued: “One of the points I make in the book is that for a hundred years, Mississippi had a black majority. Most Mississippian’s are shocked to hear that. That simple fact explains a lot.”

Mitchell said his “big hope” is that by appreciating this “simple fact,” some residents “would behave differently.”

In his new history, Mitchell purposefully included stories about Native Americans, women and minorities that traditional histories either marginalized or left out. Mitchell uses the new book as his classroom text and at least one indicator of his success in making it as well-rounded as possible came during the fall semester. As he tells it, a young African American man told him he “was pleased by that part of the story.”

After having spent more than three years of hard work and dedication, Mitchell said it can be difficult to pinpoint exactly which part of the book can be regarded as his favorite.

“It’s hard to choose; it is like choosing a favorite child,” he said, with a laugh. “If I had to choose, it might be the period of the 1970’s.”

He admitted that covering this period caused him to resort to a novel titled “The Rock Cried Out.” Set in 1970s Mississippi, the book was written by Mississippi native Josephine Haxton (1921-2012), known to most by the pen name Ellen Douglas.

“I struggled a bit, and then I went to her novel and used the characters out of her novel to illustrate that period,” he said. “That was a challenging piece.”

If he has any advice for budding historians or writers in general, Mitchell said the key is learning to love what you do. For a lover of teaching and history, this marriage of the two couldn’t have been a better fit for him.

“I enjoy it; it’s fun! I can’t imagine retiring and not doing it anymore,” Mitchell said.

As he looks back to the three-year labor of love, Mitchell said his accomplishment would not have been possible without the help of others.

“I did this book in Meridian, and the library (staff there) was incredibly supportive,” he said. “They found everything I needed: obscure articles, dissertations, theses, inter-library loans and electronics.

“I did it all from Meridian, so I appreciate all their help.”

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