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From Selma to Montgomery: Remembering Alabama's Civil Rights Movement Through Museums

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

FROM SELMA TO MONTGOMERY:
REMEMBERING ALABAMA'S CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT THROUGH MUSEUMS

By
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AHC	Alabama Historical Commission
ALDOT	Alabama Department of Transportation
ASU	Alabama State University
DCVL	Dallas County Voters League
FHWA	Federal Highway Administration
LCFO	Lowndes County Freedom Organization
LCCMHR	Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights
MIA	Montgomery Improvement Association
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NPS	National Parks Service
NVRM	National Voting Rights Museum
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SPLC	Southern Poverty Law Center
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
WPC	Women's Political Council

ABSTRACT

Though the first wave of civil rights museums in the 1990s have received a fair amount of scholarly attention, the museums created in the twenty-first century, and those that have changed their exhibits, has not yet been investigated. This paper hopes to fill the gap in the historiography by exploring how newer museums remember the civil rights movement through case studies of three museums in central Alabama: the Rosa Parks Museum in Montgomery, the National Voting Rights Museum in Selma, and the Lowndes County Interpretive Center in Lowndes County. Each chapter examines the museum's response to the scholarly literature, the collective memory of the local community, especially the museums' creators, and the narrative of the movement that the museum presents. The case studies show that museums are contributing to the scholarship of the movement by creating new sources to investigate the movement by collecting and preserving documents, photographs, artifacts, and oral history. These museums also reveal the importance of place as a theme in civil rights memorials. More than the preservation of the physical structures of history, each museum commemorates the actual sites of history. The museums' locations and exhibits are closely tied to the places of the civil rights movement. By exploring these and other influences on historical memory, this paper will offer new insight on the meanings and legacies of the civil rights movement.

INTRODUCTION

The modern civil rights era is the most important political and social revolution in twentieth century American history, and the stories of triumph and tragedy set against a background of unimaginable conditions of segregation are increasingly capturing the attention of Americans. Unlike older events, historians and the general public have benefited from photographic and video resources that document the history. Though historians and the public are both interested in history, they do not always communicate with each other. Much of the academic work is written by and for historians. The public, on the other hand, is not engaging with the scholarly literature. Instead of attending conferences or perusing the pages of the *Journal of American History*, the average American engages in history through television shows, movies, memorials, and museums.¹

Some of the more popular ventures like *Mississippi Burning*, are just “wrongheaded attempt[s] at a sympathetic portrayal of the movement.”² The 1988 movie credits the FBI with taking down the KKK, while African Americans stand on the sidelines. After the feds save the day, blacks and whites gather together at the church, singing about how they will “Walk on by Faith.” The film’s depiction of blacks as passive in the movement to secure their freedom and the resulting racial harmony resulted in an Academy Award nomination for Best Motion Picture. It also helped to perpetuate stereotypes of the black freedom struggle, views that are still held today.

On the other hand, some popular films are known for their adherence to scholarship. *Eyes on the Prize* has become the seminal documentary on the movement. The fourteen episode Public Broadcasting Service special originally aired in two parts in 1987 and 1990, and won the praise of both the general public and academic audiences. Using primary sources like archival footage and interviews with movement veterans, the film details the black freedom struggle from 1955 through 1983. The documentary remains true to the historical accounts in its coverage of both local and national topics, like the murder of Emmett Till, voter registration in Lowndes County, Alabama, and James Meredith’s 1966 March Against Fear. With so much attention to the movement in the South, the film also sheds light on often overlooked events in the above the Mason-Dixon line, including the 1967 election of the Carl Stokes, the first black mayor of a major city in Cleveland, Ohio, and

¹ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 227.

² David Dennis, civil rights veteran and director of The Algebra Project, as quoted in Emilye Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), xiii-xiv.

desegregation busing in Boston in the 1970s. It is not surprising that a film that is produced by veterans and historians portrays a more accurate account than those manufactured in Hollywood.³

Regardless of the version, the story is being consumed by Americans and thereby helping to shape American memory. In *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen investigate the various ways in which the American public engages in “popular historymaking.” Americans partake in various forms of memory making, including watching films, reading books, visiting historic sites and memorials, and reminiscing with family and friends. In each pursuit of the past, “Americans take an active role in using and understanding their past – they’re not just passive consumers of histories by others.”⁴ Rosenzweig and Thelen reveal that public memory is a multifaceted and powerful aspect in society’s view on the past and the present, but they are certainly not the first historians to examine history and memory.

The topic was first broached by French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s. His groundbreaking works were originally published in French and translated to English in 1992 by Lewis A. Coser in *On Collective Memory*. Many of his theories provide the framework for collective memory scholarship, including the idea of the presentist approach to memory, that “the past is a social construction mainly, if not wholly, shaped by the concerns of the present.”⁵

Halbwachs concluded that the construction of memories is not an individual process, but a collective one, in which people in a society rely on each other to acquire, “recall, recognize, and localize their memories.”⁶ Likewise in historical memory, individuals do not remember events directly, rather it is a collective effort of remembering manifested in indirect ways, such as a Fourth of July celebration where people gather together as a group to remember the deeds and accomplishments of the past. As Lewis Coser points out, “the past is stored and interpreted by social institutions.”⁷

In the introduction to a collection of essays in *Memory and American History*, David Thelen notes that by the late 1980s, “the theme of memory emerged naturally from the evolution of

³ Among the many movement participants and historians that served as consultants, *Eyes on the Prize* was created and executive produced by veteran Henry Hampton and narrated by Julian Bond.

⁴ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 3.

⁵ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 24.

⁶ Ibid, 38.

⁷ Ibid, 24.

scholarship in American history.”⁸ Thelen argues that historians should focus less on the accuracy of memory, and more on the construction of memory – how and why was a memory created. He is hopeful that this new scholarly attention to memory will inspire historians to consider wider audiences when constructing their narratives, and help to bridge the gap between what academics and the general public understand about the past.⁹ In his essay in the same volume, “The Timeless Past: Some Anglo-American Historical Preconceptions,” David Lowenthal illuminates several reasons for the gap between historians and popular audiences. Perhaps the most obvious reason is that historian’s “professionalism, overspecialization, fragmentation, introversion, and the treatment of history as a science” have alienated the general public and forced them to learn about the past from non-academic sources.¹⁰ Americans have become so engrossed with the more popular expressions of historical accounts that they are unimpressed with “actual” history and prefer the more dramatic versions that Hollywood creates. For example, visitors at the Smithsonian were more excited about viewing the plane that Jimmy Stewart flew in the *Spirit of St. Louis* than Charles Lindbergh’s original plane. As a visitor explained, it was “the only one they *saw* crossing the ocean on film.”¹¹

In *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History*, Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot examines the multifaceted role of power in the shaping of historical memory. He argues that “any historical narrative is a bundle of silences.” These silences exist because of the power involved in fact creation (sources), fact assembly (archives), and fact retrieval (narratives).¹² These three factors are cited in the case of the silencing Colonel Jean-Baptiste Sans Souci, African-born slave and revolutionary leader, from the historical memory. Like most of the Western world, Haitians remember the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) as a slave revolt against the French. Little attention is given to the fact that there was also a “war within the war,” in which Sans Souci proved to be a rebellious leader of a group of ex-slaves, fighting against the both French and black Creoles to assert their supremacy over the revolution. While the lack of sources and their availability is

⁸ David Thelen ed., *Memory and American History*, (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1989), vii.

⁹ *Ibid*, viii, xv.

¹⁰ David Lowenthal, “The Timeless Past: Some Anglo-American Historical Preconceptions,” in *Memory and American History*, ed. David Thelen, (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1989), 148.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 138.

¹² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 27.

problematic, Trouillot concludes that the power of the narrative is responsible for this silence. Historians have left Sans Souci out of the narrative, and thereby out of historical memory, because it is a distraction from the preferred narrative that pits the slaves against the French, not against each other.¹³

Fitzhugh Brundage was among the first scholars to look at memory studies in evaluating race relations in the South. In the introduction to an anthology of essays that he edited, Brundage outlines how collective memory is constructed, reinforced, and reinvented.¹⁴ Like Trouillot and others before him, Brundage looks at memory by studying not only what is remembered, but what is, often intentionally, forgotten. He highlights the role of power in the making of public memorials to the past. Early monuments, including those to Confederate soldiers and loyal slaves, were “testimonials to popular enthusiasm,” and did not reflect the views of the entire society.¹⁵

Regardless of the power of the creators of public memorials, the American public holds the most authority in their own historical memory. In *The Presence of the Past*, Roszenweig and Thelen highlight the unique role of museums in memory making. In museums, visitors not only interpret what is presented in the exhibits, but they also construct their own narratives by talking with their family, friends, and other visitors. The results of the historians’ wide-reaching survey revealed that museums are also the most trustworthy sources of historical information, even more than their own family members’ accounts.¹⁶ The survey respondents indicated that people trusted museums because they allowed them to engage with the actual objects and places of history. Many Americans consider museums to be a part of the professional historical scholarship, and trust in the accuracy of museums’ narratives even more than the academic literature. The public has more confidence that museums, more than historians, consult more resources and collaborate with others to verify accuracy.

¹³ Ibid, 37-44, 69.

¹⁴ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, “No Deed But Memory” in *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory and Southern Identity*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 6, 9-10.

¹⁵ Ibid, 12-13.

¹⁶ It is interesting to note, though out of the scope of this paper, that this statistic is overall true of the entirety of the survey respondents, but African Americans as a racial group indicated they slightly trusted family members more than museums, 8.4 and 8.1 respectively. Roszenweig and Thelen, *Presence of the Past*, 227.

Civil Rights Movement History and Memory

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall points out that “in contrast to the vast literature on what the movement was and did, the scholarship on how it is remembered is thin.”¹⁷ Indeed, there is a disappointingly small number of historians who have looked specifically at the relationship between the black freedom struggle and American memory. But those who have looked at movement history through the lens of public history have made insightful and significant contributions to the historiography.

Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford’s compilation of thirteen essays in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* provides the most complete look at how the movement is remembered. Through books, films, television shows, community celebrations, street names, memorials, and museums, a “dominant narrative” of the movement has taken shape, one that brackets the movement in the traditional Montgomery-to-Memphis timeframe. These displays of public history celebrate the leaders and supportive whites involved in a nonviolent movement that fought against legal and social, not economic, inequalities among the races.”¹⁸ Civil rights museums, in particular, serve as “institutions of cultural memory, selecting, legitimating, and interpreting the past.”¹⁹

Romano and Raiford also highlight the role that contemporary politics influences how people remember the past. Politicians and the public alike continue to debate about the prevalence of racism in today’s society. Some might feel that if the movement did indeed reach its goals of racial equality, then racism is no longer an issue.²⁰ With the election of President Barack Obama, the myth of a post-racial America, where race and racism do not matter and therefore do not need to be discussed, is a dangerous concept. As novelist Toure suggests, “surely Obama’s victory revealed something had changed in America, but it was not a signal that we’d reached the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s mountaintop world where race no longer matters and equality has been achieved.”²¹ It is

¹⁷ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1234.

¹⁸ Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford, “The Struggle Over Memory,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), xiv-xv.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, xvi.

²⁰ *Ibid*, xvi-xvii.

²¹ Toure, “No Such Place as ‘Post-Racial’ America,” *New York Times*, 8 November 2011
< <http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/08/no-such-place-as-post-racial-america/>>

also important to investigate the politics involved in the creation of memorials, and thereby historical memory, as many sites are sponsored by government entities.²²

Within *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, Owen J. Dwyer's essay "Interpreting the Civil Rights Movement: Contradiction, Confirmation, and Cultural Landscape" highlights how memorials to the civil rights movement are unique in that they challenge centuries of American public history that only celebrated elite, and usually white, individuals.²³ While museums and monuments cannot be expected to "authoritatively pronounce" civil rights history, they do offer another source through which to look at the movement's meanings and legacies. Dwyer also recognizes the development of these memorials "coincided with, and is in part a result of, the phenomenal rise of heritage tourism among African Americans."²⁴

According to Dwyer, there are two general perspectives that sites employ to interpret the movement – the "Great Man," focusing on the key leaders and dramatic events, and the "everyman," highlighting the everyday activity of ordinary people participating in a local, grassroots fight for equality. Advocates for the "Great Man" narrative argue that museums need to tell this version because it is more exciting. It is the compelling stories that keep museums competitive with other entertainment venues for tourist dollars. On the other hand, tourism industry professionals indicate that many visitors to civil rights sites are looking for authenticity, in which the "everyman" narrative presents a more complete look at the history. Most museums do not solely subscribe to just one perspective, but rather a "dynamic tension exists between the two." Similarly, there is tension between what many museums teach and what tourists actually want to learn.²⁵

Politics, especially in terms of funding these sites, also greatly influences which version of the history is presented. Dwyer likens the role of contemporary politics in commemorating history to the divisions within the movement "over the proper balance between leaders and participants, concentration and diffusion."²⁶ Governmental, corporate, and philanthropic funding sources have a

²² Romano and Raiford, "The Struggle Over Memory," xvii.

²³ Owen J. Dwyer, "Interpreting the Civil Rights Movement: Contradiction, Confirmation, and Cultural Landscape," in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, ed. Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 6.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 16, 20.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 13-15.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 13.

say in the interpretation, usually at the expense of the more controversial and recent events of the movement, including police brutality and the Black Panther Party.²⁷

The most prolific writer on civil rights museums is historian Glenn T. Eskew. In addition to the many books and articles he has written on movement-related topics, his publications focused on civil rights memorials in Alabama have shed much needed light on how the movement is remembered in the state with, arguably, the most controversial civil rights past.²⁸ Eskew has studied the development of many civil rights memory sites, including those in Montgomery and Birmingham, Alabama, Atlanta, Georgia and Memphis, Tennessee.²⁹

Through his extensive research, Eskew has come to several conclusions about these memorials and museums. He highlights the role of support from local, state, and/or federal government as a necessary ingredient in the construction of these sites. While governmental backing is key, more often than not, sites require the cooperative efforts of movement veterans and corporate and philanthropic entities, too. These different groups have many reasons for supporting civil rights projects, but the biggest motivation comes from the promise of economic gain through heritage tourism. The creation of civil rights memory sites usually goes hand in hand with urban revitalization. The increase in tourists and tourists' dollars in an area happens simultaneously with, if not inspires, renewal of previously declining areas.

Eskew also examines how the black freedom struggle is remembered at museums and who decides what will be remembered. Many museums all over the South tell the same Montgomery to Memphis story, fitting local actions into the context of the dominant narrative. Visitors have similar experiences at several museums, even down to the same exhibits. And the story at each museum has a happy ending in the form of messages about tolerance, acceptance, and hope for the future.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid, 18.

²⁸ "From Civil War to Civil Rights: Selling Alabama as Heritage Tourism," *International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration* (Volume 2, Numbers 3/4 2001); "The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and the New Ideology of Tolerance," in Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford, eds., *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006), p. 28-66; "Selling the Civil Rights Movement: Montgomery, Alabama since the 1960s," in Anthony Stanonis, *Dixie Emporium: Tourism, Foodways, and Consumer Culture in the American South* (Athens, GA.: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

²⁹Ibid; "Memorializing the Movement: The Struggle to Build Civil Rights Museums in the South," in Winfred B. Moore, Jr., Kyle S. Sinisi, and David H. White Jr., eds., *Warm Ashes: Issues In Southern History at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), p. 357-79; "Exploring Civil Rights Heritage Tourism and Historic Preservation as Revitalization Tools," in David Sjoquist, ed., *The City of Atlanta: Recent Trends and Future Prospects* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009).

³⁰ Glenn Eskew, "Selling the Civil Rights Movement," 175-176.

Eskew is also critical of the exclusion of movement veterans from the museum development process at many sites. Before memorials were built, he writes, it was these veterans who sought to preserve the movement's legacy through gathering at sites for anniversaries and memorial marches. Upon realizing the potential profits, whites who have no association with the movement are now running the sites and casting the veterans aside.³¹

Interpretive Challenges in Civil Rights Museums

In addition to economic and political issues memorials are involved in, they also face many interpretive challenges. The scholarly literature informs many museums' narratives, and therefore, museums have largely followed closely along with the historiography of the movement. In "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," Charles W. Eagles outlines the historiography of the movement. The first scholarly works on the movement appeared in the 1970s, and focused mainly on political and institutional histories, along with biographies of key figures.³² This first generation of scholarship produced writings about federal court decisions, civil rights policies, and organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Biographies also proved to be popular, with several prominent individuals garnering attention, however none more than Martin Luther King, Jr.³³

Influenced by the new social history, historians in the 1980s began to look at the movement from the "bottom-up," studying events and people, including women, at the local level. The grassroots nature of the movement meant most of the activity was concentrated at the local level, and community and state studies of places like Birmingham, New Orleans, Tallahassee, and Mississippi, have provided much insight. Recognizing the importance of these works, Eagles calls for a wider range of community studies.³⁴

Eagles illuminates three major criticisms of movement histories. Like many other historians, he challenges the traditional Montgomery-to-Memphis narrative that bookends the movement between the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 and Martin Luther King's assassination in Memphis

³¹ Ibid, 196. Eskew is particularly critical of Morris Dees and the Southern Poverty Law Center, see 178-187.

³² Charles W. Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," *The Journal of Southern History*, Volume LXVI, No. 4 (November 2000): 822.

³³ Ibid, 822-826.

³⁴ Ibid, 826-830, 836.

in 1968. He also notes the lack of detachment by most historians, and an avoidance of criticism of scandalous topics like sex, and calls for more objectivity in their studies. Finally, he appeals for a more symmetrical approach to the history, telling the story not just through movement supporters, but those who resisted it, including white supremacists.³⁵ He suggests that scholars “will need to muster even greater historical imagination to write new histories of the twentieth-century movement and its era in a more detached, well-rounded, balanced manner.”³⁶

The memorials to the movement have progressed in much the same way as the scholarly literature, and museums usually follow in the historians’ footsteps in their presentation of the black freedom struggle. The first memorial effort was to Martin Luther King, Jr. by his wife, Coretta Scott King, just weeks after his death in 1968. Her grand vision for the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Center in his hometown of Atlanta involved a complex in which people could visit his restored birth home, Ebenezer Baptist Church, and his tomb as the centerpiece of a memorial park. There would also be educational components in the form of Freedom Hall to tell “the story of the movement which [King] led” and institutes for non-violent social change and African American studies.³⁷ After years of controversy and lack of funding, the King family allowed the National Parks Service (NPS) to build a Visitor Center on their Atlanta site. The NPS Center opened just in time for the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. The King family now concentrates on the library and archive, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change.³⁸

In November 1989, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) erected the first concrete memorial to the movement. On par with historians’ new attention to the local movement, the monument honors those who lost their lives during the black freedom struggle. Unlike the King Center, the SPLC chose not just to focus on the national movement, but the local as well. While the striking memorial highlights events from the dominant narrative, the *Brown vs. Board* decision to King’s assassination, there is a space between the beginning and the end symbolizing that the struggle for civil rights started before 1954 and continues past 1968.³⁹ Between the national events

³⁵ Ibid, 837-844.

³⁶ Ibid, 848.

³⁷ Coretta Scott King, Announcement of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Center, January 15, 1969. (<http://www.thekingcenter.org/founders-vision>) .

³⁸ Ibid, 362-363. For a more through account of the King Center Saga, see Eskew, “Exploring Civil Rights Heritage Tourism and Historic Preservation as Revitalization Tools,” 323-324.

³⁹ Eskew, “Selling the Civil Rights Movement: Montgomery, Alabama, since the 1960s,” 184.

are details of the murders of forty men, women, and children. Some of the names are recognizable – Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, and, of course, Martin Luther King, Jr. But most honorees are not well-known. They were ordinary people, representing all walks of life, blacks and whites together, who all lost their life to the movement.⁴⁰ The interpretive path set forth by the memorial would soon be followed by several commemorative sites.

The early 1990s saw an influx in the creation of commemorative sites to the movement. In March 1991, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference Women dedicated a memorial to movement martyr Viola Liuzzo, a white housewife and mother of five from Detroit who came to support the movement during the Selma to Montgomery March. The group erected a modest headstone to mark the site of Liuzzo's murder by the Ku Klux Klan along Highway 80 in Lowndes County. In August 1991, the National Civil Rights Museum opened at the site of Martin Luther King's assassination at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee.⁴¹ Birmingham, Alabama, became the next city to memorialize the movement with the construction of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, near the important civil rights sites of Kelly Ingram Park and The Sixteenth Street Church bombing.⁴²

In studying this first wave of civil rights memorials in 1995, public historian Robert Weyeneth identified three major problems: the difficulty in presenting history that is too local, too recent, and too controversial.⁴³ Though by the early 1990s historians had begun to look beyond the significant national events and famous people, not enough scholarship had been focused at the local level. Museums relied on the published literature as a major source of their narrative, and without the scholarly base, commemorative efforts could not get off the ground. Another challenge involved preserving "young" sites. Historic preservationists tended to concentrate their efforts on architecturally significant buildings that were at least 50 years old. Many of the sites associated with

⁴⁰ "Civil Rights Memorial History" and "Civil Rights Memorial Dedication Speech," Julian Bond, 5 November 1989, available at the SPLC website at <<http://www.splcenter.org/civil-rights-memorial>>

⁴¹ Eskew, "Exploring Civil Rights Heritage Tourism and Historic Preservation as Revitalization Tools," 320.

⁴² Eskew, "The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and the New Ideology of Tolerance," 31-33.

⁴³ Robert R. Weyeneth, "Historic Preservation and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s: Identifying, Preserving, and Interpreting the Architecture of Liberation," synopsis version in *Public History News* 16, no. 1 (Fall 1995), full version in author's possession, 9-14.

the movement, namely the organizational centers in local activists' homes, schools, and churches, did not garner preservation attention at this time.⁴⁴

Controversial topics like the Black Power movement and white resistance often proved to be too difficult and dangerous to commemorate. Much of the controversy relates to the story after 1965, “when the heroes, victims, and villains become harder to define; when violence takes on some utility; when we as a society lose consensus about the meaning of the movement and what the future should hold.” In addition, the contemporary relevance of race and racism issues makes it hard enough to talk about, much less put on text panels at a museum.⁴⁵

Though the first wave of civil rights museums in the 1990s have received a fair amount of scholarly attention, the museums created in the twenty-first century, and those that have changed their exhibits, has not yet been investigated. This paper hopes to fill the gap in the historiography by exploring how newer museums remember the civil rights movement through case studies of three museums in central Alabama: the Rosa Parks Museum in Montgomery, the National Voting Rights Museum in Selma, and the Lowndes County Interpretive Center in Lowndes County. Each chapter examines the museum's response to the scholarly literature, the collective memory of the local community, especially the museums' creators, and the narrative of the movement that the museum presents. The case studies show that museums are contributing to the scholarship of the movement by creating new sources to investigate the movement by collecting and preserving documents, photographs, artifacts, and oral history. These museums also reveal the importance of place as a theme in civil rights memorials. More than the preservation of the physical structures of history, each museum commemorates the actual sites of history. The museums' locations and exhibits are closely tied to the places of the civil rights movement. By exploring these and other influences on historical memory, this paper will offer new insight on the meanings and legacies of the civil rights movement.

Why Alabama?

Historian Jim Carrier writes that “Alabama stands at the epicenter of America's second revolution.” From the bus boycott in Montgomery, to setting buses on fire and beating bus riders during the Freedom Rides in Anniston, to the church bombings, fire hoses and police dogs

⁴⁴ Ibid, 9-14.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 14.

unleashed on young protestors in Birmingham, and the violent voting rights movement in Selma and the Black Belt, Alabama has seen more civil rights battles than any other state. Not surprisingly, the painful and shameful memories seemed to be too difficult for Alabamans to commemorate for many years after the movement.⁴⁶

After decades of capitalizing on the state's Civil War heritage, in 1983, the Alabama Bureau of Travel and Tourism published the state's first civil rights tourist guide. Under the Governor George Wallace's administration, Frances Smiley, one of Alabama's first black women tourist officials, was the project director. In Governor Wallace's 1963 inaugural speech, he famously declared "segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever." Twenty years later, Wallace had renounced his past and was ready to promote the state's controversial past. Alabama was the first states to promote black heritage tourism.⁴⁷ Indeed, many state and local officials began to market their civil rights legacies, hoping not only to honor movement veterans, but profit from heritage tourism. Civil rights museums and memorials are growing parts of the \$6.8 billion tourism industry in Alabama. Today, there are more than twenty-five sites open to the public or in the works. According to Alabama Tourism Director Lee Sentell, "no other state has the quality or quantity of destinations of what was a battlefield in the '60s."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Jim Carrier, *A Traveler's Guide to the Civil Rights Movement* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books, 2004), 211.

⁴⁷ Candace Jackson, "Touring the Civil Rights Trail," *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 March 2009.

⁴⁸ Phillip Rawls, "Civil Rights Tourists Head to Alabama," ABC News website, 10 February 2009
< http://abcnews.go.com/Travel/story?id=119105&page=1#.UIYGI2_R6So>

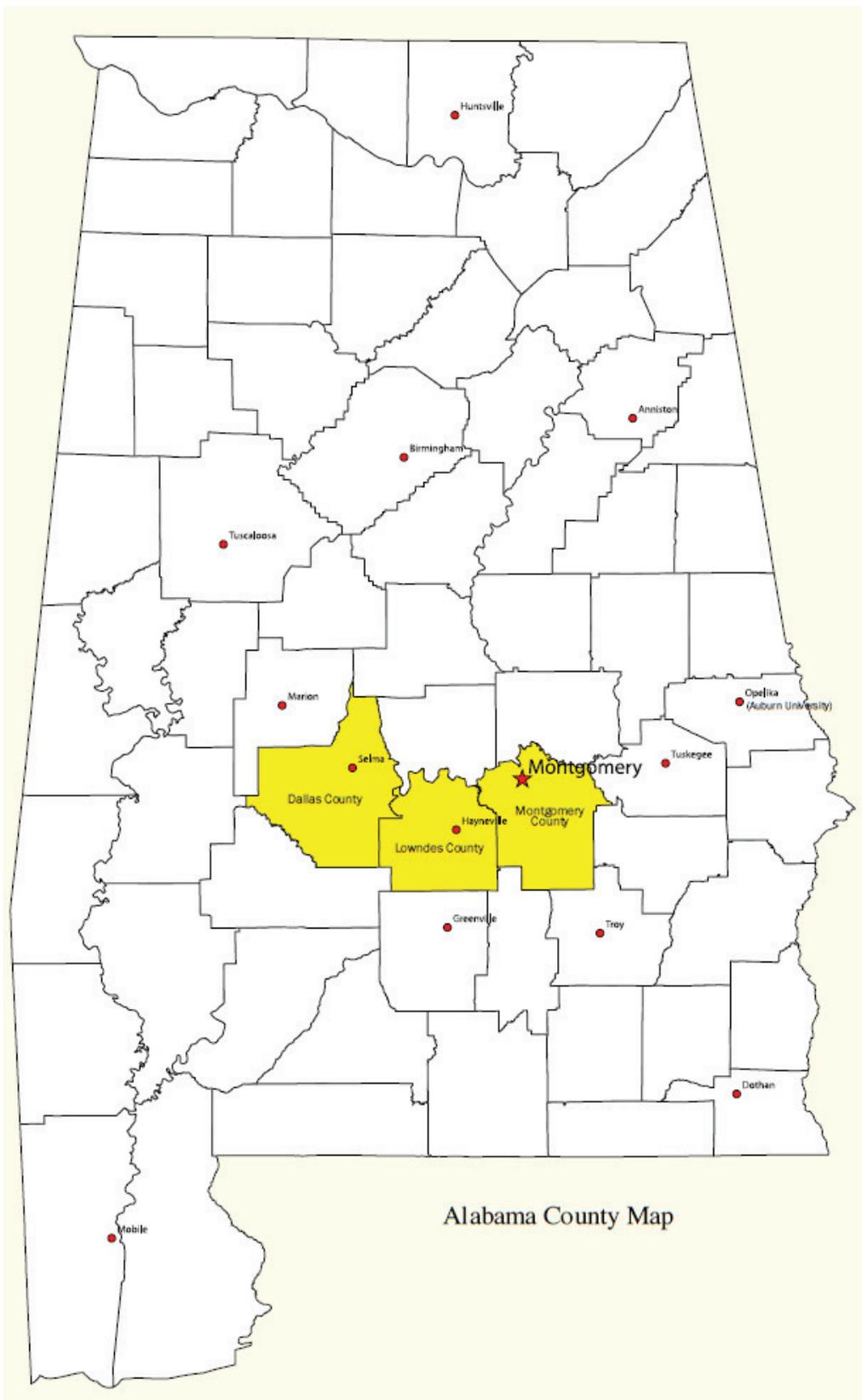


Figure 0.1: Alabama County Map

CHAPTER ONE

ROSA PARKS MUSEUM

The purpose of the Rosa Parks Museum is to uphold and interpret for the public benefit, education and enjoyment, materials related to the events and accomplishments of individuals associated with the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Rosa Parks Museum Mission ¹

In 1955, when I was arrested... I had no way of knowing what the future held. I certainly never thought I would be remembered in such a grand manner...

Rosa Parks, Museum Dedication Ceremony, December 1, 2000 ²

The Montgomery Bus Boycott

Montgomery's reputation as the "Cradle of the Confederacy" stems back to 1861, when representatives from six Southern states, led by Jefferson Davis, announced their secession from the Union. By the 1950s, the cotton merchants and slave markets had long since left the South, but racial discrimination was still prevalent in Alabama's capital city and throughout the country. Following Reconstruction, Southern cities and states began to enact legal and social measures to segregate and disenfranchise African Americans. White resistance intensified over the course of the 20th century, and only grew stronger in response to blacks' increasingly vocal stance of their unequal treatment. In the years after World War II, and especially following the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision, more and more African Americans across the South began to challenge discrimination in more visible ways. In 1955, the tension came to a head in Montgomery, resulting in the first mass protest of the modern civil rights movement.³

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks, a seamstress and NAACP member, boarded a busy Montgomery city bus on her way home from work. The Cleveland Avenue bus was full by its third stop when a white man boarded. The bus driver, J. H. Blake, ordered Parks and three black patrons to move. Parks remembered a previous encounter with Blake, when he forced her off the bus in 1943. Twelve years later, the driver again confronted Parks, but this time she would not back down. While the other passengers complied, Parks refused to stand so that a white person could sit.

¹ Rosa Parks Museum Mission < <http://trojan.troy.edu/community/rosa-parks-museum/index.html>>

² Rosa Parks as quoted in "Museum's Dedication Ceremony," 1 December 2000
< <http://montgomery.troy.edu/rosaparks/museum/dedication.html>>

³ Stewart Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 1-3.

Though Parks was not breaking the city law that permitted blacks to remain seated if there were no other vacant seats, she was in violation of the city ordinance that required passengers to comply with drivers' orders. Blake left the bus and called the police. Two officers arrived and arrested Parks in front of the Empire Theater on Montgomery Avenue.⁴

Rosa Parks did not plan her protest, or to become the "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement," as she is sometimes called. Recalling her actions on the bus that day, she said that "I had been pushed as far as I could stand to be pushed... I had decided that I would have to know once and for all what rights I had as a human being and a citizen."⁵ She was a longtime member and former officer in the Montgomery and Alabama state NAACP, and served as a founder and advisor to their Youth Council. The summer before she was arrested, Parks spent two weeks at the social justice leadership training institute, the Highlander Folk School, in the hills of Tennessee. It was there that she experienced interracial living for the first time, and fully realized just how wrong segregation was.⁶

Even before she had a chance to call her husband, word of her arrest had quickly spread throughout Montgomery's black communities. Former NAACP president and longtime friend E.D. Nixon, white attorney Clifford Durr, and his wife Virginia, came to bail her out of jail. Back at the Parks' home, the group convinced her, against her husband's wishes, to use her arrest as a test of the constitutionality of the state and city bus segregation laws. Later that night, hearing of Parks' arrest, Jo Ann Robinson, called Nixon at home. Robinson was the president of the Women's Political Council (WPC), a well-organized civic group that focused on everyday black concerns, such as treatment on buses and police brutality. They both agreed that a bus boycott that following Monday would bring attention to the issue and unite the black community.⁷

Nixon and other black leaders had been hoping to challenge the segregation laws, and Parks was not the first person to be arrested. In the months prior, Claudette Colvin and Mary Louis Smith were both arrested, but neither would work out for the test case. And it was not the first mention of

⁴ J. Mills Thornton III, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 57-61.

⁵ Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 9.

⁶ Ibid, 8-9 and Frye Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom: Alabama and the Movement that Changed America* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004) 7-8.

⁷ Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 6-9.

a boycott.⁸ Fed up with treatment on the buses, the WPC had been complaining about this issue to Montgomery Mayor W.A. Gayle since 1952. They proposed a plan like the one in place in Mobile: seating on a first come, first serve basis, with whites boarding from the front and blacks from the back. Wherever the groups met was the segregation line, and no one had to give up a seat. Jo Ann Robinson contacted Gayle again with their demands in April 1954, threatening that if conditions did not improve blacks would protest. Robinson also pointed out that the majority of riders were black and that the buses could not operate without their patronage. The WPC had been planning a boycott for months, arranging alternative transportation and organizing with other groups.⁹ They were just waiting for the right time.

Jo Ann Robinson would later say that the idea for a boycott had been around for years.¹⁰ In fact, there had been a boycott of streetcars when the city first passed an ordinance requiring segregated seating in 1900. In 1900, as well as 1955, the majority of public transportation users were African American and the boycott nearly bankrupt the streetcar companies. To stay in business, the companies turned a blind eye to the law, and blacks gradually started riding the trolleys again. But over the years, new state laws and the general growth of the Jim Crow tradition led to strictly enforced segregation and white hostility towards blacks. By the 1950s, almost every black Montgomerian who ever ridden the bus had experienced disrespect, humiliation, and abuse at the hands of whites.¹¹

Robinson, an English professor at Alabama State College, mimeographed 35,000 flyers to get the word out about the boycott scheduled for the following Monday, December 5. Her students and WPC members distributed the half-sheet flyers throughout the local black neighborhoods. Nixon called the local preachers so they could tell their congregations on Sunday morning. That next morning, almost no African Americans rode the buses.

⁸ Fifteen year old Colvin was arrested in March 1955, but had cursed at police officers and also became pregnant out of wedlock after the incident. Black leaders did not find out about Smith's arrest until several weeks after it happened. Ibid; Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 54-56.

⁹ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 46.

¹⁰ Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 20.

¹¹ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 42-53; Blair L. M. Kelley, *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1-3, 201-202.

Instead they carpoled with friends, took taxis, or walked, “proud and tall,” to work and school.¹² Later that morning, Parks appeared in court. She was convicted and fined \$10 plus court costs. Her attorney, Fred Gray, appealed and the case was turned over to a higher state court. That afternoon, several leaders, including Nixon, Robinson, Rufus Lewis, and pastors Ralph Abernathy and Martin Luther King, Jr., met to decide what to do next.

The group decided to form a new organization, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), and elected King as president. King was chosen for his superb oratory skills and also, because he was new to Montgomery, did not have any rivalries with other black leaders. The group then decided on their demands. They thought they would get better results by not fighting for full integration yet. Instead they proposed a compromise. Among their demands, the seating plan that the WPC had been arguing for since Colvin’s arrest, the “Mobile plan.”¹³ They presented their resolutions at a mass meeting that evening at Holt Street Baptist Church. Five thousand people filled the pews and spilled out into the streets. After a prayer and scripture reading, King gave his first major political address. He implored the crowd to protest courageously and to “be Christian in all of [their] actions.”¹⁴ The audience erupted into cheers, unanimously agreeing to continue the boycott. The MIA continued to hold mass meetings twice a week for the duration of the protest.

Later that week, King and the MIA held the first of many meetings with the bus company and city officials to discuss their modest demands. Though one official seemed agreeable, the rest, including Mayor W.A. Gayle, refused to cooperate. The bus company’s lawyer, Jack Crenshaw, seemed to speak for the group when he said, “If we granted the Negroes these demands, they would go about boasting of a victory that they had won over the white people, and this we will not allow.”¹⁵ The protestors also faced opposition from Police Commissioner Clyde Sellers, who threatened to arrest black taxi drivers who were giving the boycotters discounted rates.

King called his old family friend Rev. T.J. Jemison, who had led a ten-day bus boycott in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1953. Jemison told King about the carpool system that had worked for them. On December 8, King proposed the idea at a mass meeting and recruited 100 volunteers on the spot. At their weekly meetings, the MIA collected money for gas and wear and tear on the

¹² Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, 10-12.

¹³ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 20-23.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 23-24.

¹⁵ Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, 22.

vehicles, averaging \$2,000-3,000 each week. The carpool system soon became an efficient mass transportation operation, with over 300 drivers picking up and dropping off passengers at scheduled times, at over forty locations, across the city.¹⁶

By January 1956, the protest was in full swing, with a “rich mosaic of leadership” directing the boycott.¹⁷ King, Abernathy, and other pastors were the mobilizers, the senior leaders, with King as the spokesmen. Next in the hierarchy came the organizers, including Nixon, Robinson, and several dozen others, mostly women, who focused on the logistics. Beliefs about proper gender roles forced most women to take a less visible role than men, and this tradition would continue throughout the coming civil rights movement. Jo Ann Robinson particularly impressed King; he later recalled that she “more than any other person was active on every level of the protest.”¹⁸ At the microlevel, the boycott depended on the several thousand activists who helped organize their families, neighborhoods, and churches. Though leaders helped to mobilize and organize, the boycott’s success depended on the 40,000 African Americans who daily refused to ride the bus.¹⁹

As the boycott pressed on, white resistance grew. The White Citizens Council, a new supremacist group, had formed in Mississippi, and soon spread to Montgomery. Some considered the Council to be “the gentlemen’s version of the Ku Klux Klan, advocating not violence, but economic pressure.” Police Commissioner Sellers, Mayor Gayle, and a city commissioner announced their membership in January, along with 6,000 other citizens.²⁰ The police began to harass passengers waiting for rides and targeted the drivers themselves, issuing tickets for nonexistent or minor infractions. On January 26, King himself was arrested for going thirty miles per hour in a 25 mph zone.

White resistance soon took a violent turn on January 30, when King’s house was bombed while his wife, Coretta, their two-month old daughter, and a family friend were inside. King was at a meeting when he heard the news, and rushed home. When he returned, he found an angry crowd of several hundred gathered outside his house. Standing on his porch, he urged the crowd to remain peaceful, “We are not advocating violence. We want to love our enemies.” King diffused the crowd,

¹⁶ Ibid, 23, Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 13, and Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott*, 90-94.

¹⁷Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 11,

¹⁸Martin Luther King, Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, (New York: Harper, 1958), 78.

¹⁹ Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 11, 16.

²⁰ Frye Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, 25.

and as Coretta Scott King remembered, “it was a turning point in the movement...injecting the nonviolent philosophy into the struggle.”²¹ During the boycott, two advocates of nonviolent protests, Bayard Rustin and Glenn Smiley, came to Montgomery with the goal of shaping the burgeoning movement. Rustin, a protégé of “the American Gandhi,” A. Philip Randolph, and Smiley, a white minister from Texas, helped King to develop his nonviolent approach, “setting a defining tone for the next decade.”²²

Rustin and Smiley were not the only “outsiders” to provide support for the Montgomery movement. King and the other local leaders worked with a variety of national groups, including the NAACP, the National Baptist Convention, USA, and several labor unions. National organizations provided more than financial and logistical support; they also helped spread King’s philosophy. It was a common white misconception that the protest was instigated and was run by “Yankees, communists, and other outsiders.” Though they sought and accepted outside help, Montgomery’s black leaders were still very much concerned with the local nature of the movement. In meeting with NAACP officials about the future of the protest, a MIA leader, Rev. S. S. Seay said, “This is our baby, and we want to go along with it all the way.”²³

After the increased harassment and violence, the MIA met to discuss the fate of the boycott. Many ministers suggested calling it off. Persuaded by the dedication of the foot soldiers, King felt it was best to keep going. With the physical danger now apparent and the halted negotiations with the city, the MIA decided to become more aggressive with their strategy and push for full integration. King now believed that asking for a compromise in the beginning was a mistake, that the boycotters should not be willing to compromise on segregation. On February 1, the MIA filed a federal lawsuit to challenge the constitutionality of the city and state bus segregation laws.²⁴

After the filing, the boycott leaders were targeted by county prosecutors who accused them of conspiring to disrupt lawful business by running their carpool service. A grand jury indicted eighty-nine leaders, including King. The leaders turned themselves in at the police station, dressed in their Sunday best, knowing that their arrests would gain the attention of the national media. At the trial in March 1956, the defense expected that Judge Eugene W. Carter would rule against King

²¹ Coretta Scott King, as quoted in Burns, *Day Break of Freedom*, 17.

²² Ibid, 17, 20-21; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 66-69.

²³ Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 25-27, 149-151, 255-256.

²⁴ Ibid, 19, Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, 31-32, 37-43.

regardless of the evidence. Again, they decided to take advantage of national media coverage and used the trial to fully portray the abuse black bus riders had experienced. In front of a packed courthouse, twenty eight witnesses each told their account of humiliation on the bus, while King used the opportunity to talk about the MIA's peaceful protest. King was convicted and sentenced to a year in jail. He appealed and the sentence was postponed.²⁵

Stalled by the conspiracy trial, the segregation trial *Browder vs. Gayle* got underway in May. Local attorney Fred Gray, along with NAACP lawyers, represented Claudette Colvin, Mary Louise Smith, and two other black women. Though city attorney Walter Knabe was particularly bullish during his cross examinations, referring to King as "Negro King," the women remained composed. A three-judge federal panel sided with plaintiff's, declaring bus segregation unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment. Two of the three judges concurred that the *Brown vs. Board* decision against "separate but equal" reached beyond the classroom to public transportation. The city of Montgomery immediately appealed.²⁶

The boycott continued throughout the summer and the fall. The results of the appeals in both trials were announced on November 13, 1956. In the first verdict, the state court upheld the conspiracy charges, shutting down the carpool. But the larger victory belonged to the protestors. Later that afternoon, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the boycotters, specifically overturning *Plessey vs. Ferguson*. Unlike the *Brown* decision, *Browder vs. Gayle* applied to segregated public transportation, buses instead of trains. City appeals and other delays kept the court's enforcement order from arriving until December 20. Thousands of boycotters celebrated that evening at Holt Street Baptist Church, the site of the first mass meeting. King emphasized that the outcome of the boycott was a victory of justice over injustice, not blacks over whites.

The next morning, ending 381 days of protest, King, Smiley, Abernathy, and Rosa Parks boarded a city bus and sat at the front.²⁷ Though the first day saw no major incident, the desegregation process was not without violence. Two days after he sat next to Smiley on the bus, a shotgun shell blasted through King's front door. There were sniper attacks on the bus, and Ralph Abernathy's, and white Lutheran minister Robert Graetz's homes and churches were bombed.²⁸ But

²⁵ Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 19-20, 25; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 74.

²⁶ Aurelia S. Browder testimony, *Browder vs. Gayle*, as quoted in Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 17, 265.

²⁷ Ibid, 27-28; Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, 45-46.

²⁸ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 83, 86-87.

by and large the integration on the city buses was peaceful, with people sitting where they chose without incident, drivers who minded their own business, and black and the few white passengers being courteous to each other.²⁹

Though the integration of the city buses constituted a victory for African Americans in Montgomery, there was much work to be done across the South to eradicate segregation. During the boycott, King had cultivated relationships with black leaders of sister movements, including preachers Fred Shuttlesworth of Birmingham, Joseph Lowery of Mobile, and Tallahassee's C. K. Steele. In 1957, the leaders, along with Northern activists, formed a regional organization to facilitate communication and protest efforts in the South.³⁰ The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and other groups, including the NAACP, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and later, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), worked with local leaders to organize protests in cities across the region. In the years that followed the boycott in Montgomery, the modern civil rights movement was felt throughout country. In many Southern cities, African Americans employed different strategies, faced varying levels of resistance, and experienced both success and failure in their quest for equal rights.

Historiography of the Montgomery Bus Boycott

While this general narrative of the protest is consistent throughout many academic works, several authors have highlighted new details, provided new interpretations, and drawn different conclusions about the individuals and events of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Despite great scholarly interest in the civil rights movement, there is no comprehensive book-length history of the boycott. The protests in Montgomery do receive attention in chapters of books about the larger movement and Martin Luther King, Jr. In addition, there are several memoirs and biographies of participants, including King, Rosa Parks, JoAnn Robinson, black attorney Fred Gray, white minister Robert S. Graetz, and the white activist who committed suicide, Juliette Hampton Morgan. The historiography of the boycott follows that of the movement in general, with early attention to the national events and dramatic leaders, while more recent scholarship has been focused on the local grassroots effort.³¹

²⁹ Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott*, 168.

³⁰ Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 28-29.

The first book about the boycott, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*, was written by Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1958. King's intention in writing it was to spread the Montgomery story, and it is still one of the most widely read accounts of the protest. The narrative provides an interesting look into King's personal thoughts, especially into his strong religious beliefs. He describes a transforming religious experience that occurred just a few nights before his house was bombed. Unable to sleep after getting death threats via telephone all night, he sat down at the kitchen table and contemplated giving up. King writes "I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.' Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything."³² In his biography of King, David J. Garrow suggests that this experience was life-changing, and King would recall it when the pressures of leadership were too great.³³ By revealing some of King's innermost thoughts, *Stride Toward Freedom* serves as an excellent primary source. However, the King-centered narrative provides a limited view and cannot be taken as a complete account of the boycott.

The next major book was also written by a boycott participant, Jo Ann Gibson Robinson. In her memoir, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*, Robinson captures the essence of the boycott from its origins to its aftermath in a way that only someone so deeply involved in it could. As president of the Women's Political Council and member of the Montgomery Improvement Association, she provides much detail about the inner workings of both important groups. The personal stories that she shares, both hers and others, offer much insight into the complexities of local race relations, including black treatment on the bus and the whites, albeit few, who supported the movement. Most importantly, Robinson's work clearly details the role of women in the movement for the first time. Though she could have easily portrayed herself as the protagonist, she credits the effort of black women, both as individuals and in organizations, in the success of the boycott.

Robinson traces the origins of the bus boycott to the Women's Political Council, a group founded in 1946 "for the purpose of inspiring Negroes to live above mediocrity, to elevate their

³¹ For books on the Montgomery Bus Boycott not included in this paper, see Robert S. Graetz, *A White Preacher's Message on Race and Reconciliation: Based on His Experiences Beginning with the Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Montgomery: New South Books, 2006); Fred D. Gray, *Bus Ride to Justice*, (Montgomery: New South Books, 1995); Mary Stanton, *Journey Toward Justice: Juliette Hampton Morgan and the Montgomery Bus Boycott*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006); Rosa Parks with James Haskins, *Rosa Parks: My Story* (New York: Dial Books, 1992).

³² King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 134-135.

³³ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 57-58.

thinking... and to improve their status as a group.”³⁴ The WPC totaled three hundred members, most of them educators and other professionals. By the time of the boycotts, it was the most effective black civic organization in Montgomery. Under Robinson’s leadership, they began to lobby bus company and city officials for better treatment on the buses. When they realized negotiations were not working out, they planned for a boycott months before it actually happened. Due to sexism in general and also the very real fear of retaliation at their jobs, these professionals took a less visible role than the male leaders. But theirs and other black women’s participation as organizers, carpool drivers, fundraisers, and in communication roles, such as running the MIA newsletter, was integral in achieving integration of the buses.³⁵

Historian David J. Garrow has authored many publications about the civil rights movement and King, including the 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning biography, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. In over six hundred pages of text, Garrow presents a comprehensive narrative of the “Montgomery-to-Memphis” movement from 1955 to 1968. Among his exhaustive list of sources, Garrow consulted the newly available King papers, tens of thousands of pages of FBI documents, and over 700 interviews. The work offers an objective account of King and the SCLC, revealing King’s personal tribulations, including his sexual affairs, and internal problems in the SCLC. Not surprisingly, however, the book portrays King and the SCLC as the dominant forces in the civil rights movement.

Bearing the Cross presents new details about the Montgomery Bus Boycott, though they mostly relate to King and his early leadership.³⁶ Garrow also sheds light on the evolution of King’s nonviolent philosophy. He started exploring Gandhi while at seminary, but would not fully embrace a true nonviolent approach until after the boycott. At the beginning, King advocated “passive resistance,” maintaining a peaceful protest unless attacked. Bayard Rustin and Glenn Smiley, two outside pacifists, came to tutor King in Gandhian nonviolence. Though Rustin noted that King began “developing a decidedly Gandhi-like view,” he still carried a gun that he intended to use if he was attacked.³⁷ He did not fully see the inconsistency in his thinking, even as Rustin explained that even the presence of weapons was contrary to nonviolent ideology. Though his methods had their

³⁴ Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott*, 23.

³⁵ Ibid, 3, 24-27, 72-75, 168-169.

³⁶ The SCLC was not founded until 1957, after the boycott ended.

³⁷ Ibid, 43, 72.

roots in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, it was not until later in the 1950s, particularly after visiting with Gandhi's surviving disciples in India, that King wholly adopted the nonviolent approach that would shape the movement under his leadership.³⁸

Stewart Burns' *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* presents a documentary history of the boycott. His is not the first documentary collection about the boycott to be published. Under the direction of Clayborne Carson, the King Papers Project has published a multi-volume series of documents related to King, with *The Birth of a New Age* covering the Montgomery years.³⁹ In working with the King Papers Project, Stewart Burns discovered many revealing and important, but non-King specific, items about the boycott. These "leftover" sources make up *Daybreak of Freedom*, a cleverly arranged narrative of documents that provides accounts from supporters and opponents, both black and white. They offer insight into many often overlooked areas in the historiography, including the local leaders' perception of the role of "outsiders" in the boycott.

Perhaps the most interesting documents in the book come from the Preston Valien Collection at Tulane University. In January 1956, sociologist Preston Valien took a biracial group of students from Fisk University to study the protest in Montgomery. Unlike journalists, the researchers were allowed to attend MIA meetings and held candid interviews with whites and blacks. The meeting notes and interview transcripts offer powerful and honest accounts of the movement from many perspectives. Anne Holden's interview with two White Citizens Council (WCC) leaders reveals their perception of the boycott. "It was started by NAACP agitators. Ninety-five percent of the Nigras here were happy with things the way they were and are now the victims of their exploitation." When asked about the boycotters' goals: "Complete integration –intermarriage and all– is what the NAACP wants."⁴⁰ Interviews with black domestics show their passion and anger. Though many authors convey personal stories from the boycotters, it is immensely more powerful to hear it in their own words: "I'll crawl on my knees fo' I git back on dem buses."⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid, 72, 113-115.

³⁹ Stewart Burns, *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Volume III: Birth of a New Age, December 1955 - December 1956*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). David J. Garrow also edited a combination of primary and secondary sources in an eighteen-volume series, with *The Walking City* focusing on Montgomery. *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989).

⁴⁰ Anne Holden, "Interview with Prominent Local Attorney and WCC Leader and Sam Englehardt," 8 February 1956 in Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 186-188.

⁴¹ Willie M. Lee, "Interview at carpool dispatch station," 27 January 1956 in Burns, *Daybreak of Freedom*, 126.

In *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma*, one of the most important works about the civil rights movement, J. Mills Thornton III investigates direct action campaigns in three Alabama cities. Though many other historians have studied the movement at the local level, Thornton was the first to examine why certain cities had successful direct-action campaigns instead of others, and why these campaigns happened when they did. He clearly demonstrates that the structure of the municipal politics was the most important factor in the occurrence and success of demonstrations in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma. It is difficult to summarize Thornton's complex arguments and his highly-detailed narrative. For the scope of this paper, the most uncomplicated synopsis shows that discord in the white community led to shifts in power at the municipal level. These changes in local politics, in turn, empowered the black community, allowing them to see that improved conditions were possible.

Thornton argues that the relationship between local protests and national events, like the *Brown* decision, and other local demonstrations, has been overestimated. To be sure, bus boycotts occurred in other cities, including Baton Rouge and Tallahassee, Florida, both before and after the Montgomery protest, and these campaigns did learn logistical lessons from each other. However, arguing that the actions in one city caused further action elsewhere is overreaching, according to Thornton. Local people may have been aware of outside events, but they were more concerned with how their own city's white population, especially city officials, interpreted Jim Crow, not what happened at the federal level or in other cities. African Americans had been dissatisfied, to say the least, with their unequal status, and had wanted change for a long time. However, it was not until the black community believed that progress could actually happen that they began to fight for it.⁴²

In Montgomery, the lower socioeconomic-class whites' dissatisfaction with longtime machine politics led to the election of Dave Birmingham in 1953. Birmingham happened to be a racial moderate, and during his tenure, especially with the hiring of black policemen, the black community began to see that improved conditions were feasible. Birmingham's defeat by staunch segregationist Clyde Sellers made African American leaders realize that the change they wanted would not come through the electoral process; they would have to achieve it through other means. Just as divisions existed in the white community, blacks too were divided, especially along class lines. But they did share the common experience of the humiliation of segregation, particularly in public transportation.⁴³ Rosa Parks' arrest was "the spark that ignited [the] tinder." Already believing in the

⁴² Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 4-5, 11.

possibility of change, African American leaders, and the black community in general, united and rallied their support around the Montgomery Bus Boycott.⁴⁴

Study of the historiography of the Montgomery Bus Boycott reveals several common themes are included in the historical discourse. Scholars have studied the roles of religion, women, and national organizations in the protest. They have examined King's rise to leadership and changing philosophies in the fledgling movement. The causes and effects of the boycott have been investigated to varying degrees. Historians tell the story from multiple perspectives, with some voices louder than others. The voices of black leaders, city officials, bus drivers, white supremacists, white supporters, black opponents, and the thousands of foot soldiers who made the boycott a success are heard. What stories does the Rosa Parks Museum and Library tell?

Rosa Parks Museum History

In 1990, thirty five years after Parks' arrest in front of the Empire Theater, the site finally received historical recognition when the Alabama Historical Commission installed a commemorative marker. Parks shared the sign with an unlikely partner: Hank Williams. The country singer got his start at the Empire, which was billed the first air-conditioned theater in the South. Meanwhile, Troy State University opened a branch in Montgomery, purchasing a large section of downtown, including the Empire Theater. The theater was too old and dilapidated to renovate, but Troy administrators knew it was too important to convert into a parking lot. From their office window across the street, University President Glenda Curry, and her top aide, Cameron Martindale, watched as flocks of tourists visited the marker. Curry and Martindale knew it had potential, so they decided to build a museum to celebrate Parks. They wanted more than a trail or a monument, but "a living example of what individuals can do if they put their minds to it."⁴⁵

The university needed Parks' approval to move on with the project using her name. In the initial communications, Parks and her advisers expressed concern about a predominantly white school memorializing a black woman. After traveling to Detroit, where Parks moved not long after the boycott, Troy State University officials convinced Parks to lend her name to the project. She felt that the museum and library reflected her love of children and desire to educate young people.

⁴³ Ibid, 9-10, 20-30, 33-37, 48-52.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 57.

⁴⁵ James D. Ross, "TSU plans Parks' place," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 21 March 1998; Malcom Daniels, "Parks plans homecoming for ceremony," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 21 April 1998.

Elaine Steele, director of The Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development, also agreed to the project.⁴⁶

In March 1998, Troy officials unveiled the museum plans as part of the college's new \$10 million campus. The Rosa Parks Museum and Library would be the campus's first new building, housing exhibits, a "state of the art" library, interactive classrooms, and an auditorium. It would serve as the cornerstone of the Troy State University plaza, a new pedestrian and park area surrounding a clock tower at the center of campus. The university had moved into downtown Montgomery at the start of the city's urban renaissance. City officials spent over \$500 million on downtown revitalization in the early 1990s, but had done little in the area surrounding Troy. The city praised the college's new plans, highlighting the obvious economic benefit to the entire community.⁴⁷ With the city's backing, Troy officials led by President Curry lobbied the support of the federal and state governments. The federal government wanted to purchase a college-owned building for Montgomery's federal courthouse expansion. They offered \$2.5 million, but Curry insisted that the building's replacement value was \$7.5 million. The federal government agreed, and Troy garnered nearly half the money they needed for their project. Curry then moved onto Alabama's congressional delegation, where she secured another \$5 million. The community showed their support at the groundbreaking in April 1998, with over five hundred people attending the ceremony. The eighty-four-year-old Parks even traveled from Detroit to celebrate, shoveling the first heap of dirt to make way for the new museum.⁴⁸

With construction underway, Troy hired esteemed exhibit design firm Eisterhold Associates of Kansas City to conceptualize the exhibits. By the late 1990s, Eisterhold Associates were the premiere civil rights museum designers. They already had Memphis' National Civil Rights Museum under their belt, and they would later design the International Civil Rights Center and Museum in Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Civil Rights Memorial Center, just a few blocks from the Parks Museum. The design team worked with several groups to secure artifacts for the exhibits. The Montgomery Improvement Association purchased a 1950s-era Montgomery city bus, and the Alabama Power Company supplied \$130,000 to restore it. The MIA loaned the bus to the museum on a permanent basis. Another major artifact was also a vehicle, a 1955 Chevy Bel Air station wagon.

⁴⁶ The Institute was founded by Parks and her longtime assistant Steele in 1987. Alvin Benn, "Many credited for helping create Parks museum," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 16 December 2000.

⁴⁷ Mike Sherman, "\$7.5 million project seen as boost to downtown," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 21 March 1998.

⁴⁸ Alvin Benn, "Many credited for helping create Parks museum," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 16 December 2000.

The university purchased and restored the car that was similar to the ones used by churches in the carpools.

The Montgomery Police Department also donated several original documents, including mug shots, police reports, surveillance records, and legal papers, to enhance the displays. The documents had been tucked away in a box in the basement for years, and were almost discarded when they were mistaken for trash. Luckily, these documents survived, but others at the police department did not. In 1983, Deputy William Hudson rescued Parks' finger print and arrest record from a stack that was about to be shredded. Hudson found the card just after a clerk destroyed a traffic ticket issued to Martin Luther King, Jr. Hudson held onto his Parks memorabilia until 2001, when he decided to sell it to the museum. University officials had been looking for the card since the discovery of the other police documents and jumped at the opportunity to include it in the museum. Another card arose in 2007, when a Detroit collector loaned the "original" card to Disney World for an exhibit. The Parks museum informed the collector that the authentic card was on display in their museum, and he relented.⁴⁹

This would not be the first time questions would be raised about the provenance of Parks' related memorabilia. While the museum was under construction, an Alabama family put "The Rosa Parks City Line Montgomery Ala. Bus" up for sell on e-Bay. Though the provenance was questionable, they were able to convince several institutions, including the Smithsonian, of its authenticity.⁵⁰ The Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan, won with a \$492,000 bid. The museum planned to turn the bus into a unique exhibit experience, where visitors could actually climb aboard and sit down. The exterior of the bus was restored with funding from a federal grant. After the diorama was created on the inside, the exhibit opened in 2003.⁵¹ When asked if the Rosa Parks Museum wanted to purchase it, customer relations specialist Dannielle Traylor

⁴⁹ David Ashenfelter, "Parks memorabilia stirs debate among collectors," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 24 October 2007.

⁵⁰ There are only non-academic sources detailing the provenance of the bus. According to an online bus industry journal, Roy H. Summerford purchased two busses from the bus company in the early 1970s. A longtime employee informed Summerford of bus 2857's famous passenger. He used the bus as a tool shed and it sat in a field for almost thirty years. Summerford's children decided to sell it, and their claims about the bus's provenance attracted national media attention. Amazingly, if not somewhat suspiciously, an internet auction house president produced evidence from a bus company official's scrapbook that confirmed its authenticity. He then sold the bus on his auction site, where it was his biggest profit to date. Larry Plachno, "The Rosa Parks Bus," *National Bus Trader*, September 2002 < <http://www.busmag.com/PDF/RPBus.pdf>>

⁵¹ "Save America's Treasures Grant Supports Bus Restoration," Henry Ford Museum website < <http://www.hfmgv.org/exhibits/rosaparks/restoration.asp>>

replied, that by the time it became available, they didn't need it. The museum already had a restored bus and was planning an exciting bus exhibit of their own.⁵²

In the midst of the national interest in Parks' bus, local excitement over the museum was growing. Troy planned a grand affair to celebrate the museum's opening, with boycott veteran Claudette Colvin's help. The MIA sponsored three days of activities, including lectures, dinners, a parade, and worship service. Montgomery's leaders and citizens looked forward to the positive effects it would have on downtown. Local activist Carmen Falcione hoped the museum would highlight Montgomery as "a model city rather than a city whose reputation is negative."⁵³ The city rushed to complete the new visitors' center in time for the event. Business owners were especially excited about the anticipated boost to the local economy, especially for the opening weekend. The chamber of commerce projected it to generate about \$6 million dollars for the city, or at least as much as an Alabama-Auburn football game does when played in nearby Auburn. National and international media outlets expressed interest in covering the story. Troy spokeswoman Sandra Gouge recalled that she could "feel the electricity" from the community, and especially the school. On December 1, 2000, the 45th anniversary of Parks' arrest, twelve hundred people packed the historic Davis Theater for the dedication ceremony. The guest of honor, Parks, made the trip from Detroit, despite her failing health. The event drew activists, celebrities, and politicians, including Coretta Scott King, E.D. Nixon, Jesse Jackson, and Maya Angelou. Dr. Jack Hawkins, Jr., Chancellor of the Troy University System expressed his hopes that museum would serve as an important healing tool for the city, commenting that "for too long, Alabama has lived in the shadow of its past. But this event is not about yesterday, it is about tomorrow. This dedication certainly stands as a shining example of how far we've come and how much better we can be, if we can step beyond the shackles of the past...."⁵⁴ After the ceremony, seven thousand visitors received commemorative coins and toured the museum for free. Downtown businesses experienced increased profits as local and out-of-town guests crowded restaurants and shops, and hotels nearly reached full capacity. The media attention helped the museum reach national audiences, and soon

⁵² Dannielle Traylor, Customer Service Specialist, Interview with author, 6 September 2012.

⁵³ Jannell McGrew, "\$10 million Parks museum will serve visitors, students," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 1 December 2000.

⁵⁴ Dr. Jack Hawkins, Jr. as quoted in the "Museum's Dedication Ceremony," < <http://montgomery.troy.edu/rosaparks/museum/dedication.html> > and Jannell McGrew, "Special guests make plans for festivities," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 29 November 2000.

organizations from across the country were calling to book tours. Over forty groups made advance reservations for the museum's first six months.⁵⁵

In July 2001, after a nationwide search to find a museum director, Montgomery native Georgette Norman was appointed to the position. As a child, Norman participated in the boycott and lived on Cleveland Avenue near E.D. Nixon. She grew up personally knowing and admiring the leaders and the foot soldiers, especially Rosa Parks. Though her background was in Theater, her knowledge of the city and passion for the civil rights movement won her the approval of many of the city's veterans. Norman's vision for the museum is not to rewrite history, but present the facts and let visitors interpret them for themselves. Her approach to the museum's exhibits and programs is one of "no blame, no judgment, and no guilt," hoping to make visitors of all races and nationalities feel welcome.⁵⁶ Under Norman's leadership, the Parks museum would soon become one of the leading tourist sites in the city, attracting international tourists and countless groups of politicians, activists, and celebrities. Student groups from Alabama and the rest of the nation also proved to be big business, with thousands of students making the journey to the museum each year. Motivated by the increasing economic benefits, city and state officials continued to promote Montgomery's civil rights heritage.⁵⁷

The Alabama Department of Tourism and Travel officially sponsored the state's first civil rights "media blitz" in January 2002. Over thirty travel writers and marketers visited Alabama's top civil rights sites in Montgomery, Birmingham, Selma, and Tuskegee as part of a four-day tour. The visit generated much needed publicity for many museums, including the Parks Museum and Selma's National Voting Rights Museum. City officials also focused on marketing Montgomery "as a key destination city for black heritage and history."⁵⁸ The museum was only a small part of the city's revitalization that had been in the works since the early 1990s. By 2006, Montgomery was home to the new Hyundai vehicle manufacturing plant and a minor league baseball team. The airport received a \$35 million dollar makeover, and projects were planned for a Riverfront Park and at the "gateway" to the city along Interstate 65. Montgomery also saw a growing number of historic sites and other

⁵⁵ Alvin Benn, "Montgomery businesses likely to benefit from tribute," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 30 November 2000; Alvin Benn, "Many credited for helping create Parks museum," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 16 December 2000.

⁵⁶ Alvin Benn, "Parks inspired museum leader," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 4 August 2001; Terri Greene, "Montgomery's crowning jewel," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 28 November 2010.

⁵⁷ Alvin Benn, "Parks library boosts downtown businesses," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 9 December 2000.

⁵⁸ Alvin Benn, "Civil Rights Tour: Alabama has bad reputation," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 14 January 2002.

attractions, including the Rosa Parks Museum.⁵⁹ Ten years after the SPLC's Civil Rights Memorial kicked off the development of civil rights museums all over the South, the Parks Museum signaled a new age in civil rights tourism for Montgomery. The Dexter Parsonage Museum opened in February 2004, the SPLC's Civil Rights Memorial Center followed in 2005, and the National Parks Service is currently planning the last of three interpretive centers in Montgomery to honor the Selma to Montgomery March.

By 2005, the Parks Museum was developing an expansion. Over the last five years, museum staff realized that visitors, especially children, struggled to put the boycott in the larger historical context and that they had no concept of what had happened in the past. To be sure, the main museum did address the past related to treatment of African Americans on the bus, but it did not offer the story of the “long” civil rights movement. The museum hosted a series of focus groups with community stakeholders to get input on what was missing from the story. The focus groups revealed that many visitors did not understand the long legal and social history that led to segregation in the first place. The museum realized that they needed to start the story earlier. They also decided to gear it towards children. Georgette Norman did not want to tell the typical story of “blacks and freedom, where it's always a story of delivery.” Instead, she wanted to show African American agency, that they did not “just sit back and wait for Harriett [Tubman] to come and get them.” She also wanted to tell the stories of those affected by the laws, not the verdicts handed down by the courts.⁶⁰ With the theme of the exhibit in mind, Norman contacted Eisterhold Associates to design the new wing of the museum. Eisterhold Associates decided to create an exciting video presentation inside of a “time machine” bus. The oversized Cleveland Avenue bus reproduction had obvious connections to the story, but Norman hoped it would have a more abstract meaning as well, that the bus would move people into the future. She hoped that visitors would make the connection that their actions today affect the future.⁶¹

Calling the Children's Wing “a crowning jewel for the city of Montgomery,” Vice Chancellor Ray White anticipated that the new facility would attract thousands more tourists to the museum and Montgomery. Construction began on the 10,000 square foot expansion, with opening scheduled

⁵⁹ Sebastian Kitchen, “Region's economy grows with Montgomery,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 12 May 2006.

⁶⁰ Georgette Norman, Interview with author, 6 September 2012.

⁶¹ Georgette Norman, Interview with author, 6 September 2012.

for December 1, 2005, the 50th anniversary of Parks' arrest.⁶² Unfortunately, Parks would not live to see the Children's Wing completed. She passed away in October at the age of ninety-two. Parks did not have any children, and she willed her possessions and royalties from licensing fees to her longtime assistant, Elaine Steele, and the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development in Michigan. Just before Parks' death, the Institute sued Troy University, claiming that the Children's Wing violated the original agreement they made in 1998. Elaine Steele objected to the content in the video, saying that it contained "objectionable ethnic references unsuitable for the children it was intended for."⁶³ Steele was particularly concerned about the use of the "N" word and a character shown in blackface. Though the museum felt they had used in a historical context, they agreed to take out the word. However, they insisted on keeping the blackface because it was historically accurate and they did not want to "sterilize the history." The Institute also accused the museum of continuing to make money from unlicensed use of Parks' name and exceeding the agreed upon maximum square footage. At the same time as the 2005 lawsuit against Troy, Steele and the Institute began a legal battle with Parks' nieces and nephews over control of Parks' name and legacy that has yet to be settled. Parks' family sided with the museum over the Troy case, saying that it was "a frivolous lawsuit" because she would have approved of the expansion.⁶⁴ The lawsuit delayed the opening of the museum until the following February. It was not settled until December 2006, when Circuit Judge Bernard Harwood dismissed the case as baseless under Alabama's state law that grants universities sovereign immunity, making them unable to be sued for monetary damages.⁶⁵

On February 17, 2006, the Children's Wing opened its doors. Though the dedication ceremony was attended by politicians and activists, it was not on the same scale of the fanfare that accompanied the original museum. Governor Bob Riley noted that the museum's expansion was one of many examples of Alabama's progress in racial issues. He said that "We are the ones the rest of the world looks to the set the example. I want Alabama to be a leader in race relations." Several speakers stressed that the opening was not about a new building, but about celebrating the legacy of the men, women, and children who participated in the boycott.⁶⁶ The exhibit received favorable

⁶² Sebastian Kitchen, "Children's annex on schedule," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 29 April 2005.

⁶³ Erica Pippins, "Celebration and controversy: Museum focus of lawsuit," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 18 February 2006.

⁶⁴ Ibid, and David Ashenfelter, "Judge fires back in Rosa Parks estate dispute," *Detroit Free Press*, 6 June 2012.

⁶⁵ Alvin Benn, "Claims center on use of 'N' word, black face in attraction," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 23 December 2006.

reviews from adults and children alike, and the museum received nearly 2,000 visitors in the first two weeks. Despite the initial excitement, visitation levels dropped back down to normal with a slow, but steady flow of visitors. By 2007, the staff had grown to seven full-time and two part-time employees. The museum was not making a profit, but “holding its own” financially.⁶⁷ They continued to host annual celebrations on the anniversary of the boycott and Parks’ birthday. The museum also began organizing and hosting several lectures, book signings, theatrical performances, teacher workshops, and community forums on issues such as fair housing and youth leadership.⁶⁸ By their own account, in 2009, the museum received a respectable 44,000 visitors annually, putting it among the top three civil rights attractions in the state, along with the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and the National Voting Rights Museum.⁶⁹

Over a decade after its founding, the Rosa Parks Museum and Library has proven itself to be a thriving civil rights museum, successfully fulfilling its mission “to uphold and interpret for the public benefit, education and enjoyment, materials related to the events and accomplishments of individuals associated with the Montgomery Bus Boycott.” City and state officials continue to recognize the museum’s positive effects on tourism and Montgomery’s revitalization. Troy leaders and museum staff are equally proud of the museum. Involved in the project since its inception, Vice Chancellor Ray White said that the museum has “exceeded all of our imaginations and expectations.”⁷⁰ When asked about the legacy that the Parks Museum strives to impart, Georgette Norman replied that she hopes visitors continue to understand responsibility for their actions. She hopes that the exhibits convey that “the gift Montgomerians gave the world was a new way of looking at injustices. They were ready to receive a new way of thinking and a new way of acting. It was called nonviolence.”⁷¹

⁶⁶ “Children’s Wing: Troy University expands Rosa Parks Library and Museum,” *Troy University Magazine*, Spring 2006.

⁶⁷ Crystal Bonvillian, “Children’s wing turns back clock,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 10 February 2007.

⁶⁸ Viola Molton, Museum Curator, Interview with author, 6 September 2012.

⁶⁹ Except for the Parks museum, all other civil rights attractions report visitor totals to the Alabama Department of Travel and Tourism (2009-2011 visitor statistics report in possession of author). Figures for the Parks museum are found in “Rosa Parks Museum and Children’s Wing,” Troy University Montgomery Campus, 2009 Annual Report.

⁷⁰ Terri Greene, “Montgomery’s crowning jewel,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 28 November 2010.

⁷¹ Georgette Norman, Museum Director, Interview with author, 6 September 2012.

Exhibit Review

Driving to the Rosa Parks Library and Museum is a civil rights history tour in and of itself. Going west down Washington Street, one will pass the Alabama State Capitol, the final destination of the Selma to Montgomery marchers, and the Southern Poverty Law Center's Civil Rights Memorial Center, with the memorial out in front. Turn on McDonough and make a left at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church where Martin Luther King, Jr. served as pastor from 1954 to 1960. Continue on through the roundabout at Court Square, where Rosa Parks boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus, then just three more blocks to where she was arrested in front of the Empire Theater, now the site of the museum.

The exterior of the modern three-story building is a wall of windows, and its name shines in large, gold letters above the entrance and on the side of the building. Brick pavers lead the visitor up a path to a small bubbling fountain just outside the front door. The two-story high lobby is flooded with natural light, and features a small bronze bust of Parks against a backdrop of several Parks' themed paintings, including her on a bus, with children, and in front of the Statue of Liberty. The bust does not display the typical image of Parks with her glasses, a sight that pleased Parks on opening day. She smiled and said, "See, I didn't always wear glasses."⁷² The front desk is to the right, at the beginning of a long hallway that extends down the middle of the building. Down the hallway is a gift shop on the left, the main museum entrance on the right, and the temporary exhibit gallery and a large conference room farther down near the back of the building. The temporary gallery hosts travelling exhibits related to human rights and usually changes every two months. This gallery also contains a bronze sculpture of Parks and visitors can sit next to her and take a photo. In the main museum, visitors are led by a tour guide. Tours depart every thirty minutes, and can be reserved in advance. Photography is prohibited in the main gallery due to copyright issues.

⁷² Alvin Benn, "Many credited for helping create Parks museum," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 16 December 2000.



Figure 1.1: Rosa Parks Museum Exterior



Figure 1.2: Museum Lobby

Visitors first enter a small orientation theater and are invited to sit on three leather benches around the perimeter of the room. The room presents a brief, but dramatic history of segregation in the United States. Lining the wall near the ceiling are graphic panels arranged like a collage, with enlarged photographs of the city, its people, and other memorabilia from the era of segregation, including “Yancy’s Lounge, Colored Only” and “Whites Only Waiting Room” signs. Below the large graphics, interpretive panels on the walls feature photographs and short biographical sketches of people associated with the black freedom struggle in general, and those specific to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Earlier activists represented include Sojourner Truth, Mary McLeod Bethune, Thurgood Marshall, and A. Philip Randolph. Larger panels introduce the visitors to the characters they will encounter in the rest of the exhibits: Clifford and Virginia Durr, Fred Gray, Glenn Smiley, Bayard Rustin, Ralph Abernathy, and of course, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. The only artifacts in this area are documents that belonged to Parks and highlight her work with the NAACP Youth Council of Montgomery.



Figure 1.3: Museum Theater

Once visitors are seated, the room darkens and a video is projected onto three screens. The first part of the presentation includes a narrator providing a background on segregation in Montgomery while different photographs are projected simultaneously onto each of the three screens. The rich photographic sources complement and help to illustrate the commentary, but the sheer volume and pace at which they are displayed is overwhelming. In the second part of the video, clips from oral history interviews with foot soldiers and leaders in the boycott, detail the uncomfortable, humiliating, and sometimes dangerous experience of blacks on the city buses. Hearing the stories from those who rode and boycotted the buses in their own voices is one of the most powerful displays in this gallery, and helps to set the stage for the rest of the exhibits. The last part of the video features Rosa Parks' biography narrated by Parks herself. It offers a glimpse into her life beyond her role in the boycott and shows rarely-seen personal photographs of her childhood, work with the NAACP, and her visit to the Highlander Folk School. The video ends with Parks detailing the significance of bus segregation. Blacks could choose which stores, restaurants, and entertainment venues to patronize, but the bus situation was different in that they didn't have a choice. They had to ride the bus to get to work and school, and they had to endure abuse from white drivers and passengers. As the lights come on, an electronic door opens like the door on a bus and visitors proceed to the next exhibit area.

After learning about life in segregated Montgomery, visitors come face to face with the events of December 1, 1955. A large restored city bus similar to the one Parks was riding that day is the centerpiece in a gallery that loosely depicts the Montgomery Street location where she was arrested. The street scene is a contrast of both careful and careless attention to detail. The exhibit designers went so far as to research the temperature on that day and set the thermostat accordingly; it is noticeably colder there than anywhere else in the museum. The Empire Theater's marquee and movie poster feature the same film that was playing at the time, *A Man Alone* starring Ray Milland. The theater has ticket booths protruding from the wall, but little else. It is surprising that not even a mural of the theater was painted in the background. The ticket booth display case contains another oddity, Rosa Park's arrest report and finger prints. These important documents are completely out of context in this case, and are easily missed in the dark room. Despite the diorama's shortcomings, the unique audio visual presentation that is shown through the bus is the highlight of the museum.

"The idea was to have visitors see the reenactment of the event as though they were watching from outside the bus as it happened," exhibit designer Gerald Eisterhold recalled. Eisterhold teamed up with an AV consultant to create the highly sophisticated projection system

that was used to film the presentation.⁷³ The compelling exhibit shows Parks boarding the bus, continues on with the bus driver confronting her, the police arresting her, and taking her off the bus. The story plays out exactly as it does in the academic literature, and in many ways is the most surprising part of the whole museum to the general public. It is safe to say that most visitors are not knowledgeable of the entire story of the boycott, and therefore do not know what to expect. But everyone knows the name Rosa Parks and is familiar with the events on the bus. The video reveals many details that are not commonly known: this was not Parks' first experience with bus driver J. Fred Blake, she was not "tired" from work, but tired of segregation, and the fact that she was not breaking the city law as blacks were not legally required to give up their seat if there were no vacant ones for them to move to. The video also dispels a well-known rumor, that Parks' arrest was not planned by Parks herself, the NAACP, or any other outside agency. Museum staff noted that this was the fact that surprised visitors the most, and on my tour, several visitors asked the docent about it.⁷⁴ After Parks is removed, the bus windows go dark, but the audio-visual show continues on a video screen. Actual photographs and recreated shots of the jail are displayed, while a narrator recounts the events after the arrest, from E.D. Nixon and Clifford Durr bailing her out, the conversation about her being the "test case," and Jo Ann Robinson and the Women's Political Council's printing and distributing boycott flyers. When the lights come on, visitors see a replica mimeograph machine like the one Robinson used and large graphics of the flyers and newspaper article about the forthcoming boycott.

Leaving the street scene, visitors find themselves standing outside the replicated doors of the Holt Street Baptist Church, listening to a booming voice preach about the boycott followed by enthusiastic responses. The forceful audio program is recreated from the recording of the first mass meeting. Like the bus show before it, hearing the actual sermon given by Rev. A.W. Wilson on December 2, 1955, makes the visitor feel as if they are there. After going through the doors, visitors enter the more traditional section of the museum. One cannot help but feel underwhelmed with the remainder of the exhibits after experiencing the three outstanding, back-to-back audio-visual displays. While it may not be as exciting, the rest of the museum does a wonderful job of portraying the story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott using text panels, artifacts, dioramas, quotes, and videos.

⁷³ Gerald Eisterhold as quoted in Dan Daley, "Staging a Moment in History," *Pro AV magazine*, December 2005.

⁷⁴ Dannielle Traylor and Viola Molton, Customer Relations Specialist and Curator, Interview with author, 6 September 2012, and site visit by author.

The next section deals with the first month of the boycott: the mass meetings, the MIA's negotiation attempts, the failure of the negotiations, and King's "passive resistance" approach. The focal point of this first gallery is a large photographic mural that extends halfway down the wall from the ceiling. The mural depicts two opposing scenes, with a mass meeting shown as the visitor enters the gallery, and a white supremacist gathering visible on the other side as the visitor looks back toward the entrance. The exhibits encompass several viewpoints, including the boycott leaders, the foot soldiers, white resisters, and white supporters. The panels are not too text heavy, and employ several interesting quotes, including the *Montgomery Advertiser* editor Joe Azbell's description of the first mass meeting as "the most fired up, enthusiastic gathering of human beings that I've ever seen." Unfortunately, many quotes are lost in the dated graphic design. In current trends in graphic design, the quotes would have been separated out, in a larger or different color font. The panels also include children's text accompanied by a friendly cartoon Cleveland Avenue bus logo. Exhibit writers wanted to include kid-friendly copy to encourage children to read for themselves. They consulted a team of teachers to develop the text, which varies from 1st to 6th grade reading levels.⁷⁵ The exhibit is well-organized in sort of a timeline fashion, and many sections feature original documents that help illustrate the content. For example, in the section about negotiations, the MIA's actual resolutions and postmarked envelope that was sent to bus official J.H. Bagley are on display. It can be a risky and unnecessary practice to have the original documents on exhibit; a high resolution scan can be used as an "arti-fake," while the original is safely held in storage. In any case, the items help to make the history come alive for the visitor. In contrast with the plethora of original documents, there are few original artifacts. There is only one artifact in this section, albeit an unusual one, a six foot tall audio recorder and playback machine, similar to the ones that larger churches used to record Sunday sermons and mass meetings. Seeing the recorder helps visitors realize that the audio program they just heard is based on the actual recording, and not a dramatization made up by the designers.

Several videos in the exhibit also engage the visitor, including one with historical footage of the mass meetings, carpool system, and Parks' trial. Perhaps taking a cue from the historians' call to tell the story more symmetrically, one of the videos highlights white opposition to the boycott. Using rare footage from a February 1956 White Citizens Council convention at the Montgomery Coliseum attended by 10,000 supporters and an undated KKK rally, the video presents the story from a white supremacist perspective. There is also the first of two interactive video kiosks, where

⁷⁵ Dannielle Traylor, Museum Customer Relations Specialist, Interview with author, 6 September 2012.

the visitor can watch oral history interview clips from boycott participants speaking about their experiences. Incorporating oral histories is a growing trend in museums, especially as the technology has developed to allow for affordable oral history interactive stations. Civil rights history lends itself to oral histories as its participants are still living. Just as historians utilize oral histories to study the movement, civil rights museums are increasingly using interviews to present the story. The oral history interactives at the Rosa Parks Museum feature multiple narrators, including men and women of both races, and a variety of topics, such as home life, work, carpools, and mass meetings. Seeing and hearing from the local participants themselves is the best way to learn about this grassroots movement. Oral history exhibits allow museums to present stories that are often overlooked, or simply cannot be told, in other formats. In the section about home life, Rev. Thomas Jordan recalls how his father, a Pullman car porter, travelled all over the country. When he would come home, his dad would tell him about the integration he saw in other places, and how it inspired him to know that the situation in Montgomery and the rest of the South could be changed. The interview clips also afford the visitor a personal connection with the past. In a particularly moving clip, Rev. Robert Graetz cried as he recounted a story about an elderly boycott participant who missed her carpool and was going to be late for work. Another protestor suggested that she ride the bus, just this once. The woman replied no, that she wasn't protesting for herself, but for her grandchildren, so that one day they could pay their money and be treated as equals on the bus. Proud and tall, she walked to work that day, not knowing if she would be fired for being late. As Graetz points out, this is the real lesson of the movement. The courage that she and so many others displayed, sacrificing and doing whatever it took to stick to the boycott, even when they had no confidence that it actually would succeed in their lifetimes.

Before moving on to the next gallery, the visitor comes across a window into Martin Luther King's replicated kitchen and sees him sitting at the table, having the "epiphany" that he describes in *Stride Toward Freedom*, and is repeated throughout the scholarly literature. The diorama is adequate, but the interpretation is not. Instead of the text panel that displays a lengthy passage from his book explaining the event, it would have been much more effective to hear King's quote in an audio format. In the next, and largest gallery, the visitor learns the rest of the story including the mass arrests of the eighty-nine black leaders, the anti-boycott trial, police surveillance, the *Browder vs. Gayle* lawsuit and subsequent appeal, and finally the boycotters' victory. As in the historians' accounts, the role of media attention and importance of the carpool system are explored.

A large photomural of the MIA leaders is displayed next to an interpretive panel explaining that the MIA leaders dressed in their Sunday best before turning themselves in, knowing that their pictures would be in the news the next day. The carpool is dealt with in a variety of ways, including through interpretive panels, photographs, and another oral history video kiosk. The most effective display of the carpool is a diorama featuring a restored 1955 Chevy Bel Air station wagon, similar to the ones used in the carpool, displaying the Holt Street Baptist Church label. Sitting in the car are three mannequins of a male driver and two younger passengers, one of whom is holding school books. Two women mannequins loaded down with packages are approaching the car. A large photomural of a pick-up point with a line of people waiting for a car serves as the backdrop for the diorama. The display depicts all aspects of the carpool, and the tour guide points out each element in further detail. The guide allowed my tour group to go behind the stanchions to get a closer look. The radio in the car is tuned to an African American station and the visitor can hear a digitally enhanced recording from the time period. The docent pointed out, as several historians do, that black radio stations played an important role in communication among the boycotters.

Most of the interpretive panels in this section are affixed to a glass wall with fuzzy silhouettes of the foot soldiers. Perhaps this is the museum's version of the monochromatic mannequins used at many other civil rights museums. Again, the fascinating original documents are a prominent feature in these exhibits. Visitors can see an actual insurance policy for a carpool vehicle, evidence of police surveillance in the form of reports of carpool activity and a protestor's bank statement, and the city commissioners' appeal of the *Browder vs. Gayle* ruling. Unfortunately, there is no video footage in this section, except for the second oral history kiosk. There are also few artifacts, though the ones that are presented are interesting. The wooden Dean's Drug Store sign is an appropriate catalyst for discussion of the highly complex organization involved in running the carpool. Mr. Dean ran the logistics for the carpool system. His drug store was a pickup and drop-off location. To combat the police surveillance, boycotters entered and exited through different doors, and police never knew how many were coming and going.

Compared to the well-organized layout of the previous exhibits, the last section seems haphazardly thrown together. A short text panel accompanied by a December 21, 1956, newspaper explains that the boycott has ended. The "Victory Ride" diorama depicts King, Glenn Smiley, Ralph Abernathy, and Fred Gray riding the bus. Except for a tiny photo and caption on the previous panel, there is no interpretation of the diorama. Many visitors might be left wondering who these men are. Another short text panel explains that the boycott was only the beginning of the modern civil rights

movement, and displays remarkable, yet poorly labeled, documents. A propaganda brochure distributed by the state of Georgia shows several pictures of King and other leaders engaging in “communist activities.” Those familiar with the history will find it interesting, but there is no other mention of communism in the museum and the general public would likely be confused by its inclusion. The violence that occurred after the boycott is also not fully interpreted. Original police and hospital reports are exhibited from the December 28, 1956, bus shooting, but there is no label to provide context for the incident.

In contrast to its grand entrance, the museum runs out of steam in the final exhibits. An interpretive panel detailing the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference stands next to a large photo mural of events that happened in the years after the boycott, including demonstrators being blasted with fire hoses in Birmingham, a bus on fire during the Freedom Rides in Anniston, Attorney General Robert Kennedy and the Civil Rights Commission, and King standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel, moments before his assassination. The photos constitute a great display, but the absence of interpretation might be puzzling to visitors who are not knowledgeable of the history. The visitor learns about Parks’ life after the boycott in a video shown on small screen. The concluding text panel sums up the protest, highlighting the ordinary people participating in a local, nonviolent movement. In its final, feel-good message, the panel poses the question, “Do you have the courage to treat people fairly?”

The newer portion of the museum is the Children’s Wing, located just down the sidewalk from the main museum. This two-story facility houses both unique and traditional exhibits designed especially for children. Like in the main museum, tour guides lead visitors into the downstairs exhibit, which consists of a darkened room full of futuristic equipment, with a frenzy of colored lights projected onto the floor and walls. Walking on silver metal platforms, visitors make their way to an oversized reproduction of the Cleveland Avenue bus with a Mr. Rivets, a robotic driver, at the wheel. On two screens inside the bus, and on large screens surrounding the outside of it, a twenty-minute video presentation seeks to present earlier events in the black freedom struggle. While the museum has successfully created a fun educational experience, it does not fully realize its goal of informing visitors about life in the Jim Crow era. Historians have long debated the chronology of the civil rights movement, tracing it as far back to the days of slavery, to more recent eras such as the pre WWII labor movements. Just as historians cannot agree on a date, neither can museums. The museum takes several liberties with the history and excludes major events in its interpretation of the beginning of the movement.

Once on the bus, visitors are seated and notice a large digital graphic at the front of the bus displays the date December 1, 1955. The video presentation begins with Rosa Parks and other passengers waiting for a bus in downtown Montgomery. Parks serves as the narrator, explaining that segregated conditions in the United States have existed for a long time. She informs the audience that the bus they are on is actually a time machine, and that they will be travelling back in time to explore the history of segregation. As the lights flicker and the bus shakes, visitors are whisked away to 1838 in Cincinnati, Ohio, to learn about the “starting point of segregation.” A young African American street performer is singing and dancing to “Jumpin’ Jim Crow.” A white passer-by, Tom “Daddy” Rice, is amused by the jovial boy’s act, and thinks other audiences will be too. Rice steals the boy’s act and begins performing with blackface makeup in theaters all over the country, with other actors following his lead. The minstrel shows proved popular with white audiences and helped to perpetuate negative stereotypes about African Americans. Though it might be a stretch to consider this event the “starting point of segregation,” this section does inform visitors about the origin of the term Jim Crow. In this and following scenes, the video strives to present a realistic account of the past through the use of primary source documents, photographs, and period clothing and language. However, not all visitors appreciate the museum’s efforts. The first section is particularly controversial because of its use of blackface. In addition to the lawsuit brought by the Rosa Parks Institute, some visitors are offended and have complained about this part of the video. The museum stands by their choice to include the historically accurate scene.⁷⁶

The next stop is Dred Scott’s family home in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1857. Scott, his wife, and two daughters sit at their kitchen table and discuss the recent decision in his Supreme Court case that ruled that African Americans are not citizens. Another section based on a legal case is the final scene set in 1892 in New Orleans. Homer Plessy boards a train, sits in the whites-only car, and refuses to move when asked by train officials. He is arrested for violating Louisiana segregation laws, and his case is ultimately heard by the Supreme Court, which handed down their “separate but equal” decision in 1896. While the museum deserves praise for telling the story from the perspective of the people and not focusing on the traditional story of the court decisions, it might make some uncomfortable that the character’s dialogue is entirely speculative.

Unlike in the court scenes, the narrator admits that the Harriett Tubman and Henry “Box” Brown section is not historically accurate in that Tubman and Brown never actually met. Tubman famously led many slaves on the Underground Railroad from the south to the north, where they

⁷⁶ Viola Molton, Museum Curator, Interview with author, 6 September 2012.

gained their freedom. Box Brown took a different route by packing himself in a box and shipping himself north. The scene was fabricated to present two different accounts of black resistance to slavery, and though not based on an actual event, is nonetheless effective. In contrast to the liberties taken in the other accounts, the scene explaining the Civil War is largely devoid of staged interpretation. Instead it is presented through documents, newspapers, and other propaganda of the time. Adults may find the presentation overly dramatic, but children seem to love the video and the thrilling bus ride. Despite the video's stylistic shortcomings, the show does engage the visitor by presenting a new story in a unique way.

The bigger concern of a visitor familiar with the history is not what is in the presentation, but what is left out. The video seeks to tell the story of both setbacks and accomplishments in the black freedom struggle. It depicts the time period from the origins of the term Jim Crow in 1838 to Homer Plessy's arrest in 1892. Most major events within these chronological boundaries are explored, but there are a few exceptions. Noticeably absent is white abolitionist John Brown's raid of Harpers Ferry in 1859. There seem to be two potential reasons for the raid's exclusion: the fact that Brown was white and the fact that it was a violent act in which an armed slave revolt was attempted. Given the museum's commitment to exploring the story across racial lines, it is likely that the latter is the motivation for leaving out the story. As stated by director Georgette Norman, the museum hopes to convey the message of the nonviolence philosophy. Other events that are excluded point to African American accomplishments, such as Sojourner Truth's 1851 "Ain't I a Woman" speech, and the founding of several black universities including Howard University and the Tuskegee Institute.

However, the most obvious exclusions involve the enormous gap between the last story in the video and start of the "Montgomery" narrative. The museum has missed out on sixty three years of historical context that would help visitors more fully understand the events that lead to the modern civil rights movement. Just a small sample of the overlooked history reveals such important events as the founding of the NAACP, the great migration, the Harlem Renaissance, the role of African Americans in World War II, and the *Brown vs. Board* decision. The museum recognizes the video's faults and hopes to add more modern events to the video in the near future.⁷⁷

The second floor's text-based exhibits are not as exciting as the time machine, but they do reinforce the messages from the main museum, and highlight foot soldiers who do not receive much attention in the other exhibits. A large timeline stretches across all four walls of the room, picking up

⁷⁷ Viola Molton, Museum Curator, Interview with author, 6 September 2012.

where the time machine left off in 1896 and continuing until 1957. The timeline chronicles the steps it took to end bus segregation, and focuses on key events civil rights legal history and the boycott itself. Kiosks scattered throughout the middle of the room present the stories of foot soldiers such as Fred Gray, Myles Horton, Virginia Durr, Rufus Lewis, and Ralph Abernathy. Though this is considered the children’s wing, these exhibits are text heavy, and do not include the kid-friendly copy that the main museum does.



Figure 1.4: Children’s Wing Exhibits

The exhibit’s strength is the primary source material used to illustrate the boycott. Documents, photographs, newspapers, and quotes help to engage the visitor not only with the history, but with historical research methods. The museum is committed to exhibiting the “real” sources of history, highlighting the notion that we learn about the past by studying the accounts that

people leave behind. Some documents, like Park's fingerprint card, are repeated from the main museum, but these exhibits include several new items, such as King's paycheck from Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, JoAnn Robinson's 1954 letter to Mayor Gayle with the Women's Political Council's complaints, and the carpool routes from the MIA. In keeping with the theme of using primary sources to explore the history, a station with recreated period newspapers gives visitors an opportunity to read the news of the boycott. Finally, several computers are available for visitors to research historic documents and hear oral history interviews related to the Montgomery movement.

Overall, the Rosa Parks Museum and Library serves as a model for civil rights museums. The museum strives to connect with all audiences and upholds the professional standards of the industry. The exhibits incorporate many different interpretive elements to hold the visitor's attention. Most importantly, the museum presents an accurate account of the story they set out to tell, the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The storyline is based in the academic scholarship and touches on nearly all of the themes that historians do, including the roles of women, religion, and media, the evolution of King's nonviolent philosophy, and the success of the boycott through effective communication and the carpool system in the black community. The museum tells the stories of black leaders, foot soldiers, white resistance, and white support. Visitors walk away from the museum with a true sense of how "ordinary people responded to extraordinary circumstances and attained greatness in the process."⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Conclusion interpretive panel in the Rosa Parks Museum.

CHAPTER TWO

NATIONAL VOTING RIGHTS MUSEUM

The National Voting Rights Museum exhibits materials and artifacts from the voting rights struggle in America, especially those that highlight the experiences, which fueled "Bloody Sunday," the Selma to Montgomery March, and the Civil Rights Movement throughout the South. The NVRM provides research forums, community action, and makes presentations that impact or support voting rights issues in America.

NVRM Mission ¹

Perhaps worst of all, [Selma] is a place where blacks and whites, like punch-drunk boxers, are still fighting the same old battles of race.

New York Times journalist Peter Applebome, 1994 ²

The Selma to Montgomery March

Though Montgomery is known for its "Cradle of the Confederacy" legacy, Selma, perhaps more than any other Alabama city, exemplifies the notion of a shared Civil War and civil rights heritage.³ In many ways, not much in Selma had changed in the century between the two eras. In the 1960s, the "Queen City" continued her reign as the economic center of the western portion of Alabama's Black Belt. The Black Belt stretches across seventeen counties in central Alabama, and gets its name from the abundant, dark soil that supports the region's agricultural economy. The decline of the Black Belt started after the Civil War with boll weevil invasions and overuse of the land, and by the 1960s, mechanization of the farming industry forced Selma, in Dallas County, and the rest of the region even further into an economic slump. Though slavery was declared unconstitutional in the 1860s, legal measures and social and economic traditions kept African Americans from achieving equal rights. The Black Belt's cotton plantation and slavery tradition continued long into the twentieth century, through tenant farming, strict segregation, and severe white resistance. By the 1960s, Selma was arguably the most inflexible and passionately segregated city in Alabama.⁴ Black leaders in Selma, like many across the South, thought the key to equal rights was political enfranchisement.

¹ According to its website, the NVRM's official name is the National Voting Rights Museum and Institute, however all other publications refer to it only as the National Voting Rights Museum. NVRM Mission, NVRM website, <http://nvrmi.com/?page_id=45>

² Peter Applebome, "In Selma, Everything and Nothing Changed," *New York Times*, 2 August 1994.

³ Glenn T. Eskew, "Memorializing the Movement: The Struggle to Build Civil Rights Museums in the South," 363-364.

In 1870, the fifteenth amendment made it unconstitutional to deny male citizens the right to vote “on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”⁵ But after Reconstruction ended, Democratic leaders across the South adopted intricate provisions to disfranchise African Americans. The framers of the Alabama Constitution of 1901 declared that blacks were “incapable of self government.”⁶ Prospective voters were now required to read, write, or interpret a section of the U.S. Constitution. requiring endorsements from whites vouching for the black applicant’s character. The county registrars selected the passages and determined if the qualifications were met. Few African Americans, especially those in the Black Belt, even attempted to register. The Democratic Party also barred blacks from voting in primaries. So even if blacks were able to register, they could not vote in the only elections that really mattered in the one-party South.⁷

In 1944, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Smith vs. Allwright* declared white-only primaries unconstitutional in. Alabama responded with the hotly contested Boswell Amendment in 1946, allowing the county boards of registrars to verbally question applicants. After the Supreme Court declared the amendment unconstitutional in 1949, Black Belt state senators introduced new legislation that required a literacy test, questionnaire, and vouchers from whites. Under this new 1951 amendment, registrars had a legal basis for the voucher system and continued to take great liberties in the interpretation of the requirements. Of the many measures they took to disfranchise blacks, registrars frequently denied applications that contained insignificant mistakes on the questionnaire.⁸ The discriminatory legislation and conduct of the county registrars succeeded in their goals of black disfranchisement. In 1952, voter registration among African Americans all over the South averaged about 20% of the black population. Alabama was second only to Mississippi, with 5% of blacks registered to vote.⁹

⁴ J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 380.

⁵ “Constitution of the United States” <http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_transcript.html>

⁶ Frye Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom: Alabama and the Movement that Changed America* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), xii.

⁷ *Ibid*, 62-63 and Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 435-436.

⁸ Scotty E. Kirkland, “Mobile and the Boswell Amendment,” *Alabama Review* Vol. 65, No. 3 (July 2012): 201-244.

⁹ David Garrow, *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (New York: Yale University Press, 1978), 6-7.

In addition to resistance to black enfranchisement through laws and county registrars, whites employed economic and physical measures to keep blacks from challenging the status quo. Blacks who attempted to register faced retaliation, including harassment, loss of their jobs, and even violence. White resistance only increased during the modern civil rights movement. After the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision, several state NAACP chapters submitted desegregation petitions to their boards of education. In response, Dallas County segregationists established the state's first Citizens' Council. By 1955, the Dallas County Citizens' Council was the largest in the state with fifteen hundred members, including many city and county officials. The Citizens' Council clearly declared in the *Selma Times-Union*, "We intend to make it difficult, if not impossible for any Negro who advocates de-segregation to find and hold a job, get credit or renew a mortgage." They made good on their threat when Selma's desegregation petition was submitted to the school board. Sixteen of the twenty-nine black parents who signed it were fired from their jobs. This growing white resistance proved to be effective; from June 1954 to June 1961, only fourteen African Americans were registered to vote in Dallas County.¹⁰

Blacks also faced barriers to enfranchisement within their own community. After years of increasingly segregated conditions, many African Americans across the Black Belt had become apathetic, feeling that nothing would ever change because nothing ever had. Prominent black attorney J.L. Chestnut, Jr., said that for most of Selma's black community, "it was just the way things were, and folk accommodated themselves to it."¹¹ Blacks and whites sought out relationships with each other when it was in their best interest to do so. Chestnut recalled that his mother "was determined to get the best for their family, and she dealt with white people on that basis."¹² White officials formed relationships with black leaders to help them maintain the status quo. City and county leaders threw "crumbs of power" to some black leaders as rewards for keeping their communities in line.¹³

Despite the risks of retaliation and violence, C.J. Adams founded Selma's NAACP chapter in 1918. J.L. Chestnut remembered that "Adams pretty much *was* the NAACP in Selma." There were no lawyers in south Alabama, and Adams, a notary public, served as Dallas County's black legal

¹⁰ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 392-394, 404, 436-439.

¹¹ Garrow, *Protest at Selma*, 20 and J.L. Chestnut, Jr. and Julia Cass *Black in Selma: The Uncommon Life of J. L. Chestnut, Jr.*, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), 22.

¹² Chestnut, *Black In Selma*, 22.

¹³ *Ibid*, 45.

adviser.¹⁴ In the mid-1920s he founded the Dallas County Voters League (DCVL) to help African Americans register to vote. Membership was low under the oppressive racial conditions. Nevertheless, Adams attracted police attention. After being imprisoned several times for falsifying documents, he moved to Detroit in 1948. When Adams left, Sam Boynton took over as the DCVL president and NAACP leader for Selma. Boynton believed that economic advancement was the key in overcoming discrimination. Economic advancement, however, could not happen without voting rights.¹⁵ Boynton and his wife, Amelia, opened an insurance agency, allowing them to be safe, at least, from job retaliation. By the 1950s, the league was holding monthly meetings in the Boyntons' office. The DCVL had a small, but loyal membership of about a dozen people, including dental hygienist Marie Foster and teachers James Gildersleeve and F. D. Reese.¹⁶

As the DCVL worked locally, the federal government passed two laws, the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960, in hopes of reducing the barriers to black enfranchisement. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 gave the Justice Department more power to combat voter registration discrimination, including federal review of complaints against voting rights. However, few blacks went through the bureaucratic process of filing a formal complaint, and when they did, the county registrars refused to produce records. The 1960 act strengthened the previous one by forcing boards to keep registration and voting records and making them available to the Justice Department upon request. According to David Garrow, both acts “proved disappointing.”¹⁷

The enforcement of both laws depended on the cooperation of federal judges, many of whom were segregationists. Dallas County's district federal judge, Daniel H. Thomas, believed racial matters “must be resolved, and should be resolved, by the people not the courts.”¹⁸ He repeatedly denied Justice Department requests for records and delayed trials for months on end, often only proceeding after a federal complaint. Thomas' actions protected Judge James Hare and Sheriff Jim Clark, his close friends in Dallas County. The local leaders committed extreme abuses of power because Thomas refused to hold them accountable for their actions.¹⁹ Sam Boynton realized that the

¹⁴ Ibid, 53.

¹⁵ Ibid, 74.

¹⁶ Ibid, 132-135.

¹⁷ Garrow, *Protest at Selma*, 12-15, 28.

¹⁸ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 444.

DCVL would have to remove or circumvent the local leadership to gain political equality. Boynton hoped to attract the attention of “sympathetic forces” outside the community. They initially sought help from the federal government. In 1957, the Boyntons and DCVL members testified before the newly-formed Civil Rights Commission in Montgomery after the registrars continued misconduct. But after delays from Judges Hare and Thomas, the case was not decided until 1962, when despite overwhelming evidence Thomas ruled there had been no discrimination.

Perhaps realizing that change would come slowly through the federal courts, Amelia Boynton contacted a few civil rights organizations in 1962. She began taking on a more visible leadership role in the voters’ league in the late 1950s after Sam suffered from a series of strokes. Prompted by her dying husband’s wish to see that his civil rights work be continued, Amelia hoped to hold a voter registration drive. In November 1962, the Voter Education Project of the Southern Regional Council sent a Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field worker to Selma to determine if a project would be successful there. Bernard Lafayette, like many SNCC workers, brought something new to Selma – fearlessness. In a particularly bold move, he met with Sheriff Jim Clark, Dallas County’s version of Birmingham’s Bull Connor, letting Clark know that he was in town for voter registration. Lafayette was impressed with the strong local foundation through the DCVL. He thought Selma was an ideal place for a registration drive and recommended that funding be provided to the DCVL.²⁰

In early February 1963, Lafayette and his wife Colia began the voting registration campaign. The outsiders’ presence was met with mixed reviews from the voters’ league members. Margaret Moore, a teacher, gave the Lafayettes a room in her home, despite the job retaliation risks. Marie Foster continued teaching voter education classes. The SNCC workers recruited many Selma University and high school students to join the registration efforts. But not everyone was in favor of SNCC’s strategy of direct action campaigns. Many older, black activists and civilians expressed their concerns, and some even quit the DCVL. Whether they approved or not, the campaign resulted in more registration attempts. Before the drive began, applications averaged three per month, but by May 1963 had jumped to thirty-one blacks.

As the Dallas County movement gained momentum, its founding father Sam Boynton died in May 1963. Lafayette and Rev. L.L. Anderson honored Boynton with a memorial service and

¹⁹ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 444-445; Garrow, *Protest at Selma*, 31-36.

²⁰ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 446-448; Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, 223-224.

voting rights rally at Tabernacle Baptist Church. On May 14, three hundred fifty African Americans attended Selma's first mass meeting. Sheriff Clark and his posse of recently deputized, poorly trained, men also came to the meeting. After smashing car windshields outside, Clark and his posse stormed the church, daring the activists to challenge them. The night's speaker, James Forman, SNCC's executive secretary, stood his ground. Forman inspired many in the audience with his fearlessness, loudly proclaiming, "Someday they will have to open up that ballot box, and that will be our day of reckoning." The monthly mass meetings turned into weekly events, gaining more support at each one. Over the summer, hundreds of people applied for registration and over 800 people attended a meeting in September 1963. Clark's harassment increased as support for the movement grew. The sheriff and his posse began ticketing cars at meetings and arresting SNCC workers, including Lafayette. But now, unlike ever before, the black activists refused to let white resistance stop them.²¹

In July, SNCC and the DCVL began preparing for demonstrations and sit-ins. The activists opposed to direct-action formed their own committee, the Dallas County Improvement Association (DCIA). Both groups submitted petitions to Mayor Chris Heinz and other groups, including the Selma Retail Merchants Association. The DCIA's modest requests included paying black workers a living wage and considering them for previously whites-only positions. SNCC and the DCVL demanded full integration of all public facilities and for the hiring of black policemen and firemen. Both petitions were denied without much consideration from the white leaders. Realizing that compromises with officials would not work, the DCIA united with SNCC and the DCVL. The direct action demonstrations began on September 16, 1963.²²

The planned demonstrations took on new meaning when the Ku Klux Klan bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, killing four young girls, on September 15, 1963. Many in the black community were moved by the tragedy, and hoped the demonstrations would "transform the meaning of the bombing" into something more than death.²³ For over two weeks, protestors held sit-ins at drugstores and restaurants. They picketed and boycotted many businesses. Over 350 people were arrested, the majority of them juveniles. Arrests were nothing new to veteran

²¹ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 448-451; Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, 223-226.

²² Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 450-455.

²³ Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, 221.

activists, but as John Lewis recalled, the “Selma-style” arrests were particularly brutal.²⁴ On October 7, SNCC workers Carver Neblett and Avery Williams were arrested for attempting to distribute sandwiches to protestors at the courthouse. Lewis remembered Neblett’s report on the incident, calling it the “most vivid” arrest account he had ever seen. After being beaten by fifteen state troopers and the local posse at the courthouse, Neblett was thrown onto a police bus. Inside the bus, Neblett thought he would die, when a plainclothes officer coldly stated, “Somebody give me a gun. I’m gonna shoot the nigger now.” He endured more beatings and unimaginable humiliation in the jail, before he was finally released on \$500 bond.²⁵

The violent arrests and horrendous jail conditions affected even the most seasoned activists, but the experience of the young protestors was especially cruel. The county jails were filled with adults, so juveniles were incarcerated at state prison camps. The deplorable facilities were normally used as temporary housing for convict road crews, and were especially inadequate for females. Once in court, juveniles were afforded even fewer rights than the adults. Probate Judge Bernard Reynolds delayed proceedings, and when he finally held them, they were often held in secret, without the minors’ parents present. First-time offenders were usually released on the condition that they not participate in further demonstrations. Repeat offenders fared much worse, as Judge Reynolds sent many to the state reformatory in nearby Mount Meigs.²⁶ Despite their indescribable suffering, many children were excited to participate in the movement. Like many of her peers, child protestor Jo Ann Bland recalled being inspired by the courage of the SNCC and SCLC workers. Bland was arrested over a dozen times. She remembers it as “the greatest adventure of her childhood.”²⁷

The protests stopped when Judge Thomas’ November 1962 ruling in favor of the registrars was overturned on October 3. All the while, blacks continued to attempt to register by the hundreds, and they continued to be denied by registrars. Voter qualification became even harder in January 1964, when the Alabama Supreme Court established a new requirement to the registration test that forced applicants to answer questions about the U.S. Constitution. The test made registering harder, but the real barrier to black voters was the boards of registrars who administered the test. Regardless

²⁴John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999), 235.

²⁵ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 235-237.

²⁶ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 455-456.

²⁷ Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, 244.

of the requirements, the fact was the majority of whites qualified, and the majority of blacks did not.²⁸

Selma saw fewer demonstrations throughout the spring and early summer of 1964, but the movement was far from dormant. Weekly mass meetings continued to draw large audiences as blacks grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of progress. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 on July 2, the movement once again sprang to life. The Act required the integration of public accommodations, and blacks immediately began testing local restaurants and the movie theater. The protestors, most of whom were students, were arrested by Clark and his posse. At the July 5 mass meeting, DCVL president F.D. Reese announced that organized protests would begin on July 12. Judge Hare responded with an injunction forbidding public assembly of three or more people in which “violation of the law is suggested, advocated, or encouraged.”²⁹ Hare’s injunction, which Sheriff Clark aggressively enforced, brought the mass meetings to a halt. Held back by the very real “fear of repression and violence,” most of the black community complied with the injunction. Only a small group of leaders, the “Courageous Eight,” including Amelia Boynton, Marie Foster, and F. D. Reese, continued to meet secretly.³⁰

Like his ally Sheriff Clark, Judge Hare’s white supremacist tactics had grown more extreme as the movement progressed. J.L. Chestnut described him as “an intelligent, well-read man. But where race and the South were involved, he was obsessed, irrational, almost crazy.”³¹ According to Chestnut, Clark was the “symbol of white resistance in Selma, while Hare was the power behind the scenes.”³² White moderates were increasingly embarrassed and disgusted by the supremacists’ actions. John Lewis recalled that moderate whites did not want blacks to vote either, but felt that “there were more civilized ways of keeping [blacks] off the rolls.”³³ When Mayor Joseph Smitherman took office in October 1964, it became apparent that traditional white supremacist leaders were being replaced by a new, moderate regime.

²⁸ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 440-442, 461.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 462-463.

³⁰ Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, 226-227.

³¹ Chestnut, *Black In Selma*, 180.

³² *Ibid*, 176.

³³ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 315.

Joseph Smitherman grew up poor, in a working class Selma neighborhood. After graduating from the University of Alabama, he returned to Selma and opened an appliance store. Smitherman resented the longtime political machine rule that kept wealth and power in the hands of a few old families. He wanted economic growth for Selma and thought it was time for “young, positive, and progressive leadership.” In 1964, Smitherman challenged incumbent Mayor Chris Heinz, who was seeking his fourth term. Pledging to “represent all the people, not just the favored few,” he was elected mayor in 1964.³⁴ As far as race went, the new mayor “was in the middle, playing both sides to stay alive politically,” according to Chestnut.³⁵ Ever the salesman, Smitherman gained both white and black support by tailoring his message, preaching segregation to the whites, then paving streets in the black neighborhoods. Moderate white leaders wanted to attract new industries to the community, and saw Selma’s diminishing race relations, and the negative publicity that came from it, as a major roadblock in their plan. They were willing to ease up on segregation as long as it helped them achieve their economic goals.

Along these lines, moderates were concerned by Sheriff Clark’s supremacist antics. In an effort to limit Clark’s power, Smitherman appointed moderate Wilson Baker as public safety director and gave him jurisdiction over the city of Selma. As the county sheriff, Clark would oversee Dallas County and the Dallas County Courthouse. Though Baker was a segregationist, he was determined to enforce the Civil Rights Act of 1964, “assuring the courteous and fair treatment of all persons regardless of race, creed, or color.”³⁶ With Clark confined to the Courthouse, Baker stopped enforcing Hare’s injunction. The meetings resumed, but they lacked the same intensity they had gained in July. Moderate officials began to ignore segregation laws, including desegregating water fountains and integrating housing near Craig Air Force Base. But the small, and often times federally-mandated, changes did not satisfy the black leaders who had been working tirelessly for voting rights.³⁷ After nearly two years of voter registration drives, only 156 blacks were registered in Selma.

Hoping to accelerate the pace, many black leaders wanted the SCLC to take a more active role. The SCLC had been providing assistance in Selma throughout the voting rights movement, but

³⁴ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 432.

³⁵ Chestnut, *Black In Selma*, 197.

³⁶ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 467-469.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 469.

the main leadership came from the DCVL and SNCC. The SCLC was considering Selma for the location for their next campaign. They wanted a success on the scale of Birmingham, and they saw potential in both the strong local foundation and violent Sheriff Clark.³⁸ The DCVL's concern was winning the vote, and they were willing to use a new tactic to get their rights. SNCC members were less enthusiastic, as tension was mounting between the two national groups. SNCC had become increasingly critical of SCLC's "headline-grabbing, hit-and-run tactics," but they decided to respect the local leaders' wishes when they extended the SCLC a formal invitation in the fall of 1964.³⁹ In December, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. met with President Lyndon Johnson to discuss a voting rights act. Johnson explained that he was working on an act, but that it was too soon, and it likely would not pass until 1966. King told him that the people were not going to wait that long. On December 28, 1964, the SCLC announced they would launch a new phase of the movement in Selma.⁴⁰

On January 2, 1965, thousands of people gathered at the mass meeting at Brown's Chapel. King announced that demonstrations would begin on January 18, the deadline the Supreme Court set for integrating public accommodations. Over the next two weeks, the SCLC, SNCC, and the DCVL came together to prepare and organize the protests. King's presence in Selma boosted "the confidence factor" of the black community, and united them like never before.⁴¹ The white community also united, in their anger toward the negative national publicity that would result from the demonstrations.⁴² On Monday, January 18, King and SNCC president John Lewis led four hundred protestors to the court house to register to vote. A mob of white supremacists from various right-wing and neo-Nazi groups joined Clark and his posse on the courthouse steps, hoping to intimidate the protestors. Clark ordered the protestors to line up in the alley, and they complied. The sheriff kept his cool that first day, and there was no confrontation. There was also no registration, as the protestors were kept waiting outside all day.⁴³

³⁸ Ibid, 469; Garrow, *Protest at Selma*, 223.

³⁹ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 301-304.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 303-307.

⁴¹ Chestnut, *Black In Selma*, 199.

⁴² Thornton, *Dividing Lines*,

⁴³ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 308-310.

The next day, when Clark told them to move to the alley, the marchers refused. The posse tried to push them off the sidewalk and arrested sixty-seven of them. Clark himself roughed up Amelia Boynton for moving too slow. He grabbed her by the collar, arrested her, and shoved her into a police car. Finally, Clark's classic supremacist tactics were on full display for the reporters who had gathered in Selma. John Lewis later recalled that as the cameras clicked, he knew the "cycle of violence and publicity and more violence and more publicity" had started.⁴⁴ The courthouse demonstrations continued throughout the week, and hit a high note on Friday when F.D. Reese led one hundred teachers in a march to the courthouse. Teachers had been reluctant to join the protests, since they were especially vulnerable to job retaliation. The teacher's fearlessness inspired the entire black community. Perhaps in a moment of level-headedness, or more likely, under the direction of Smitherman, Clark decided not to arrest the group.

In the following weeks, Clark's wild antics continued to escalate amid the daily protests. On January 25, fifty-three year old Annie Cooper challenged him to hit her. Clark proceeded to whack her in the head with his billy club. Newspapers across the county showed the pictures of Clark hitting the woman. Hundreds of protestors were being arrested every day and Governor Wallace sent fifty Alabama state troopers to assist the local posse.⁴⁵ Fed up with Clark, segregationist Judge Thomas finally sided with the protestors, demanding there be no "interference with registration under the guise of law enforcement." The arrests continued, however, now at the request of Judge Hare who claimed they were disrupting court proceedings. In fact, arrests reached an all time high after Thomas ordered Clark to stop; over 2,000 people were arrested in the first week of February alone.⁴⁶

On February 1, in a planned maneuver, Baker arrested King as he led marchers to the courthouse. Both sides benefitted from the arrest; King wanted to draw more publicity with a stint in jail, and Baker wanted to protect King from the unpredictable Clark. Later that afternoon, five hundred schoolchildren, some holding crayon-written protest signs, were arrested outside the courthouse. As the situation deteriorated further, Judge Thomas issued his ruling in the Justice Department's complaint against the registrars from the previous September. Thomas found the registrars in contempt, and declared the voting qualification test unconstitutional. He also ordered

⁴⁴ Ibid, 308-310.

⁴⁵ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 311-312.

⁴⁶ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 480-481.

the registrars to process one hundred applicants per session and not to disqualify them for insignificant mistakes on their applications. Though the registrars would not fully meet Thomas' demands, they were finally making progress. The NAACP declared it to be "the beginning of the end of voter registration in Selma."⁴⁷

With the protestors' victory, Clark became more volatile. On February 10, the sheriff forced one hundred and sixty juveniles to march for two miles, poking them with electric cattle prods along the way. John Lewis recalled his experience with the cattle prods during the demonstrations in September 1963, he remembered "how they burn, and how the men who used them enjoyed aiming for the genital area."⁴⁸ Another confrontation occurred when SCLC member C. T. Vivian called Clark "Hitler" and dared the sheriff to hit him. As reporters watched, Clark punched Vivian so hard, he broke his finger. The national publicity sparked outrage, and demonstrations began springing up all over the country to protest black treatment in Selma. Politicians, leaders, and other activists began traveling to the Black Belt to assess the conditions and to offer their help. Malcolm X spoke at a mass meeting at Brown's Chapel. He inspired protestors with his aggressive style, declaring whites should concede to King and the SCLC's demands, "before some other factions come along and try to do it another way."⁴⁹

After a month of protests in Selma, on February 18, many protestors traveled to Marion, in neighboring Perry County to participate in a march protesting SNCC member James Orange's arrest. SCLC member Albert Turner and James Dobynes of the Perry County Voters League led six hundred marchers, including members of the press, on a nighttime march through town. Suddenly the street lights went out, and state troopers and local law enforcement, including Clark's men, began to violently beat the protestors and reporters under the cover of darkness. The brutality resulted in over eight hundred arrests, eight protestors injured, including Jimmie Lee Jackson in serious condition after being shot. Jackson was shot at point blank range in the stomach by a state trooper, after Jackson tried to protect his mother and eighty-two year old grandfather from being beaten.⁵⁰ A week later, Jackson succumbed to his wounds, becoming the first martyr for the voting rights movement. Although the movement in the Black Belt had been particularly violent, no one

⁴⁷ Ibid, 480-482.

⁴⁸ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 234.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 312-315.

⁵⁰ Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, and Thornton, *Dividing Lines*,

had been killed during the demonstrations. Jackson's death aroused a new level of support for the movement, and one thousand mourners came to his funeral. As the crowd marched from the church to the cemetery, James Bevel suggested they carry Jackson's coffin all the way to Montgomery and confront the governor. They would not march that day, but the SCLC would begin planning for a massive march.⁵¹

The SCLC knew from experience that large marches put the movement in the national spotlight. SNCC, however, thought that a march was too dangerous and questioned King's motives. Many thought King was attempting to attract publicity for his own gain, not for the people of Selma. The incident further divided the groups. Most SNCC members pledged only "minimal" support to the march.⁵² Bevel announced that the march would take place on Sunday, March 7. Governor Wallace forbade the march and once again deployed state troopers to Selma. Whether they would have cancelled the march or not, SCLC leader Hosea Williams later recalled, "The people were here, and they were ready. There was no way to turn them back home now." Activists from all over the country arrived to participate in the march. On Sunday, March 7, 1965, six hundred protestors gathered at Brown's Chapel, six blocks from the Edmund Pettus Bridge. King was noticeably absent. In light of Malcolm X's assassination and his own death threats, King's advisors pressured him to stay at home in Atlanta. The protestors themselves were unsure if the march would even happen, and they certainly did not plan to actually march to Montgomery. The leaders had not made any arrangements for food and shelter on the fifty-four mile journey. Many of the protestors still had on their church clothes, and women wore their high heels. Some, like SNCC president John Lewis, expected to be arrested. In anticipation of a stint in jail, he carried a few books and his toothbrush with him. None of them, however, expected the violent attack that would soon take place.⁵³

The protestors lined up in pairs and began the mile-long walk to the bridge. John Lewis and Hosea Williams headed the line, followed by Albert Turner and SNCC member Bob Mants. In the third row was Marie Foster and Amelia Boynton, and behind them, as Lewis later remembered, an army of foot soldiers, "stretching as far as his eye could see." They were "salt-of-the earth people, from all walks of life" Lewis recalled, "the faces of the civil rights movement."⁵⁴ When Lewis and

⁵¹ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 318.

⁵² *Ibid*, 315-319.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 319- 325.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 307, 325.

Williams reached the crest of the steep bridge, they saw a sea of opponents on the other side, ninety state troopers and posse men, some on horseback. A crowd of one hundred stood along the side of the road, “hollering and waving Confederate flags.” On the other side, reporters and photographers readied for action, and a small group of blacks gathered at a safe distance.⁵⁵ Trooper Major Jon Cloud informed the protestors they had two minutes to “disperse and go back to their church or their homes.”⁵⁶ Lewis suggested to Williams that they kneel and pray. As the marchers kneeled, Sheriff Clark triggered a spray can on his belt, giving the signal to the officers behind him to charge. Cloud later testified that Clark accidentally discharged it. Regardless of his intention, the officers rushed the marchers and began beating them with bull whips and billy clubs. Lewis was one of the first victims, getting whacked on the head with a trooper’s club. He crumpled to the ground and the trooper continued to hit him.⁵⁷ The officers showed no mercy or discretion, beating everyone they could, including women, children, and reporters. They continued like “savages” for thirty minutes, throwing tear and nausea gas, and trampling marchers with their horses. Boynton, Foster, and Lewis, along with a score of other marchers, lay unconscious or vomiting. Annie Cooper remembered, “The only way you could tell they were alive was by the quivering of their skin.”⁵⁸ The troopers and possemen chased the protestors across the bridge back to town until Baker intervened. The marchers returned to Brown’s Chapel, where teams of doctors and nurses treated cuts, bruises, and tear gas burns. Black funeral homes used their hearses as ambulances to transport over fifty seriously injured patients to Good Samaritan Hospital. Later that night, Lewis and Williams held a mass meeting. Several marchers were bandaged and bloodied, including Lewis, who had yet to go to the hospital for his fractured skull. Lewis called on President Johnson to send aid, questioning how can the President send troops to Vietnam, and not to Selma, Alabama?⁵⁹

That night, ABC News interrupted their broadcast of *Judgement at Nuremberg*, to report on the events of “Bloody Sunday.” Audiences saw fifteen minutes of the attack, “scene after scene” of vicious law enforcement attacks on peaceful protestors. They heard the blood curdling screams, bodies being beat, and Sheriff Clark shouting, “Get those goddamned niggers! And get those

⁵⁵ Ibid, 326; Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 488.

⁵⁶ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 327.

⁵⁷ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 488; Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 326-327.

⁵⁸ Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, 244-245.

⁵⁹ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 329-331.

goddamned white niggers!”⁶⁰ Americans had seen the images of Bull Connor’s fire hoses and dogs unleashed on protestors in Birmingham, but Selma “touched a nerve deeper than anything that had come before it.” The next morning, King and a legal team, including J. L. Chestnut and Fred Gray, requested a federal injunction from Judge Frank Johnson to hold another march. The team was hopeful that Johnson would grant it, as he had sided with the Montgomery bus boycotters nearly ten years earlier. Johnson put the hearing off until later in the week. SNCC and SCLC leaders once again debated about having a march. King had never defied a federal order, and did not want to jeopardize Johnson’s pending decision. SNCC leaders, though, were fired up and pushed for a march.⁶¹ After talking with Justice Department negotiators, King announced that the march would occur on March 9.

Over two thousand protestors, many who had just arrived since “Bloody Sunday,” met at Brown’s Chapel that Tuesday for the march. King led the crowd over the bridge just past the spot where the carnage unfolded two days earlier. When they got to the other side, they prayed and sang, then King turned the crowd around and headed back to the church. As they walked away, the troopers and possemen moved out of the way for them to continue on to Montgomery. Though they had not planned for an actual march to Montgomery, the crowd was disappointed and confused by King’s actions. Unbeknownst to the marchers, including SNCC members, King made a deal with federal officials to hold a “symbolic” march across the bridge, and not go all the way to Montgomery. For many of the SNCC workers, King’s “double-dealing” was the final straw. The next day, James Forman led a group to Montgomery to focus on organizing demonstrations at the state capitol. They found many supporters among Tuskegee Institute and Alabama State University students. Despite their differences, SNCC and the SCLC remained united for the press. When asked about any organizational problems between the two, SNCC member Ivan Donaldson replied, “We are a family. Arguments take place in any family.”⁶²

Though the march ended peacefully, Selma would not escape the day without violence. That evening, a group of Klansman attacked three white ministers as they walked to Brown’s Chapel. The ministers, including Rev. James Reeb, had come to Selma after Bloody Sunday. The Klansmen were enraged after seeing the whites eating in a black restaurant. Such racists hated the whites in the

⁶⁰ Ibid, 331.

⁶¹ Ibid, 334-335.

⁶² Ibid, 334-335.

movement even more than the blacks. White supporters were traitors, or perhaps worse, “masterminds of the cause.”⁶³ One of them fractured Rev. James Reeb’s skull with a baseball bat. Reeb died two days later, and the news of his death inspired even more people to come to Selma. Four Klansmen were charged with Reeb’s murder, including Elmer Cook, who had racked up twenty six assault charges in twenty years. Judge James Hare presided over the trial. In his opening remarks, Hare said, “Many self-anointed saints took it upon themselves to come here and help us solve our problems. But integration will solve no social problem....”⁶⁴ In December 1965, an all-white, all-male jury found the Klansmen not guilty.

Eight days after the march, on March 15, 1965, seventy million Americans watched President Johnson address the voting rights movement in a televised speech. Johnson recognized that “what happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America.” He called for Congress to pass the voting rights act with “no delay, no hesitation, no compromise.” He ended the speech by quoting the words of the movement’s anthem: “We shall overcome.”⁶⁵ John Lewis watched the speech with King in Selma, recalling it was the only time he ever saw King cry.⁶⁶ Mayor Joseph Smitherman felt differently; he remembered “it was like you’d been stuck by a dagger in your heart.” James Forman was also unimpressed, and said that Johnson had “spoiled a good song that day.”⁶⁷ Two days later Judge Frank Johnson granted the injunction for the march.

The SCLC leaders immediately began planning for the fifty-four mile march to Montgomery. There were “thousands of details” to attend to: mobilizing thousands of people, mapping the route, and securing supplies, including tents, blankets, walkie-talkies, and flashlights. Local women worked around the clock preparing sandwiches and hot meals for the marchers. Ministers delivered food to the campsites every night. Doctors and nurses came in from around the country to provide medical care. Security was a major concern, especially through neighboring “Bloody Lowndes” County. When Governor Wallace refused to spend state money to protect the marchers, President Johnson

⁶³ Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, 311.

⁶⁴ Mary Stanton, *From Selma to Sorrow: The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 48.

⁶⁵ Garrow, *Protest at Selma*, 106-108.

⁶⁶ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 339.

⁶⁷ Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, 257.

sent four thousand Alabama National Guardsmen, U.S. Army troops, FBI agents, and U.S. marshals.

On Sunday morning, March 21, over three thousand protestors set out toward the Edmund Pettus Bridge. SCLC leaders and national activists made up the first row: Dr. King, Coretta King, John Lewis, Hosea Williams, Andrew Young, A. Philip Randolph, Ralph Abernathy, and Dick Gregory. Next were the local people “who brought about the historic day,” including Amelia Boynton, Marie Foster, F.D. Reese, and hundreds of ordinary men, women, and children. Behind them, Lewis remembered that thousands of “people from all walks of life, from all parts of the country, black, white, Asian, Native American, walked with us.”⁶⁸ They marched seven miles the first day before camping at David Hill’s farm in Dallas County. Hill was one of several black landowners who let the marchers camp on their property, despite the risk of retaliation. In Lowndes County, convenience store owner Rosa Steele lent her land to the cause. She said she was not afraid, “I’ve lived my three score and ten.”⁶⁹ The marchers met many supporters in Lowndes County, as many blacks came out to Highway 80 to cheer them on or offer them a cold drink. Some of them even joined the marchers. Whites retaliated against many of the supporters, including Rosa Steele. Vendors refused to sell her goods for her store in an unsuccessful attempt to put her out of business. SNCC’s Bob Mants helped organize a boycott against the vendors, and they began selling to Steele again.⁷⁰

Not everyone who came out to see the marchers cheered them on. Some whites stood on the roadside to taunt the marchers, but most just shouted at them as they drove by on the highway. One night, bricks were thrown into a campsite in Lowndes County, injuring several protestors. But other than a few minor incidents, violence was minimal under the heavy police presence. The weather proved to be an enemy to the marchers. It was cold in Selma that March, and the temperature was close to freezing many nights. On Tuesday, it rained all day, turning the route into a muddy mess. Marchers used the mud to cool the blisters on their feet. John Lewis remembered that “no one complained. No one got tired.”⁷¹ On Wednesday night, they stopped at the City of St. Jude, a small religious community six miles west of Montgomery. Over twenty thousand people joined the

⁶⁸ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 343.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 344.

⁷⁰ Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, 261-262.

⁷¹ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 444.

marchers in celebrating at an outdoor concert featuring the movement's celebrity supporters, including Sammy Davis Jr., Joan Baez, Dick Gregory, and Peter, Paul, and Mary.⁷²

By Thursday, March 25, the crowd had grown to twenty-five thousand for the last leg of the journey to Montgomery. DCVL president F.D. Reese joined King at the head of the march, along with Mrs. King, Ralph and Juanita Abernathy, Rosa Parks, and Amelia Boynton. Governor Wallace did not greet the marchers when they arrived at the state capitol. Instead, he hid in his office, peeking through the blinds to see the crowd. Several leaders spoke to the marchers, including Fred Shuttlesworth, Jim Bevel, and John Lewis. Martin Luther King gave one of his most memorable speeches, letting the protestors know that the time for the voting rights act was soon. "How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever."⁷³

That night, Viola Liuzzo made several trips along Highway 80, driving protestors back to Selma. Viola Liuzzo was a white woman who left her husband and five children in Detroit to join the march after seeing the Bloody Sunday attack on television. On her way back to Montgomery, a group of Klansmen spotted Liuzzo and her passenger Leroy Moton, a black teenager. The Klansmen, including Gary Thomas Rowe, who was also an FBI informant, pursued Liuzzo's Oldsmobile in a high speed chase through Lowndes County. After about twenty miles, they pulled alongside the Oldsmobile and shot her in the head, as she hummed "We Shall Overcome." Liuzzo was killed instantly, but Moton survived. The car crashed and Moton played dead to trick the Klansmen who inspected the wreck. Rowe identified the shooter as Collie LeRoy Wilkins, and the trial began in May.⁷⁴

President Johnson denounced Liuzzo's murder at the hands of "the enemies of justice," and called for Congress to pass the voting rights act soon. Governor Wallace blamed Liuzzo's murder on the marchers' "chanting, maligning, slandering, and libeling the people of this state. I think the people of our state were greatly restrained."⁷⁵ Liuzzo was vilified in the press and during the trial, with accusations ranging from promiscuity to mental illness. Wilkins' defense attorney, Matt Murphy, blamed Liuzzo for her own death for being in the company of a black man. The all-white, male jury acquitted Wilkins. Liuzzo biographer Mary Stanton suggests an FBI cover up in her book

⁷² Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, 262.

⁷³ Ibid, 262-263.

⁷⁴ Stanton, *From Selma to Sorron*, 41-55.

⁷⁵ Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, 269.

From Selma to Sorrow.⁷⁶ Three Klansmen would eventually be tried for her murder, but none were convicted.

Congress debated the Voting Rights Act of 1965 throughout the summer, and finally passed it on August 4. In a televised ceremony two days later, President Johnson signed the act into law, declaring it “one of the most monumental laws in the entire history of American freedom.”⁷⁷ The Voting Rights Act addressed many of the barriers to black enfranchisement, including mandating federal oversight of local elections and banning literacy tests and poll taxes. But the law did not provide full political equality, as African Americans now faced new battles for enfranchisement. According to J. L. Chestnut, “King often said, ‘The vote is not the ball game, but it gets you inside the ballpark.’ That’s where we were at the end of 1965. We had gotten into the ballpark. Now we had to learn to play the game.”⁷⁸

Historiography of the Selma to Montgomery March

Historians have studied the voting rights movement in Selma from a variety of perspectives, from the federal and local policies that affected voter registration, to the local activists and the national players. The scholarship presents the varying degrees of white resistance, and the divisions among the black community and its leaders. Historians examine the many political, economic, and social effects of the movement, highlighting that the results stretched farther than the city limits of Selma but to the rest of the Black Belt as well. Most of the scholarly literature traces the aftermath of the movement, and assesses the success of the Voting Rights Act in establishing political equality for African Americans.

One of the first comprehensive works on the Selma movement David Garrow’s *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* reflects the historiographical trends of the late 1970s, the civil rights movement from the perspective of national leaders and federal policies. As the book’s title, and the historian’s other works, suggest the focus of the account is King. Garrow does include other SCLC leaders in his narrative, but the Dallas County Voters’ League is not discussed in detail. According to Garrow, King developed his nonviolent philosophy during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, but by ten years later, his strategy had evolved to coercive

⁷⁶ Stanton, *From Selma to Sorrow*, 182-213.

⁷⁷ Garrow, *Protest at Selma*, 122-132.

⁷⁸ Chestnut, *Black In Selma*, 233-235.

nonviolence. King saw how Birmingham's volatile Bull Connor attracted the attention of the national media, and saw the same potential in Selma's Jim Clark. The SCLC's more aggressive tactics proved successful, and with Clark's crazy antics on display on television and in newspapers across the country, support poured into Selma from all over the country.

His thorough account traces the evolution of several federal laws, discussing how each one was developed and how it was enforced. Garrow highlights the segregationist tactics of Judges Daniel Thomas and James Hare in their interpretation of each act, and in turn, the federal government's efforts to strengthen the subsequent law. Garrow also points out that the events of Bloody Sunday did not cause President Johnson to draft a voting rights act. Johnson had been working on one, but felt it was too soon to introduce after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in July. He did not plan to introduce it until 1966, but the Selma movement made it happen sooner than expected, and also increased congressional support for the act.

J. L. Chestnut, Jr. presents his story as a black attorney in the Selma movement in *Black in Selma: The Uncommon Life of J. L. Chestnut, Jr.* As a lawyer, Chestnut interacted with many whites on a daily basis at the Dallas County Courthouse, and his account offers much insight into the South's complex race relationships. He describes how he maintained working relationships with even the most segregationist white officials, while participating in the voting rights movement. Chestnut says "white Southerners have always had warm feelings, even a kind of love, for black individuals while having a morbid fear, even hatred of blacks as a group."⁷⁹ Chestnut reveals divisions in the black community, from the preachers who helped maintain the status quo to the conflicts between the voters' league, SNCC, and the SCLC. He presents fair and insightful commentary on many leaders' personalities and actions, including F.D. Reese and Mayor Joseph Smitherman.

Chestnut's colorful narrative traces the long version of the civil rights movement from 1930 through 1990. He discusses how his childhood experiences affected his adult views on race, including the influence of John Shields, his high school civics teacher. Shields taught Chestnut "that segregation was not natural. It was not a system ordained by God or established in nature."⁸⁰ Shields was the first black in Chestnut's life to challenge him to question the system of segregation. Chestnut also sheds light on a previously untouched chapter of Selma's history, the late 1970s and

⁷⁹ Chestnut, *Black In Selma*, 181-182.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 46.

1980s. He illuminates the ongoing struggle for political equality through civil rights lawsuits, protests, and the participation of blacks in the city government process.

In his 1998 autobiography, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, John Lewis details his involvement in the civil rights movement, including such events as the 1958 Nashville sit-ins and the Freedom Rides in 1961. As both the chairman of SNCC and an unwavering supporter of Martin Luther King, Lewis presents a unique account of the internal conflicts within SNCC, and also between the SCLC and SNCC. SNCC members became increasingly disillusioned by their experiences in the movement, including the 1961 Freedom Rides and the Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964. Many members began to reject the nonviolent philosophy in favor of a more militant and separatist approach. According to Lewis, “Something was born in Selma during the course of that year, but something died there, too. The road of nonviolence had essentially run out.”⁸¹

Lewis offers much needed insight into the day-to-day activities of the protests and his relationships with the national and local leaders, as well as the foot soldiers. He demonstrates that the participation of the “plain folks” led to the success of the movement. Lewis remained committed to SNCC’s idea of the beloved community, and describes “the incredible, and overwhelming, sense of communing” he felt during the Selma to Montgomery March. He provides an insider’s view into the movement, including its changing strategies, the varying levels of resistance and support, and the protestors’ experiences, including jail conditions and the events of Bloody Sunday. Lewis’ work is one of the few that discusses the planning of and the events during the Selma to Montgomery march, including the nighttime activities at the campsites. According to Lewis, the first night of the march, “the marchers made the most of their evening together. They clapped hands, built huge fires, sang and soaked in that Freedom High until they finally fell asleep.”⁸²

Finally, J. Mills Thornton’s *Dividing Lines* provides a detailed narrative of the conditions in Selma leading up to and after the Selma to Montgomery March. But as his focus is on the intricacies of municipal politics, he has largely ignored the actual fifty-four mile march. There is only one paragraph out of over one hundred and fifty pages that discusses the event. Nonetheless, the book clearly demonstrates the complexity of race relations in Selma throughout the twentieth century. Like Chestnut, he explores the results of the Voting Rights Act well into the 1980s, and even the

⁸¹ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 347.

⁸² *Ibid*, 343.

1990s. Thornton's work acts as an important balance for Chestnut's insider account. Both narratives provide the foundation for a new chapter of Selma's race relations history, part of which includes the National Voting Rights Museum.

National Voting Rights Museum History

In 1974, Charles E. Fager wrote the first book-length history of the voting rights movement in *Selma 1965: The March that Changed the South*. A white former SCLC member, Fager spent the night in the Selma Jail with Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy in 1965. Besides this claim to fame, the account of Fager's involvement in the movement has been tucked away in a footnote.⁸³ A modern reader's first clue of the author's perspective comes through former Sheriff Wilson Baker's endorsement as "a fair account of the civil rights movement in Selma in 1965." Among other things, Fager's narrative suffers from a lack of available sources at the time. As the scholarship of the movement has evolved, *Selma 1965* is of little value in presenting an accurate account of the movement. However, when Maurice Halbwachs' thesis on historical memory is applied, the book becomes a useful source for the time period it was produced.⁸⁴ In its portrayal of the past, *Selma 1965* documents the white moderate perspective of the early 1970s, when the first commemorations of the movement took place.

In what Thornton calls "distinctly romantic" portrayal of Selma, Fager describes how blacks and whites in Selma "rubbed elbows" before the "defiant young organizers" of SNCC came in and got the black community riled up. Sheriff Clark is the ultimate villain, hated by not only blacks, but "whites of breeding and influence."⁸⁵ According to Fager, most whites in Selma were not racists; they just wanted race relations to return to the days before the movement, as they had been "peaceful for over one hundred and fifty years."⁸⁶ Perhaps not surprisingly, the account is littered with Civil War references that serve as nostalgic reminders of a more civilized time, when

⁸³ According to J. Mills Thornton, Fager was part of a faction of SCLC members that felt that black leadership should be handed over to the poor, not the Dallas County Voter League's middle class blacks. Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 691, fn.151.

⁸⁴ Maurice Halbwachs was the first to argue that "the past is a social construction mainly, if not wholly, shaped by the concerns of the present." Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 24.

⁸⁵ Charles E. Fager, *Selma 1965: The Movement that Changed the South* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 15-18.

⁸⁶ Fager, *Selma 1965*, 13.

paternalistic whites controlled Selma's political and economic systems in the best interest of the blacks. Yet he notes the current atmosphere in Selma in the early 1970s as proof of the civil rights movement's success, and that a "remarkable degree of reconciliation in Selma" has occurred.⁸⁷

Fager largely bases his assessment on the fact that by 1973, Selma's schools had been "fully and peacefully desegregated." Fager doesn't have the story quite right. Just as they did all over the South when forced to integrate, the majority of Selma's white students fled from the public schools to two newly-built private academies in Dallas County. By 1973, African Americans made up 70% of the student body, but had no representation on the city council-appointed school board. The public schools, and the rest of Selma, were making progress towards equal rights, but the freedom struggle was far from over. In Selma, it seemed that at once, everything and nothing had changed.

In the early 1970s, most of the movement's key players were still around. In fact, many of them would never leave Selma. Joseph Smitherman was still the mayor. According to J.L. Chestnut, Smitherman's moderate approach, as it always had been, was "if you give a little, you won't have to give a lot."⁸⁸ He remained a segregationist, but now he needed black votes to stay in office. He began making more significant improvements, including integrating the police force and appointing black moderates to public office.⁸⁹ In addition to the mayor's appointees, elected black officials participated in the city government for the first time since Reconstruction. Their election, however, might not have occurred without the efforts of attorney J. L. Chestnut. The Voting Rights Act helped to improve political equality, but voter registration proved to be the first of many battles for full black enfranchisement. Believing that "you changed the system through the system," Chestnut continued to file civil rights lawsuits.⁹⁰ In the early 1970s, he threatened to file one against the city council if they chose the at-large election alternative over election by districts. The city council decided to go to districts, and five of Selma's districts elected blacks in 1972. In his 1990 autobiography *Black in Selma*, Chestnut remembered that episodes like this were "typical of Selma's racial politics. Almost every step of progress for black people require either a confrontation – a lawsuit, a boycott, a march, or the threat of them – or a federal regulation requiring black participation as a condition for receiving money. Very little happened voluntarily."⁹¹ Chestnut's

⁸⁸ Chestnut, *Black In Selma*, 260.

⁸⁹ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 497-499, 531-533.

⁹⁰ Chestnut, *Black In Selma*, 192, 259-260.

memory of Selma's politics in 1972 reflects the racial tension in 1989, when his law firm became involved in a major civil rights protest. Regardless of Chestnut's bias, his description would continue to apply for decades, and perhaps still does today.

Before filing the city council lawsuit in 1972, Chestnut partnered with a young couple, Henry "Hank" and Rose Sanders, to form Chestnut, Sanders, and Sanders, the only black law firm in the Black Belt.⁹² The Sanderses were not Selma natives, and had not participated in its voting rights movement. But both had felt the sting of discrimination, and fought it in their own ways. According to Hank, he "overcame the twin obstacles of poverty and racism" during his childhood in Baldwin County in southwest Alabama to graduate from Harvard Law School.⁹³ Rose grew up in North Carolina, and did not fully engage in civil rights activism until her Harvard days, where she began demonstrating for more black administrators and professors to be hired in the largely white university. Hank and Rose married soon after graduating in the late 1960s, and spent a year on fellowship at a university in Nigeria. The couple returned stateside in 1971 to follow Hank's childhood dream of becoming a lawyer in his home state. In deciding where in Alabama to live, Hank felt the young lawyers could be of service to the African Americans in the Black Belt, and wanted to settle in Selma. Rose was reluctant. She had visited her uncle in Selma during the 1950s and 1960s and had some experiences in Selma "that were not at all positive," Hank later recalled. Striking a compromise, she agreed to stay in Selma for five years.⁹⁴

Chestnut felt that to succeed, the civil rights movement needed both aggressive and calm leaders. Hosea Williams threatening to boycott and march allowed Andrew Young to negotiate with white leaders. According to Chestnut, the Sanderses also employed polarizing roles in their civil rights activism.⁹⁵ Hank Sanders was the quiet, behind-the-scenes director type. In 1983, he was elected to the Alabama State Senate, the first African American to represent Selma in state government since Reconstruction. Rose Sanders, on the other hand, assumed the aggressive, outspoken role. Chestnut recalled that her confrontational style "ruffled feathers not only in white but in black Selma." Rose became one of the black community's most prominent, and most vocal, activists. She formed pre-school and after school programs, an organization for black women, and

⁹¹ Ibid, 268.

⁹² Ibid, 252.

⁹³ Hank Sanders, *Death of a Fat Man* (Conyers, GA: Imani Way Enterprises, 2004).

⁹⁴ Hank Sanders, "Selma just pulled at my heart strings," *Selma Times-Journal*, 6 April 2012.

⁹⁵ Chestnut, *Black In Selma*, 257.

hosted an annual Kwanzaa celebration. Rose's main passion was educating African American youth, particularly about voting rights history. She hoped to inspire black pride and activism by teaching children about "Selma's heroes."⁹⁶ Rose Sanders would soon become synonymous with civil rights, and racial tension, in Selma.

While Rose Sanders promoted Selma's civil rights legacy, Mayor Smitherman and other city leaders began to tout Selma's Civil War heritage. The Black Belt has always been one of the poorest regions in the country, but Selma was dealt a major blow with the closing of Craig Air Force Base in 1977. Selma officials hoped to tap into the growing heritage tourism industry by promoting their Civil War history and antebellum mansions. The first wave of tourists came in 1986 for a reenactment of the Battle of Selma. With help from the city, the Kiwanis Club sponsored the annual event. It proved to be a popular tourist draw, attracting thousands of people each year. But, the Battle of Selma was not the city's first reenactment. Though the city leaders did not promote it, the black community held a reenactment of the Selma to Montgomery March in 1972. March veterans John Lewis, Julian Bond, and F.D. Reese organized the first march celebration, but it was only held occasionally thereafter. In the late 1980s, John Lewis and SCLC leader Joseph Lowery began planning for the march's 25th anniversary. With the help of the Selma to Montgomery March Anniversary Committee, they organized a dramatic event, complete with smoke bombs to simulate the tear gas. Mayor Smitherman supported the reenactment, and attempted to form a city committee to help with the planning.⁹⁷ However, many blacks questioned his motives. Hank Sanders accused him of using the march as a public relations ploy to improve the city's image, calling it "a struggle over who will own this bit of history." In the end, it was an all-black committee that planned the reenactment.⁹⁸ The racial tension between city leaders and black activists in the march planning was part of a larger conflict in Selma that had been brewing for several months. Just shy of the march's twenty-fifth anniversary, Selma witnessed intense protests reminiscent of those in the 1960s.

In 1987, the Selma school board hired its first African American superintendent, Dr. Norwood Roussell. The new superintendent immediately earned the suspicions of blacks when he hired additional white teachers and became the first black member of Selma's Rotary Club. Roussell's popularity with the white leaders soon faded, however, after he implemented operational

⁹⁶ Ibid, 251-258.

⁹⁷ Glenn T. Eskew, "Memorializing the Movement: The Struggle to Build Civil Rights Museums in the South," in *Warm Ashes*, 363-364.

⁹⁸ Ronald Smothers, "A Selma March Relives Those First Steps of '65," *New York Times*, 5 March 1990.

changes to the Selma school system, including changing the grouping of students by ability. Many blacks, including Rose Sanders, viewed the ability groupings as a discriminatory tool that created legally segregated schools. Sanders' view of the groupings might have also been affected by her daughter Malieka's placement in the middle, not highest, group. Despite the superintendent's favorable reviews from a black citizens committee in February 1989, the school board voted not to renew Roussell's contract in December. As had often been the case with the school board, the decision to fire him was split along racial lines, with a vote of 6-5. Roussell was vocal about his dismissal, calling the white criticism of his "dictatorial" style "simply a misinterpretation by whites here of black leadership."⁹⁹ Not all African Americans appreciated his no-nonsense personality, but most agreed that he was an effective leader. Sanders commented that although she felt Roussell favored whites, at least he had done more for blacks than the previous superintendents.¹⁰⁰ His firing angered many in the black community. Much like they did in Selma twenty-five years earlier, black leaders organized direct action campaigns in the hopes of gaining racial equality.

Backed by Chestnut and her husband, Rose led a series of one-day school boycotts in January 1990. The black school board members had resigned in protest, and racial tension grew when the all-white board attempted to resolve the situation. In early February, when they failed to negotiate a compromise, black students and adults occupied a school cafeteria in protest.¹⁰¹ Joseph Lowery urged the protestors to remember Bloody Sunday and "remain nonviolent."¹⁰² City leaders closed the schools for five days and called in state troopers and the National Guard to preserve order. School resumed on February 13 with law enforcement in place, but by then a third of the white student body had transferred to private schools. Though the situation at the schools had calmed down, demonstrations at city hall continued through March, only stopping in time for the march reenactment.¹⁰³

Indeed, with the anniversary approaching, Hank Sanders was concerned that the demonstrations would keep people from attending the ceremonies, denying any attempt to gain publicity from his protest efforts. "Some people have said that we were trying to enhance the

⁹⁹ Ronald Smothers, "25 Years Later, Racial Tensions Revive in Selma," *New York Times*, 11 February 1990.

¹⁰⁰ Ronald Smothers, "Few Neutral on Selma School Chief," *New York Times*, 14 February 1990.

¹⁰¹ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 550-551.

¹⁰² Ronald Smothers, "25 Years Later, Racial Tensions Revive in Selma," *New York Times*, 11 February 1990.

¹⁰³ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 550-551.

commemoration effort with this protest, but that is not true," he said.¹⁰⁴ Rose Sanders also had her detractors. She mobilized a portion of the black community with the dramatic boycott, but her tactics also alienated many black and white civil rights supporters. While the protests succeeded in eradicating the ability groupings, they also scared most of the remaining whites out of the public schools, reversing the partially integrated school system back into an almost completely segregated one. Selma High School student turned activist Meria Carstarphen wondered just how real the issue was. She later recalled, "It's still confusing to me. Let's face it, this community can't go forward if we're forever polarized."¹⁰⁵

On March 5, 1990, amidst intense racial turmoil, five thousand people gathered at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge to commemorate the Selma to Montgomery March. Many of the participants had been there twenty-five years earlier, including Amelia Boynton-Robinson, Joseph Lowery, John Lewis, Hosea Williams, and Jesse Jackson. March veteran Major R. Owens saw the commemoration as "a chance to recharge our batteries and get on to finish [King's] justice agenda."¹⁰⁶ Though most whites stayed away from the reenactment, Smitherman attended. He did not cross the bridge, but he did dedicate an Alabama Historical Commission marker to the march. Though they put their differences aside for that day, the months of demonstrations prior to the event had damaged the already fragile relationship between black and white leaders. In particular, the friction between the Smitherman and the Sanders would only grow deeper in the coming years. However, the bridge crossing march celebration unified both blacks and whites on one important point: heritage tourism could be big business for Selma.

The march commemoration got the ball rolling for physical memorials to the voting rights movement in the city. Just after the reenactment, Representative John Lewis pushed through Congress the Selma to Montgomery National Trail Study Act, to see if the 54-mile stretch that the marchers traveled in 1965 qualified as a National Historic Trail. Lewis and other activists, led by Rose and Hank Sanders, began planning another memorial in Selma. Through her involvement in the school boycott, Rose realized that the school curriculum and the local history museum did not address the struggle in Selma. Many students did not know much about the civil rights movement, especially about the events that happened in their own city. The foot soldiers and activists decided to

¹⁰⁴ Ronald Smothers, "25 Years Later, Racial Tensions Revive in Selma," *New York Times*, 11 February 1990.

¹⁰⁵ Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising: How the South Is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture* (Boston: Mariner's Books, 1997), 77-78.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

establish a voting rights museum “to offer America and the world the opportunity to learn the lessons of the past to assure we will not make the same mistakes in the 21st century and beyond.”¹⁰⁷

In 1992, the National Voting Rights Museum opened on Water Avenue, near the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge and around the corner from the Dallas County Courthouse. Its building had an ironic history, first as an antebellum cotton warehouse, then as a Citizens’ Council hangout in the 1960s. The museum’s first board featured local foot soldiers and nationally known activists, including Lowery, Lewis, Coretta Scott King, SNCC veteran James Orange, SCLC leader C.T. Vivian, Hank Sanders, Marie Foster, and Albert Turner. Its initial funding came from private donations and gift shop sales. The exhibits were created by volunteers and focused on the local aspects of the movement. Longtime museum employee Jo Ann Bland later recalled that the museum’s vision had always been to give “children, especially African American youth, a ‘proper’ understanding of their past.”¹⁰⁸ The displays presented topics including Reconstruction-era African American politicians, martyrs of the movement, and women’s suffrage. In 1993, the museum began sponsoring the annual march reenactment, turning it into a weekend-long festival with food, crafts, concerts, parades, and even a beauty pageant. The “Bridge Crossing Jubilee” drew thousands of tourists to Selma, and the event generated revenue for both the city and the museum.¹⁰⁹ In addition to the money gained through the Jubilee, the museum would soon find a new funding source in the government.

Prompted by Selma’s chamber of commerce, the city began to provide the museum \$10,000 in annual funding. The museum benefited from free advertising in the state guide to black heritage sites. Hank Sanders’ 1994 appointment to the Finance and Taxation Education Fund Committee in Alabama Senate also brought the museum a big payday. As the chair of the Finance and Taxation Education Fund, he appropriated nearly \$2 million to educational projects that he and his wife were closely associated with in Selma. The National Voting Rights Museum received around \$150,000 from the appropriations, making up half of their operating budget. The city stopped providing money for the museum when the state funding became available.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Eskew, “Memorializing the Movement,” 365.

¹⁰⁸ Dwyer, “Memorial Landscapes Dedicated to the Civil Rights Movement,” (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kentucky, 2000), 124.

¹⁰⁹ Eskew, “Memorializing the Movement,” 365, and Dwyer, “Memorial Landscapes,” 74-76.

¹¹⁰ Dwyer, “Memorial Landscapes,” 77.

Selma leaders' stopped backing the NVRM financially, but they did not completely abandon it. The city needed the museum for their new heritage tourism campaign, "Civil War, civil rights." The success of the Battle of Selma reenactment and the Jubilee allowed city officials to realize the economic potential the two eras held. As to be expected, these two racially-charged stories rarely crossed, at least not intentionally. Whites interpreted the Civil War, while blacks commemorated the civil rights movement. Though the histories were told separately, the eras and their advocates would overlap, forming a complicated, and often tumultuous, relationship. This era of heritage tourism indicated a new, and still unfolding, chapter in the race relations story in the Black Belt.

As Selma began to realize the economic potential of its dual heritage, state and federal leaders took notice, too. In 1995, the National Parks Service designated the marchers' route the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail, opening the door for federal funding for historic preservation in the area. Old foes Congressman Lewis and Mayor Smitherman put their differences aside to promote Selma on television shows, including "Oprah." They even carried the Olympic torch over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1996, all the while bringing positive, national attention to the Black Belt. The Selma-Dallas County Chamber of Commerce issued a new brochure outlining the city's historic sites that dripped in symbolism. The front cover of the "Civil War to Civil Rights" guide combined the Battle of Selma reenactment and the Bridge Crossing Jubilee, featuring an image of civil rights protesters marching past Civil War re-enactors under a canopy of oak trees lined with Spanish moss. The chamber director pointed out that both whites and blacks approved of the promotion of Selma's shared legacy. All residents, regardless of race, certainly appreciated the \$5 million that heritage tourism brought to the city in 1997.¹¹¹

Despite the improving economy, trouble between the Sanderses and Smitherman flared up again that year. The mayor held two news conferences "to show the public that our tax dollars are going to private groups the Sanderses created."¹¹² Around the same time, pamphlets entitled "R.O.S.E., Robbing Our Schools Everyday," began circulating throughout Dallas County. In October, the Alabama Ethics Commission investigated the charges and unanimously cleared Senator Sanders of any wrongdoing. Rose stated after the ethics decision, "I don't know if these vicious attacks by Smitherman would have carried any weight if I were not an African American person."¹¹³

¹¹¹ Glenn T. Eskew, "From Civil War to Civil Rights: Selling Alabama as Heritage Tourism," *International Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Administration* (Volume 2, Numbers 3/4 2001): 211-212.

¹¹² Alvin Benn, "Sanders to appeal dismissal of libel lawsuit," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 26 March 1999.

The Sanderses filed libel lawsuits against both the mayor and Dallas County Board of Education member Cecil Williamson. The defendants argued that they had not libeled anyone; they simply informed the public of the facts. In March 1999, a Mobile Circuit Judge ruled that the plaintiffs failed to prove malicious intent by the officials. The Sanderses appealed the ruling to the Alabama Supreme Court.¹¹⁴ While they waited for the trial to begin, the Sanderses and Smitherman once again put their differences out of the public view for the annual Bridge Crossing Jubilee.

Since the museum began hosting the Jubilee in 1993, the event had becoming increasingly popular and profitable. Thousands of participants, many of them foot soldiers, joined politicians, celebrities, and other activists in commemorating the Selma to Montgomery March every year. In 2000, the Jubilee attracted a very important guest: Bill Clinton. The President's visit once again put Selma in the national spotlight, and everyone wanted to look good. The city contributed \$25,000 to the event, despite the fact that they had not provided any funding since the museum began collecting state funds.¹¹⁵ On March 5, Clinton arrived in Selma and toured the NVRM before delivering his speech to an audience of 20,000 at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. He first thanked Senator and Rose Sanders "for the work they are doing with this magnificent Voting Rights Museum." In his moving speech, Clinton emphasized the importance of Selma in the civil rights movement and U.S. History. He highlighted that while important victories had been won in the black freedom struggle, as long as people, including the ones in Selma, "have not participated in our economic prosperity, we have a bridge to cross."¹¹⁶ As expected, the visit garnered Selma and the NVRM national attention. It also brought promises of federal funding for the museum. Despite his tension with the Sanderses, Smitherman seemed supportive of the new potential funding for the museum, saying that they deserved it. He also echoed Clinton's sentiments toward the Sanderses, and museum tour guide Sam Walker, commenting that they "are to be commended for the way they put the program together."¹¹⁷

¹¹³ *Selma Times Journal*, 4 July 2000.

¹¹⁴ Alvin Benn, "Sanders to appeal dismissal of libel lawsuit," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 26 March 1999.

¹¹⁵ Alvin Benn, "President tours 'unique' memorial," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 7 March 2000.

¹¹⁶ William J. Clinton, "Remarks on the 35th Anniversary of the 1965 Voting Rights March in Selma, Alabama." *Weekly Compilation Of Presidential Documents* 36, no. 10 (March 13, 2000): 470. MasterFILE Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed September 14, 2012).

¹¹⁷ Alvin Benn, "President tours 'unique' memorial," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 7 March 2000.

Praise for the NVRM soon turned to criticism, when the museum encouraged black voters to vote in the September 2000 election with a \$1,000 cash prize. The museum had also used this tactic in the last election, giving a brand new Jeep Grand Cherokee as a reward for voting in 1998. But unlike the Jeep giveaway, this was in a landmark election year. Activist and museum tour guide Sam Walker defended the contest to critics, saying “anytime you inspire others to go to the polls and exercise their right to vote, you are a winner.”¹¹⁸ Seeking his 10th term as mayor, Joseph Smitherman faced African American businessman James Perkins, Jr., in the city election. In his attempt to appeal to black voters, Smitherman used his old segregationist tactic of fear. He told a reporter, “You need white inclusion, you need diversity in the city government. Let's face it, the whites have the money, the white business people. They tend to pull back when it goes all black. So that's what I'm trying to get across to the blacks.”¹¹⁹ Perkins beat Smitherman by 1,300 votes in the heated election, becoming Selma’s first black mayor. Invoking Martin Luther King, Jr.’s sentiment after the bus boycott, Perkins said in his victory speech that the battle was not between blacks and whites, but “faith and fear. Faith won this campaign.”¹²⁰ And although the NVRM was pleased with Perkins’ election, their contest did not affect the outcome, only encouraging about one hundred voters.¹²¹

The NVRM received even more criticism in the next election, when they offered another cash prize to encourage voting. In 2002, an anonymous donor offered \$10,000 for the contest. Participants earned a ticket for a raffle by answering three trivia questions. They also had to be “historically excluded from voting in Alabama in the last fifty years.” Selma City Attorney Henry Pitts denounced the contest as a “thinly disguised attempt to purchase votes.”¹²² Pitts was a defense attorney for Yusuf Salaam in a case involving voter fraud in the June House District 67 race. His opponent in the election, LaTosha Brown alleged voter irregularities and filed a complaint with the State Democratic Executive Committee. When they upheld the election results, Brown brought a

¹¹⁸ The raffle had a choice of prizes, \$1,000 cash or dinner with Johnnie Cochran. Though she “loved Johnnie Cochran,” a Selma nurse chose the money over the dinner. Alvin Benn, “Election contest winner picks cash,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 23 September 2000.

¹¹⁹ David Firestone, “Old Southern Strategy Faces Test in Selma Vote,” *New York Times*, 10 September 2000.

¹²⁰ David Firestone, “Making History at the Polls, Selma Elects a Black Mayor,” *New York Times*, 13 September 2000.

¹²¹ Alvin Benn, “Election contest winner picks cash,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 23 September 2000.

¹²² Henry Pitts succeeded his father, McLean Pitts, in the city attorney position. During the voting rights movement, the elder Pitts was a staunch segregationist. Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 495, 548, and Alvin Benn, “Museum offers cash for voting,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 1 November 2002.

suit against Salaam in circuit court. Rose Sanders represented Brown in the case. In response to Pitts' criticism of the NVRM's voting promotion, Sanders denied the allegations, commenting, "No one seems to be upset about the illegalities that took place in [the June] election. The only time people get upset is when something encourages African-American voters."¹²³ Brown eventually dropped the suit and Salaam later won the general election. Again, the contest had no effect on the outcome of the election, but the election resulted in a "whopping" 52% turnout. NVRM Director Jo Ann Bland counted voter awareness as one the museum's goals and was pleased with the record turnout. The election held another victory for the museum; Hank Sanders won his 6th term in the Senate.¹²⁴

Amidst the voting controversy, racial tensions continued to flare up in a battle involving the NVRM and a Civil War monument. Just days after James Perkins was sworn in as mayor in October 2000, the Friends of Forrest Committee erected a monument in honor of Confederate General and Ku Klux Klan leader, Nathan Bedford Forrest. Before leaving office, Smitherman had authorized the placement of the memorial on city property, in a predominantly black neighborhood. The monument would stand in front of an historic building bearing Smitherman's name. Most critics were upset with such a controversial memorial on public property. If the monument was to be erected, museum spokesman Sam Walker suggested it should include "the other side of the story," as well. Smitherman's longtime friend and Dallas County Board of Education member Cecil Williamson chaired the monument committee. He responded to Walker's suggestion by saying that only Forrest's military history would be noted. Williamson added that the Civil War monument would be a great tourist attraction.¹²⁵ A small group of black activists, many associated with the NVRM, protested at the dedication ceremony. They heckled the participants, while Walker held a dummy wearing a replica KKK uniform. The police came to keep order, and although no one was arrested, the confrontation ended in a truly emblematic scene. As black protestors began to sing "We Shall Overcome," the much larger white group drowned them out singing "Dixie."¹²⁶

Rose Sanders did not attend the dedication ceremony, but she soon became involved in the controversy. After Sanders and other black activists, including museum director Jo Ann Bland,

¹²³ Dale James, "Museum defends voting promotion," *Selma Times-Journal*, 4 November 2002.

¹²⁴ "Voter turnout here encouraging," *Selma Times-Journal*, 6 November 2002.

¹²⁵ Alvin Benn, "Blacks protest at ceremony," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 8 October 2000 and "City shells out \$52K in Forrest lawsuit," *Selma Times-Journal*, 18 October 2002.

¹²⁶ Alvin Benn, "Blacks protest at ceremony," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 8 October 2000.

appealed to Mayor Perkins, he issued an order demanding the statue be moved to private property. However, the city council overruled him and it remained in front of the Smitherman building. In December, vandals attacked the monument, dumping trash and throwing a cinder block at it.¹²⁷ Later that month, vandals also struck the NVRM. In two separate break-ins, historic photos from Bloody Sunday were ripped in two and a hood was removed from the KKK mannequin. In January, the FBI investigated the vandalism at the museum as a “civil rights violation.” The museum obtained new photographs and replaced the hood.¹²⁸

A few weeks later, Rose Sanders and local SCLC president, Clarence Williams, diverted a Martin Luther King Day march off its intended route, leading a crowd of nearly two hundred to the Forrest monument. The group tied a rope around the monument and tried to topple it. Sanders directed them, “Not around the neck. That’s what they did to us.” The rope broke and the statue did not fall. Once again the FBI investigated the incident, this time focusing on Sanders and Williams.¹²⁹ Nothing came of either investigation, but the vandalism stopped. Finally in March, the city council voted to move the Forrest monument. White city councilwoman Jean Martin broke ranks with the other white members, giving the black members a majority. Martin explained her vote as “out of conscience and for the betterment of Selma,” but she received harassing phone calls and emails from whites who called her a traitor. The City paid for the relocation of the monument to a privately owned Confederate site. In March 2001, the statue was moved to the Old Live Oak cemetery where it remained relatively unharmed for over a decade.¹³⁰

In the midst of the debate about a private monument’s display on public grounds, Senator Sanders was thrust into the spotlight for using public funds on private property. Sanders requested assistance from the Alabama Department of Transportation in building access steps for a voting rights park that was being constructed on private property that the Sanderses had recently deeded to the museum. Hank Sanders indicated that most of the project was being funded by the NVRM, and that the steps were being constructed on state property.¹³¹ Cecil Williamson accused the couple of

¹²⁷ Alvin Benn, “Bust targeted again,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 16 January 2001.

¹²⁸ Alvin Benn, “FBI examines museum thefts,” 6 January 2001.

¹²⁹ Alvin Benn, “Bust targeted again,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 16 January 2001.

¹³⁰ Alvin Benn, “Forrest monument taken to new location unharmed,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 1 March 2001.

¹³¹ Alvin Benn, “River property in private hands,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 27 February 2001 and Alvin Benn, “Sanders defends park project,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 28 February 2001.

wasting taxpayers' money on a private project. Civil rights veteran and NVRM board member C. T. Vivian dismissed Williamson's accusations as "petty racist attacks." Rose pointed out the irony in the situation, "He doesn't see the value of this park, but will then celebrate a mass murderer."¹³²

The next NVRM project would prove in to be even more divisive. In June 2001, the museum announced their plans to open a Civil War and slavery museum. The Sanderses cited the economic benefits of a new museum, noting that it fit in perfectly with Selma's dual Civil War-civil rights heritage tourism campaign. The museum would tell the story of "the Civil War period left out of history books," informing visitors of the plight of African Americans, said Sam Walker. The NVRM made it clear that the museum would be funded through private donations, and that no state funds would be used. Not surprisingly, Williamson was less than enthusiastic about the project. The county official claimed that the museum was "another part of Rose's plan to make Selma Zimbabwe-on-the-Alabama."¹³³

Before the museum opened, Rose decided to get a jump start on educating children on slavery. With permission from the School Superintendent, she distributed 3,000 controversial pamphlets that detailed the horrors of slavery to elementary school students. The stories of slave torture and death, including lynchings, frightened some children, and the superintendent was forced to issue a public apology. School board members expressed their frustrations, saying that instances like these only divide the community. Sanders remained unapologetic "for telling the truth."¹³⁴ Spurred by the slavery debate and the superintendent's apology, Rose "could no longer bear to have a slave's name." In May, she legally changed her name to Faya Ora Rose Toure. Her new moniker included family and African names, with Faya meaning "one has rediscovered herself."¹³⁵

The Civil War and Slavery Museum opened on June 19, 2002, two blocks away from the NVRM's main facility on Water Avenue. The June 19th opening coincided with Juneteenth, the oldest celebration of U.S. emancipation, marking the 137th anniversary of the state of Texas' announcement of the abolition of slavery. The opening was part of the museum's first annual Juneteenth Festival, a four-day event that featured a flea market and a film festival. Faya Rose Toure felt that it was appropriate for the NVRM to open a slavery branch because the voting rights

¹³² Alvin Benn, "Senator deeds property to Voting Rights Museum," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 7 March 2001.

¹³³ Alvin Benn, "Voting Rights Museum plans Civil War branch," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 21 June 2001.

¹³⁴ Alvin Benn, "Faults apology," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 26 February 2002.

¹³⁵ Alvin Benn, "Sanders sheds name," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 25 May 2002.

struggle represented in the main museum is part of the vestiges of slavery. According to Museum Director Vickie Donaldson, the slavery museum would fill a gap in the interpretation in Selma's antebellum sites, where only one side of the story was told.

The slavery museum was unique in that they would present the perspectives of both "those enslaved and those who did the enslaving." Donaldson hoped to convey a positive experience.¹³⁶ Though many in the community were not happy about the museum, Donaldson said that they were welcomed by an unlikely supporter, when a white woman from "old Selma" stopped by with a small gift.¹³⁷ At the beginning, the exhibits consisted of a replica slave cabin, old farm implements, and photographs. By 2005, the museum began offering interactive tours. Tour specialist Afriye Wekandodis said the purpose of the tours was to present the truth, "not shaming anyone, not blaming anyone."¹³⁸ The tour took visitors on a simulated journey from Africa, across the Middle Passage, through slavery, and then to freedom. Guides play the role of slave owners, yelling profanities, including the "N" word, at visitors, as they crawl through darkened passages and mount an auction block.¹³⁹ Though the city continued to capitalize on their Civil War civil rights legacy, the Civil War and Slavery museum was not part of the promotion. After the start of the interactive tours, the museum dropped out of the public spotlight. Presently, there is little information available about the status of the slavery museum. It is no longer listed on the NVRM or the Chamber's website and apparently is open by appointment only.¹⁴⁰

Meanwhile, back at the NVRM, the *Birmingham News* accused Senator Sanders of misusing monies from the Alabama State Education Trust Fund by allocating over \$5 million to organizations run by him and his wife. The allocations included \$1 million in funding to the NVRM since 1996. Sanders maintained his innocence, saying that the museum was justified in receiving state funds as it fulfills an educational mission. He insisted that his support has nothing to do with his involvement in the project, and it was not used to fund payroll of museum employees, including his wife. The accusations led to another senate ethics commission investigation in 2005. Sanders accused

¹³⁶ "Slavery, Civil War Museum opening set," *Selma Times-Journal*, 12 June 2002.

¹³⁷ Alvin Benn, "Tells story of slavery," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 23 June 2002.

¹³⁸ "Slavery program planned," *Selma Times-Journal*, 23 October 2009.

¹³⁹ "Selma Museum visitors can be slave for a day," *Houston Chronicle*, 26 February 2006 <<http://www.chron.com/news/nation-world/article/Selma-museum-visitors-can-be-slaves-for-a-day-1558940.php>> and "Slavery program planned," *Selma Times-Journal*, 23 October 2009.

¹⁴⁰ I asked a staff member at the NVRM about it, and she indicated that I would have to make an appointment.

Williamson of filing the complaint; Williamson called him “a liar.” The senator was found not guilty of the charges the next year.¹⁴¹

Though it had its critics, many people were passionate about the NVRM. Civil rights veteran Sheyann Christburg said, despite its modest size, “it has been one of the major players in relaying black history and civil rights history.”¹⁴² It also counted outspoken employees like Sam Walker and Jo Ann Bland among its supporters. The museum that was started by local veterans and activists continued to be run by them as well. A child of the Selma movement, Museum Director Jo Ann Bland had been involved with the museum since its founding. Carver Boynton, granddaughter of Selma veteran Amelia Boynton, praised Bland, saying she had been “well received by the community.” Bland had “developed a very well-known reputation for her energetic and aggressive style of presenting, which captures the aggression of the movement,” according to Boynton. The museum’s main spokesman and longtime tour guide, Sam Walker, has also been involved since the founding. According to museum patrons, Walker is very knowledgeable of the movement. He has led countless groups of students, teachers, politicians, and the general public through the museum over the years.

The museum also had financial support from government, corporate, and philanthropic organizations. In 2004, the museum received a conservation grant to preserve hundreds of oral history video and audio tapes. The museum had been collecting them since 1989, even before they were officially founded. Alabama Power Company agreed to match the funding. Between the state and corporate funds, the museum garnered more than \$15,000 for the digitization project. In 2006, after the roof on the slavery museum collapsed during a storm, the Freedom Foundation, a Denver-based nonprofit organization, repaired it for them. The Freedom Foundation came to Selma to participate in the urban revitalization that was beginning in the downtown area.¹⁴³ City leaders lent their support to the museum too. Jubilee had become a “major attraction,” said Centre of Commerce official, Lauri Cothran. The Centre expanded its Jubilee advertising campaign, now including both print and cable television ads to promote the event across the Black Belt.

By the mid-2000s, the bridge crossing march drew twenty thousand visitors to Selma every year. The event doubled the city’s sales tax revenue each March. It had an impressive roster of VIP

¹⁴¹ John Davis, “Ethics panel clears senator,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 2 February 2006.

¹⁴² Jannell McGrew, “Selma museum may loose aid,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 13 September 2003.

¹⁴³ “Non-profit has plans for downtown,” *Selma Times Journal*, 2 December 2006.

guests, including John Lewis, Dick Gregory, Harry Belafonte, and Coretta Scott King, who attended every year until her death in 2006. Visitors filled hotel rooms in Selma and as far away as Montgomery and Prattville. They packed the restaurants and shops. And most of them went to the NVRM, according to director Jo Ann Bland.¹⁴⁴ Whites and blacks both benefited from the Jubilee's economic boom for the area. Alabama Tourism Director Lee Sentell urged, "It's not one or the other because everything can generate money for your town."¹⁴⁵ In addition to Jubilee, they hosted other annual events, including the Living Legend Membership Banquet. The banquet serves as a membership drive, while honoring civil rights veterans and activists. Over the years, honorees included F. D. Reese, James Orange, Dick Gregory, and C. T. Vivian.¹⁴⁶ They sponsored annual celebrations in honor of the Voting Rights Act and Juneteenth anniversaries.

The museum continued on with its mission of voting rights education, but this time with events that drew praise, not criticism. In January 2005, they held a reunion to honor veterans of the Teachers' March on the Dallas County Court House. They also partnered with Wallace Community College to organize a civil rights history education seminar. The four-day workshop was designed to teach the history of the movement that was not taught in text books "because a lot is left out of them," said NVRM employee Chantay Smith. The teachers were civil rights veterans and activists, including Amelia Boynton, J. L. Chestnut, Bernard Lafayette, and Hank Sanders.¹⁴⁷ The museum partnered with another Sanders-backed nonprofit to provide housing for over sixty New Orleans evacuees after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The NVRM continued with its controversial voting registration giveaways, but now it had a more educational component. For the 2008 presidential election, they held "Rap the Vote," where young people produced rap songs that encouraged voting rights. The songs were voted on by listeners through the museum's website. The winner received a \$5,000 prize. The museum also gave \$1,000 to the person who could register the most voters. Faya Rose Toure, explained that it was imperative to focus the efforts on young people, "because we have stopped teaching them the vision. We stopped telling them the stories."¹⁴⁸ The NVRM's campaign

¹⁴⁴ "March means tourism boom," *Selma Times-Journal*, 5 March 2004 and "Jubilee organizers confirm celebrity guests." *Selma Times-Journal*, 20 February 2005.

¹⁴⁵ "Tourism leader says Selma has two big draws," *Selma Times-Journal*, 13 April 2009.

¹⁴⁶ "Teachers' march reunion to be held," *Selma Times-Journal*, 19 January 2005.

¹⁴⁷ "Civil rights heros to teach at WCCS," *Selma Times-Journal*, 8 June 2005.

¹⁴⁸ "Rap the vote," *Selma Times-Journal*, 16 October 2008.

in the 2008 election once again had no effect on the outcome of the heated election, as voters turned out in record numbers. The museum was nonetheless pleased with the black voters' participation. The museum was enjoying its most peaceful years, seemingly leaving the past controversies behind them. This period of harmony accompanied an economic boom for both the City and the museum.

Progress was slow on the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail, but had picked up in 2006, with the opening of an interpretive center in Lowndes County. The next center scheduled to be built in Selma would actually be the first on the trail. A third to complete the trail has yet to be built in Montgomery. After Mayor Perkins secured the funding for the construction of the Selma Interpretive Center, the downtown renaissance was officially underway.¹⁴⁹ The NVRM was part of the recently appointed National Historic District on Water Avenue. The designation opened the doors for funding and revitalization plans were soon underway. The Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs teamed up with the city government to make recommendations on potential improvements. The report was financed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Recommended improvements included improved parking, signage for tourists, and streetscape enhancements on Water Avenue. The museum stood to greatly benefit from the project, along with the historic Brown chapel and the Confederate Naval Foundry. The new NPS interpretive center would also be built along Water Avenue, and serve as a focal point of the District.¹⁵⁰

Along with the new construction, the area benefitted from another state-financed heritage tourism advertising campaign. In 2008, Selma received three recognitions on the Alabama Tourism Department's list of "Fifty Things to do for Free." The NVRM charges admission and was not eligible. The three winners though would prove to be an equal mix of Civil War and civil rights history: The Martin Luther King Jr. Street Historic Walking Trail, the old Live Oak Cemetery, home of the Forrest statute, and a joint Civil War and civil rights site tour.¹⁵¹ The NVRM got their state recognition later that year with the inclusion of the Bridge Crossing Jubilee in the Top Ten Events of Alabama list.¹⁵² While heritage tourism in Selma was booming, Museum Director Jo Ann Bland

¹⁴⁹ "Will new Center help the city?" *Selma Times-Journal*, 22 March 2006.

¹⁵⁰ "Plans underway to develop Selma's tourist areas," *Selma Times-Journal*, 11 January 2006.

¹⁵¹ "Selma on state's Top 50 list," *Selma Times-Journal*, 9 July 2008.

¹⁵² "Jubilee name of top events in Alabama," *Selma Times-Journal*, 29 December 2008.

made a career change to become more involved in the growing industry. Bland parted with the museum amicably to become a guide for a specialty tour company of civil rights sites in Selma. She continued to give tours of the NVRM as part of her tour.¹⁵³ The heritage tourism industry soon experience another boost, when the Jubilee was once again thrust into the national spotlight.

Prior to the 2008 election, Democratic presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton attended the 2007 Jubilee festival. On March 4, Obama spoke at a sold out prayer breakfast co-sponsored by the NVRM. Bill Clinton joined his wife in Selma and was inducted into the museum's Hall of Fame.¹⁵⁴ Later in the afternoon, both politicians addressed thousands at two black churches that had been key meeting grounds during the voting rights movement. Senator Clinton spoke at the First Baptist Church, attempting to appeal to voters with a religious speech delivered in gospel-inspired tone that historian Allen Tullos called, "a moment of unintended caricature."¹⁵⁵

Next, Senator Obama addressed the crowd three blocks away at Brown Chapel AME Church. Senator Obama attributed his birth directly to the historic events in Selma, saying that the march paved the way for his parent's interracial marriage. He emphasized the generational shift in the movement, from the "Moses generation" of the civil rights veterans, to the "Joshua generation" of today. He challenged the Joshua generation to act saying, "There are still battles that need to be fought; some rivers need to be crossed."¹⁵⁶ After the speeches, national and local leaders led thousands of participants across the bridge. Linking arms in the front row were Jo Ann Bland with Obama, Hank Sanders next to Hilary Clinton, and Faya Rose Toure in between Bill Clinton and Al Sharpton.¹⁵⁷ Obama returned to Selma in 2008, along with fellow presidential nominee John McCain. Unlike the large crowds the Democratic candidates received, McCain's audience was small, and mostly white. Faya Rose Toure explained to a reporter that "McCain's policies unify us. That's why you don't see black people here."¹⁵⁸

The publicity from Obama's visits coupled with the downtown revitalization brought droves of tourists to Selma. In December 2009, the city recognized the NVRM as one of the most popular

¹⁵³ "Bland saying goodbye," *Selman Times-Journal*, 23 April 2007.

¹⁵⁴ "Sold Out: Obama to speak at Sunday breakfast," *Selma Times-Journal*, 1 March 2007.

¹⁵⁵ Allen Tullos, "Selma Bridge: Always Under Construction," *Southern Spaces*, 28 July 2008.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Patrick Healy and Jeff Zeleney, "Clinton and Obama Unite in Pleas to Blacks," *New York Times*, 5 March 2007.

¹⁵⁸ Tullos, "Selma Bridge."

attractions. Later that same week, the museum won \$450,000 in federal funding as part of a \$2.3 million package for historic preservation in the state. Securing the federal grant was her last task as president of the museum, Toure announced. She continued to be affiliated with the NVRM, but stepped down as its leader. She hoped the museum would continue to grow under new leadership. Despite the success of Selma's tourism ventures, the downtown revitalization was progressing slowly. The museum's building desperately needed repairs and more parking. When their building was deemed unsafe, they decided to abandon their old location.¹⁵⁹

In November 2009, the NVRM moved into an old building, now directly at the foot of the bridge, but on the Montgomery side, in a more industrial part of Selma. Interim Director Olimatta Taal was pleased with the new location, saying that the extra space allowed them to grow and expand their parking lot, which had been a major concern at the downtown location. The grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services allowed them to double their exhibit space and purchase new televisions for the exhibits. The Tuskegee University Archives helped the museum digitize their collections and create in-house documentaries of the voting rights movement in nearby Marion and Lowndes Counties, and in Mississippi. They also hired a new director and curator.¹⁶⁰ The national economic recession and the 2010 Bluewater Horizon Oil Spill did not seem to hurt the museum's visitorship. In fact, the tragedy on the Gulf Coast brought more people to Selma as they no longer wanted to visit the beaches. Selma's Tourism Department launched another marketing campaign, reaching audiences across the region through print and television ads, the Internet, and billboards. The museum had thirty tour bookings in the month of June 2010 alone, compared to the previous June's six tours.¹⁶¹ The new location seemed to signal a new era of financial stability and professionalism for the museum. However, the reality of the situation was quite different.

The additional funding and increased attendance was not enough to keep the museum afloat. According to Olimatta Taal, the museum did not have enough backing from the community and volunteers, and she called for a wider support base. "We need as much community support as possible. We need the world to help Selma and to revitalize it," she said. Interim director Taal left the museum in April 2011. The Board did not renew her contract because of lack of funds. While

¹⁵⁹ "Faya Rose Toure resigns as president of the National Voting Rights Museum," *Selma Times-Journal*, 16 December 2009.

¹⁶⁰ Desiree Taylor, "Family's loss among top stories, Voting Rights Museum gets new building," *The Selma Times Journal*, 29 December 2010.

¹⁶¹ Desiree Taylor, "Selma tourism on the rise," *Selma Times-Journal*, 9 July 2010.

the NVRM had received the large federal grant, that money could not be used on salaries or utility bills. During her tenure with the museum, Taal had implemented many of the digitization projects and “created national museum-standard exhibits.”¹⁶² Kevin Hollis, the curator, served as interim manager, and tried to bring the museum up to professional standards. According to Hollis, “exhibit cases are up to code, protected from UV light and insects.” The museum also created a new website and new galleries, including one devoted to the “Courageous Eight.” Hollis was proud of his work at the NVRM, but could no longer work “without pay or without air conditioning.” He left in September 2011.¹⁶³

The city continues to struggle with Selma’s dual Civil War, civil rights heritage. In March 2012, the monument of Nathan Bedford Forrest was stolen from the Live Oak Cemetery. The Friends of Forrest offered \$20,000 “for the arrest and conviction of person or persons associated with the crime.” The reward was funded in part by the Sons of the Confederate Veterans.¹⁶⁴ With no sign of the missing monument, in August, the Friends of Forrest began building a replacement. The new Forrest statue would be even bigger than the old one, and now surrounded by LED lights and a 24-hour surveillance system. Faya Rose Toure once again led the protests against it saying, “Glorifying Nathan B. Forrest here is like glorifying a Nazi in Germany.” A group picketed the construction site, and the police were called when the protestors laid down in front of the heavy equipment. She pressed assault charges against the site manager when he allegedly pushed her. Toure’s daughter, Malika Sanders-Fortier joined her in the fight against the monument and started an online petition in protest.¹⁶⁵ The city council, now headed by Cecil Williamson, held a public meeting to discuss the monument’s future. Several citizens spoke against the monument, but the real debate is once more about whether the monument is on city property. While the city apparently donated the land to the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1877, there is no proof of the legal completion of the transaction. Construction of the monument has been halted pending the decision of the case in court.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Desiree Taylor, “Taal leaving Voting Rights Museum,” *Selma Times-Journal*, 7 April 2011.

¹⁶³ Desiree Taylor, “Museum to lose another curator,” *Selma Times-Journal*, 3 September 2011.

¹⁶⁴ Tim Reeves, “\$20K reward offered for bust,” *Selma Times-Journal*, 28 March 2012.

¹⁶⁵ Robbie Brown, “Bust of Civil War General Stirs Trouble in Alabama,” *New York Times*, 24 August 2012.

¹⁶⁶ Tim Reeves, “Forrest monument a ongoing battle,” *Selma Times-Journal*, 5 September 2012.

Though Selma continues to have its Civil War-civil rights controversies, the City still promotes both legacies. The city's community development committee began planning for a Civil War trail in 2011. One of the stops along the trail highlights a freed slave, Benjamin Sterling Turner, who owned a livery and was a city official during Reconstruction.¹⁶⁷ Perhaps this new trail is a positive, albeit small, sign of the state of heritage tourism in Selma today. Even if only for economic benefit, at least now the city is attempting to present the black and white stories together.

In the past year, the NVRM has remained active in some pursuits, despite their staffing and financial problems. In December 2011, they opened a new exhibit on Alabama's new controversial immigration law. They also inducted a new class into their Foot Soldiers Hall of Fame and held their annual membership banquet. Despite this recent activity, it appears that the NVRM is not open on a regular basis. Several local residents and museum professionals in the area gave a variety of responses when asked about limited access to the museum. Some indicated that the museum's main operating season is January to March, and that they do not keep the hours posted on their website during the rest of the year. Several expressed that their attempts to contact the museum had gone unanswered. A city public relations employee hastily commented that the NVRM is not run by the city and that they do not have any information about it. The most helpful response to this visitor came, not surprisingly, from Selma's tourism department. An employee gave me the home phone number of a museum staff member. Unfortunately, the staff member did not return my calls.

Exhibit Review

Unlike the newer museums studied in this project, descriptions of the exhibits at the NVRM have been published. In addition to staff members' descriptions available in the *Selma Times-Journal*, civil rights historian and geographer Owen J. Dwyer includes a brief exhibit review of the NVRM in his 2000 dissertation, "Memorial Landscapes Dedicated to the Civil Rights Movement." These descriptions are included in the following exhibit review where applicable.

Traveling west from Montgomery on Highway 80 to Selma, one cannot help but feel the Black Belt's civil rights history. Excitement builds as one travels along the same highway that the marchers did, past the commemorative signs marking where they camped, and finally reaching its climax where the events of Bloody Sunday unfolded: the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The museum is located at the foot of the bridge before crossing over into Selma. Perhaps other visitors feel as this one did, and cannot wait to traverse the iconic bridge. I passed the museum, drove over it, then

¹⁶⁷ Rick Couch, "Civil War monuments take next step," *Selma Times-Journal*, 20 May 2011.

turned around and came back. The museum occupies a building previously used as retail space. Its name “The National Voting Rights Museum and Institute II” is displayed on a red awning overhanging the tinted windows across the front of the building.



Figure 2.1: National Voting Rights Museum Exterior

After walking through the modest lobby, the visitor enters the museum. The first gallery is mainly devoted to the Selma to Montgomery March, with interpretive panels, artifacts, photographs, and a television covering all four walls, and with kiosks scattered throughout the center of the room. This exhibit sets the tone for the rest of the museum: many fantastic artifacts and photographs displayed in an unsystematic and often chaotic manner, with interpretation ranging from adequate to nonexistent. The exhibits are presented thematically, but there is no organization to the themes. Visitors move from the galleries dedicated to contemporary issues into historic topics, making for a confusing journey through the museum.

In fairness, the NVRM continues to suffer from financial problems and lack of a professional staff. It is understandable, then, that the museum lacks professionally-designed and fabricated exhibits or high-tech interactives. However, it does not take money or a museum studies degree to implement exhibits that are presented in a clear and logical format. It is likely that interpretive concerns are addressed in a guided tour. Newspaper and personal accounts indicate that Sam Walker is a very effective tour guide. I tried to schedule a tour, and left several phone messages with no reply. I arrived at the museum at 10:30 am, thirty minutes after they opened, and upon entering was told that they were about to close. I was rushed through the exhibits without the assistance of a tour guide.

In the first gallery, the far back wall serves as sort of an orientation exhibit for the Selma to Montgomery march. Two text panels on the wall briefly explain the catalyst for the march, Jimmie Lee Jackson's murder by a state trooper, and the events of the three marches. Over fifty photographs of the march are displayed on the wall and on a freestanding rack next to it. These photos of Bloody Sunday and the subsequent marches, especially of the peaceful protestors being attacked by state and local police, are some of the most compelling in American history.



Figure 2.2: Bloody Sunday Exhibit

In 2000, Owen Dwyer described the photographs as “yellowed and brittle.”¹⁶⁸ As a result of the digitization grant, scanned reproductions of the photos are now displayed in attractive, matching frames. For a visitor familiar with the history, the photos speak for themselves. But visitors without a background understanding of the events, the lack of labels or dates might prove confusing.

Moving clockwise around the room, the visitor encounters three exhibits mixed together on one large wall. Near the ceiling is the “Foot Soldier Hall of Fame,” adorned with thirty-nine names of local people who participated in the marches or other demonstrations in Selma. Next is an image-rich timeline of voting rights and civil rights milestones that extends across the wall. The timeline starts with “1776, The Declaration of Independence is signed by wealthy white men.” The rest of the events are a mix of nationally and locally significant “firsts,” legal decisions, and turning points in the movement. It is important to note that the timeline is inclusive of legal efforts to disfranchise many cultures in the United States, including Mexican, Chinese, and Native American. Though this is the only effort of this kind in the museum, it should be noted that this was the only mention of any other cultures in any of the museums included in this paper. Of the 232 year span the timeline covers, one-quarter of it is devoted to the years 1963 to 1971, which are concentrated mostly on events in Selma. The third exhibit on the wall is a series of text blocks both below and above the timeline that first details the teachers’ march in Selma in January 1965, then, out of sequence, the May 1963 children’s march in Birmingham.

Continuing clockwise, the visitor next encounters another multipurpose exhibit, this time with the history of Selma laid out in three text blocks above several terrific objects related to the voting rights movement. These one-of-a-kind artifacts include clothing and shoes worn by activists on Bloody Sunday and Sheriff Jim Clark’s badge, shoes, billy clubs, and a cattle prod. The displays have labels, but one is puzzled by the interpretation offered for Sheriff Clark. He is noted for being one of the officials responsible for the arrests of hundreds of protestors. There is no mention of how he used the electric cattle prod and billy clubs on the peaceful protestors. This lack of historical context is confusing for visitors who are not familiar with the history, and a missed interpretive opportunity to discuss the severity of white resistance.

¹⁶⁸ Dwyer, “Memorial Landscapes,” 126.



Figure 2.3: Selma to Montgomery March Exhibit

The far left wall contains the first of several television screens that were not turned on during my visit and the first “Foot Soldier” tribute to members of the Foot Soldier’s Hall of Fame. Plaster cast footprints are displayed on plaques throughout the museum. In 2000, Dwyer noted that the footprint display included “written testimonials from the marchers.” Today, the footprints are accompanied by a brief statement of the honoree’s involvement in the movement. Though the footprints themselves constitute a compelling exhibit, the statements from the marchers themselves, as opposed to third-person statements would have been much more effective. In the center of the room, five kiosks detail the accomplishments of the Dallas County Voters League’s “Courageous Eight.” The professionally fabricated interpretive panels prominently feature a photograph of each veteran and a biographical sketch. The eye-catching exhibit has benefitted from the grants the

museum has received since 2000. Dwyer described this exhibit as being presented on large sheets of posterboard.¹⁶⁹

The visitor travels through an almost empty room with only one text panel on the wall. The next room is devoted to the nonviolent philosophy encouraged by Martin Luther King, Jr. during much of his leadership of the movement. Text panels display biographical sketches of leaders Mohandas Gandhi, Mother Theresa, and King and characteristics which the leaders have in common, including their humanitarianism and the Nobel Peace Prize. Though Gandhi was nominated several times, he did not actually win the Nobel Peace Prize. This inaccuracy and several others throughout the museum are inexcusable; especially considering that even a quick Internet search reveals the correct fact. However, the room does contain a trustworthy exhibit opposite the biographies. King's nonviolent principles are displayed as bullet points in a full wall graphic flanked by photos of King and Gandhi. Many civil rights museums focus on the philosophy of nonviolence, but none offer such a detailed explanation. The inclusion of the principles really spells out what the philosophy means, and could be used as a discussion points during group tours.

Turning the corner, the visitor stumbles upon the white supremacy exhibit, literally coming face to face with an artifact case containing a mannequin wearing a Ku Klux Klan robe and hood, and holding a whip. Another case displays more KKK memorabilia, including a burned cross, an application for membership, a noose, and "Klan art" of a hooded member riding a horse through a field, painted onto a large saw blade. Several interesting interpretive choices have been made here. While these attention-grabbing artifacts demonstrate the extreme level of violence at the hands of white supremacists, the label only contains a general description of the history of the KKK and mentions they were responsible for four children's deaths in the Birmingham church bombing. It does not delve into local KKK-related events, including the death of Viola Liuzzo during the march. The display also leaves out other forms of white resistance, including the prevalence of the White Citizens Council in Selma. Moreover, this exhibit is the only real inclusion of a white perspective in the entire museum, save for the brief remarks about white martyrs on the timeline and Sheriff Clark's artifact case. There is no discussion of white city officials, white moderates, or white supporters (albeit few) in the museum. The names and roles of key players in the voting rights movement are completely left out: Mayor Joe Smitherman, Public Safety Commissioner Wilson Baker, the federal judges, or even President Lyndon B. Johnson. An accurate account of the events leading up to, during, or after the marches cannot be presented without these key players' inclusion.

¹⁶⁹ Dwyer, "Memorial Landscapes," 125-126.

Perhaps it is not surprising for Selma’s civil rights museum not to include the white perspective, as the civil war museums in Selma generally exclude the black perspective. The last display in this area is also puzzling, a full-wall banner of the verbatim text of King’s “I Have a Dream Speech.”

The next three rooms follow the example of the previous exhibits in their lack of interpretation. The Reconstruction gallery highlights the election of black legislators and the formation of Black Codes in the late 19th century. The exhibit mainly consists of photographs of African American politicians on the wall. A small room devoted to Jesse Jackson presents his life history through text panels, photographs, and magazine covers. Another small room contains two graphic panels, a photograph of Malcolm X and King and a copy of the speech Malcolm X gave in Selma in February 1965. A simple label would provide the historical context necessary to explain the significance of this photo. Malcolm X only met King on one occasion, in Washington in 1964, as depicted in the photo. However, when Malcolm X came to Selma, King was in jail and they did not see each other again.



Figure 2.4: Reconstruction Gallery

The visitor next moves onto an exhibit that more clearly relates to the movement in Selma, the Church Gallery. Decorated with crosses, a pulpit, and a pew, the room highlights three churches as key locations for mass meetings and nonviolent protest training. Rose Sanders described a similar exhibit at the Water Avenue location in 2000. A “Catholic room” in the old museum depicted the Good Samaritan Hospital, where fifty blacks received treatment on Bloody Sunday. The Roman Catholic priests who ran the hospital helped to install the exhibit, including a bed and medical equipment. Sanders appreciated their efforts, to “make the room look as authentic as possible.”¹⁷⁰ Those artifacts, and any interpretation of the hospital, are not found in the new church gallery. In its place are interpretive panels that only discuss the role of religion from an African American point of view.



Figure 2.5: Church Gallery

¹⁷⁰ Alvin Benn, “President tours ‘unique’ memorial,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 7 March 2000.

The visitor then walks past two water fountains labeled “white” and “colored” to a wall exhibit that details the local movements in Greenwood, Mississippi, St. Augustine, Florida, and Albany, Georgia. Though this section is grounded in more academic scholarship than the others, it lacks the rich photographic elements found elsewhere. It is literally a wall of words that most casual visitors might not bother to read. Moving past a large gallery devoted to museum donors, the visitor enters the Legal Gallery. Text sections on the wall near the ceiling list landmark court cases in several categories, including free speech, racial segregation, and voting rights. Curiously, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 are included in the “others” category. The display lacks any sort of historical context as no details or even dates are offered for the decisions. Another peculiar section in the gallery relates to Thurgood Marshall. First, a photograph of “Supreme Justice Thurgood Marshall” is prominently displayed on the *Brown vs. Board* panel. This inaccuracy is just one of several missed interpretive opportunities. Marshall was the plaintiffs’ lawyer in the case, not a Justice. He did become the first African American Supreme Court Justice, but not until 1967, thirteen years later. He also founded the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and, in addition to *Brown*, won several key Supreme Court decisions related to civil rights. None of this information is included in the exhibit. Instead his eulogy is included, and while it relays nice sentiments, it does not present any meaningful interpretation.

Two rooms adjacent to the Legal Gallery focus on topics related to the modern voting rights movement, and once again are completely devoid of any real information. The first gallery is probably the exhibit that has previously been described as the “Woman’s Suffrage” exhibit. There is a large photomural of women at the polls, waiting in line to vote. There are other photos of women, but they are shown without labels and do not convey interpretation of the plight of women voters. Another panel in the room contains the verbatim text of Martin Luther King’s 1967 “Give Us the Ballot” speech. Perhaps this is used as a point on a tour to discuss the ongoing struggle of black voters even after the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, a casual visitor might not make this connection. This room also contains a unique artifact, a voting booth. It is so antiquated and different from any of the machines used today that many visitors, especially children, likely do not know what it is. Again, there is no label to explain it.



Figure 2.6: Jail Exhibit

The next room features one of the better executed exhibit designs, a jail cell complete with bars on the walls, a metal toilet/sink combination, and cot with a thin, bare mattress. Arrest records and mug shots offer clues as to what the exhibit is about, but there is no real content delivered about the mass arrests in 1964-1965, and the general police brutality in Selma both before and after the movement. The room also contains one of the few personal stories from a foot soldier. Towanner Hinkle's account of his time in jail as a sixteen-year old finally provides some insight into the actual experiences of those involved in the movement.

One of the largest exhibits in the museum is the Obama Gallery. Not surprisingly, there is little interpretation about his role in civil rights today. Instead, a long wall is adorned with

photographs, newspapers, and inspirational quotes. A small freestanding panel in the center of the room notes biographical facts and key legislative victories, including the Affordable Health Care Act and the repeal of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Act. The last gallery also deals with a modern topic, the annual Bridge Crossing Jubilee. Several photographs of past Jubilee festivals are displayed on the walls, and some include identification labels. Though some photos emphasize the sheer number of people who attend the reenactment, the main focus is on the well-known national figures that have attended the celebration over the years.



Figure 2.7: Bridge Crossing Jubilee Exhibit

In 2000, Dwyer described the last exhibit as consisting of a mirror with the words “You Can Make History Too” displayed above it. The current exhibit, although attractive in its presentation, does not imply the personal message of the previous display. Both the Obama and Jubilee exhibits represent the past’s connection to the present, a message that most civil rights museums strive to

convey in an effort to remain relevant to its visitors. Indeed, memorials “remain vital only if the living can shift their meaning and emotional power into possibilities for an impending future.”¹⁷¹ Despite their interpretive shortcomings, the NVRM’s galleries demonstrate that the civil rights movement continues today, and therefore is pertinent to its visitors.

It is disappointing that a museum that was founded by foot soldiers and honors them through their hall of fame, tells so few stories about them. The most regrettable exclusion in the museum is the “I Was There Wall.” Dwyer describes a previous exhibit where veterans of the movement wrote their own stories on notes and posted them on a wall. According to Dwyer, over two hundred accounts detailed participants’ experiences, including marchers, Selma residents, and even state troopers.¹⁷² This compelling exhibit is no longer shown in the museum. Also noticeably missing from the galleries was any evidence of the hundreds of oral history interviews that the museum has collected. Perhaps they are shown on the video screens that were not turned on during my visit. Or perhaps they are highlighted on a guided tour. Nonetheless, these rich sources could have been utilized in many of the displays. Most of the exhibits would be enhanced if they included veterans’ personal stories. They could be handled in the same low-tech, low-budget way that the jail exhibit’s short text panel that offers Towanner Hinkle’s account. It is unfortunate that the federal and state funding that the museum has gained went to picture frames, television screens, and exhibit cases, instead of actual interpretation of artifacts, photographs, and exhibits. The museum holds many unrealized opportunities to connect with the visitor. On many levels, the content of the displays is not based on academic scholarship.

Instead of consulting the scholarly literature, the museum’s founders drew from a closer source: their own experiences. Most of the people associated with the museum are Selma veterans: Joanne Bland, J. L. Chestnut, Marie Foster, Amelia Boynton, C. T. Vivian, to name a few. Bland, the museum’s longtime curator was a child in the Selma movement. Frye Gaillard recounted two interviews with Bland in his book *Cradle of Freedom*. As an eleven year old girl, Bland saw the troopers rushing her on the Edmund Pettus Bridge as men with “horrible faces, like monsters almost, as they galloped through a cloud that was making people choke.” Later, she found out about the gas masks and the tear gas.¹⁷³ Bland’s childhood consisted of “disappointing encounters with white people,”

¹⁷¹ Allen Tullos, “Selma Bridge: Always Under Construction,” *Southern Spaces*, 28 July 2008.

¹⁷² Dwyer, “Memorial Landscapes,” 125.

¹⁷³ Gaillard, *Cradle of Freedom*, 244.

with one exception; Jonathan Daniels, a white minister who was killed in Lowndes County in 1965. Bland recalled, “Jonathan was white and he was nice.”¹⁷⁴ Every museum curator brings their own perspective to the exhibits they create. Bland’s experiences are visible in so many ways, from the large display of Bloody Sunday photos to the only inclusion of whites in the museum.

Though she is not a veteran of the 1960s Selma movement, Faya Rose Toure could be considered a veteran of Selma’s long civil rights movement. Her influence is obvious throughout the museum. Toure’s experiences in Selma over the last forty years impact the museum’s content: white resistance to black freedom, the importance of black enfranchisement, the election of President Obama, and success of the Bridge Crossing Jubilee. Her experiences outside of the museum with Mayor Joe Smitherman, Councilman Cecil Williamson, and many others, have also shaped the exhibits, and perhaps partly explain why the white perspective has been intentionally left out. The museum shows Selma’s past racial tension, but the current state of race relations is clearly evident, as well. The exhibits’ main message, like Toure’s own message, is one of black empowerment both in the past and in the present. The museum is the voice of Faya Rose Toure, and perhaps others in the black community who are not as vocal as she is.

Despite its lack of attention to the published accounts of the march, many visitors feel the museum presents the “real” history of the voting rights movement in Selma. Visitors continually praise the museum’s folksy atmosphere and tour guides, especially Sam Walker. They report that their level of personal engagement in the content is much higher at the NVRM as opposed to larger facilities, like the National Civil Rights Museum or the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. The museum and the Bridge Crossing Jubilee play a leading role in not only the historical memory of the Selma movement, but also in the city’s economy. In 2010, the NVRM hosted almost 50,000 visitors, making it the second most visited civil rights museum in Alabama, second only to the BCRI. Regardless of whether people approve of the museum’s exhibits or its founders, it continues to be a major player in interpreting the black freedom struggle in Alabama.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 279.

CHAPTER THREE

LOWNDES COUNTY INTERPRETIVE CENTER

It is the mission of the National Park Service to preserve and interpret the history of the sites associated with the 1965 voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama which resulted in the signing of the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965.

Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail Mission ¹

There were ugly, shameful, painful stories, but we will tell them.

NPS Official on Selma to Montgomery Trail ²

The Lowndes County Voting Rights Movement

In the 1960s, Selma remained the economic heart of the surrounding agricultural counties, including Lowndes County, its neighbor to the east. Just as had happened in Selma during the civil rights movement, Lowndes County also experienced an escalating cycle of black acts of defiance and white acts of resistance. But the intensity and violence of the movement in Lowndes County makes the Selma story seem like a pretty, “city-fied” version of the freedom struggle in the Black Belt. The Lowndes County movement largely began after the events in Selma, when support for the nonviolent philosophy waned, and blacks began employing more militant tactics to obtain equality. Lowndes County saw more extreme actions from both races, including the emergence of revolutionary political strategies. All the while, “Bloody Lowndes” lived up to its nickname, with the most severe violence and racial terrorism in the South.

After Reconstruction ended, white leaders enforced strict segregation throughout the South, but Lowndes County’s brand of discrimination proved to be particularly brutal. Plantation owners and law enforcement engaged in extralegal violence to control the county’s black residents, including lynchings, beatings, and other forms of terror. The extreme white supremacist tactics forced blacks to only engage in subtle acts of protest against their unequal treatment; popular tactics included arson on white farms and working mules to death.³ By 1935, a small group of Lowndes County residents mustered the courage for a visible protest during a sharecroppers strike. With assistance from the national Share Croppers Union (SCU), local tenant farmers demanded improved working

¹ Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail Mission, NPS website, <<http://www.nps.gov/semo/historyculture/index.htm>>.

² NPS official Brenda Mobley Caldwell as quoted in Alvin Benn, “Trail fans assess progress,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 25 September 2002.

³ Hasan Jeffries, “Freedom Politics: Transcending Civil Rights in Lowndes County, Alabama,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 2002), 17-24.

and living conditions, including a livable wage of \$1 per one hundred bales of cotton picked. On Monday, August 19, the first day of the strike, Sheriff Bob Woodruff shot strike leader Willie Witcher and beat him unconscious in front of other farmers to serve as a warning to stop the protest. That night, plantation owners and sheriff's deputies began a terror campaign of beating farmers and threatening them with shotguns, but the strike continued for nearly a week. On Thursday, whites whipped Annie May Meriwether, a local SCU leader, and hanged her until she lost consciousness, before finally letting her go. A mob of landowners and sheriff's deputies also targeted Meriwether's husband, Jim Press, severely beating him before shooting him to death. Black farmers endured several days of torture, but Press' murder forced them to abandon their strike. They returned to work for \$.40 per one hundred bales of cotton. The short-lived protest reminded African Americans that Lowndes County was far too violent to openly challenge white power. Except for a few locals who supported the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and later the Selma voter registration efforts, there was no real movement activity in Lowndes County.⁴

According to historian Hasan Jeffries, African Americans in the Black Belt led "bearable and dignified lives," in spite of the violence, poverty, and political exclusion. Blacks distanced themselves from whites, forming their own social institutions and living in their own communities. They gathered with family and friends in their own homes, businesses, and churches. J. L. Chestnut later recalled that conversations amongst blacks frequently revolved around hunting and sports, and when black men and woman met separately, sex was a popular topic. In any case, "public issues of the day" were not often discussed.⁵ But as the Selma movement gained momentum, a handful of Lowndes County residents started talking about a voting rights campaign in their own county. In January 1965, the Daylight Savings Club, a benevolent society, began planning a voter registration attempt. The group's leader and only registered voter, John Hulett, instructed the group on the voter registration process. Hulett was a Lowndes County native who registered in Birmingham when he moved there after graduating high school. By late February, they decided the time was right and scheduled the attempt for the next registration day, March 1.⁶

In the days before the registration attempt, news spread throughout Lowndes County's black and white communities. John Hulett ran into a family friend at a store in White Hall and was able to

⁴ Jeffries, "Freedom Politics," 25-31.

⁵ J. L. Chestnut, *Black in Selma*, 131.

⁶ Jeffries, "Freedom Politics," 35-37.

rally a few more protestors. The white community also caught wind of the registration plan. On Sunday, February 28, dozens of armed whites stormed Mt. Carmel Baptist Church in Gordonsville during the deacon board meeting. They accused Rev. Lorenzo Harrison, who had participated in the Selma demonstrations, of organizing the registration attempt, and told him to get out of town or he would be killed. The deacons rushed him off to Selma that night, but it did not stop the registration attempt. At eight o'clock Monday morning, thirty nine blacks showed up at the Lowndes County Courthouse. The registrars told the group that they were not taking applications that day, but to submit their names and come back when the office was open again in two weeks. Despite the risk of retaliation, most of the protestors signed their name.⁷

After the March 1 registration attempt, white creditors visited the protestors and threatened severe consequences if the blacks continued to attempt to register. During this same time, the protests and violence in Selma reached fever pitch; state troopers and Sheriff Jim Clark's posse attacked marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7, and white supremacists murdered Rev. James Reeb soon after Bloody Sunday. Meanwhile, the Lowndes County registrars moved their office to the county jail in Haneyville, perhaps the one place blacks feared more than the courthouse. Despite their fear, and the very real risk of retaliation, a group showed up at the jail on March 15. Inside the dark jail, the three registrars took swigs from whiskey bottles and kept their pistols on the table as they processed seventeen applications. Only two successfully registered: Hulett, who was approved because he was already registered, and a blind preacher who answered the questions correctly when they were read to him.⁸

The protestors' lack of success only strengthened their resolve. On March 19, twenty-eight people gathered at an abandoned store just outside of White Hall to plan more registration attempts. The group formed the Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights (LCCMHR) to coordinate a voter registration drive. They appointed temporary officers, opting to hold elections for the offices at the first mass meeting. Before the mass meeting would occur, however, the Lowndes County movement gained much needed momentum when the Selma to Montgomery March passed through the county on March 22 and 23. The severe retaliation risks kept all but a few Lowndes County residents from participating in the march. Local African Americans met the marchers on Highway 80, cheering them on and bringing them cold drinks. Rosa Steele, Mary Gardener, and

⁷ Jeffries, "Freedom Politics," 38-39.

⁸ Ibid, 39-40.

others allowed the marchers to camp on their land, and a few local teenagers snuck into the campsites at night. Lowndes County residents' interactions with the marchers inspired them to fight for their own rights. In turn, SNCC members used the opportunity to make contacts with people for their new campaign in Lowndes County.⁹

As a growing result of tension with the SCLC, SNCC had set their sights on Lowndes County after Martin Luther King's about-face during the march on Turnaround Tuesday. Lowndes County was ideal for SNCC's campaign for several reasons. The rural, poverty stricken landscape and extreme white resistance was similar to where they had campaigned the summer before in the Mississippi Delta. They also hoped to go to a place where they would not face competition from the SCLC. In 1965, the SCLC made two small attempts to organize in Lowndes County, including sending representatives to the LCCMHR's first meeting. But the continued white resistance after the Selma to Montgomery March caused the SCLC to pull out of the Black Belt, and start a new campaign in Chicago. According to SNCC leader Silas Norman, Jr., "the decision that Lowndes County was so bad that nobody would come in there showcasing, that it was only going to be serious work there, and so we would not be bothered, and not be in conflict."¹⁰

SNCC members attended the LCCMHR's first mass meeting on Sunday, March 28, but choose to lay low among the one hundred fifty people in attendance. The gathering also served as a memorial for Viola Liuzzo, a white protestor from Detroit, who was murdered on March 25. The group had a difficult time finding a church to host the meeting due to the risk of bombings and other acts of violence. Rev. R. V. Harrison, whose son Lorenzo Harrison was run off to Selma, agreed to allow the LCCMHR to use Mt. Gilliard Baptist Church. In Lowndes County, and throughout the South, the church was the backbone of the black community. The church's support of the movement gave it the credibility it needed to attract more supporters.¹¹ After the meeting, SNCC members made contact with Hulett and the other leaders to offer their help with the voter registration campaign. The leaders were happy to have assistance, but they knew that Lowndes County was a dangerous place, and they were concerned with the outsiders' ability to commit to a long term project. SNCC assured them they were in it for the long haul, and gained the leaders' trust by remaining true to their organizing philosophy, "helping the locals with that which they wanted

⁹ Ibid, 51-52.

¹⁰ Ibid, 51, 47-55.

¹¹ Ibid, 42-44.

help.” The leaders asked them to distribute leaflets for the next meeting, and they immediately got to work canvassing the county.¹²

The threat of retaliation kept most black residents from even talking to the activists. To connect with the black community, SNCC employed a tactic that proved successful in Mississippi; using children to recruit to their parents and other adults. Stokely Carmichael, Bob Mants, and Judy Richardson handed out leaflets to students at the Lowndes County Training School, the largest black school in the county. Sheriff deputies showed up at the school, and threatened to arrest the protestors. In front of a large crowd of students, Carmichael challenged the officers, telling them that if they were going to arrest him, to go ahead and do it, and stop wasting his time. The officers were dumbfounded by Carmichael’s defiance and told him to wait while they debated whether or not to arrest him. Carmichael replied “when you find out, you come get me,” as he left the school. He later recalled “there’s always a point when there comes a confrontation between a civil rights person and the police, a direct confrontation in front of people. The receptivity of the people will depend on how the confrontation goes.” News of Carmichael’s display of courage in front of the students quickly spread throughout the county. Many residents, especially young people, were inspired by the outsiders’ fearlessness, and found the courage within themselves to join the movement. The confrontation also led the LCCMHR leaders, along with other locals, to trust the outsiders’ commitment to the county.¹³ Bob Mants later recalled that “had it not been for that confrontation at the school, it would have probably been several months later before we actually moved into Lowndes County full-time.”¹⁴

On April 4, five hundred people attended the second mass meeting, and the next week’s meeting attracted one thousand participants. The LCCMHR and SNCC leaders talked about the movement not in terms of political theory, but practical concerns, like running water and educational opportunities. They emphasized that by voting, blacks could change their social and economic situations. On the two registration days later that month, nearly one hundred fifty protestors showed up at the jail to register to vote.¹⁵ Timothy Mays recalled that he was not scared, and he challenged the registrar when she asked him how many bubbles were in a bar of soap: “The

¹² Ibid, 55-57.

¹³ Ibid, 57-59.

¹⁴ NPS Interview with Bob Mants, #15, 8. NPS Interviews available online at <<http://www.nps.gov/hfc/av/semo/docs/>>.

¹⁵ Ibid, 67-68.

answer to the clerk were if you blow the bubbles and I sit and count ‘em I could tell you but if you don’t know, I don’t know. Get a bar of soap and you blow the bubbles and I count ‘em. That’s what I told the clerk and she says you’re a smart nigger, aren’t you. I says well, I went to school, I supposed to be a smart nigger, you know. That’s what my people are sendin’ me to school to for and they continued to do that.”¹⁶ When the results were announced on May 3, only three blacks had qualified. The defeat did not discourage the protestors; instead, it inspired them to work harder. The participants gave testimonials about their experiences at the mass meetings, and helped “the nervous and afraid inch closer to believing that they could shape their own destiny.”¹⁷

Indeed, convincing residents that voting could change their lives, and was worth the risk of white retaliation, was the biggest obstacle in the Lowndes County movement. SNCC workers and LCCMHR leaders canvassed the county to educate black residents and it often took three or more visits to get locals to commit to coming to a meeting or a voter registration attempt.¹⁸ In addition to the reluctant participants, Bob Mants remembered that organizing in Lowndes County was particularly challenging due to its large size at over seven hundred square miles. The lack of cars and two-way radios for communication made the process even more difficult. Organizers and residents also had to contend with the constant threat of violence. There was “always clear and present danger... the danger seen and unseen on these plantations, and up and down these long dusty roads,” Mants recalled.¹⁹

The multiple visits to local farms and homes resulted in SNCC members being absorbed into the black community. Most residents invited the organizers into their homes for meals, and SNCC members worked alongside black farmers in the fields. These rituals allowed them to really understand the locals’ plight, and they developed strong bonds with many families.²⁰ Jonathan Jackson, a teenager in an activist family, convinced his parents to let SNCC members use one of their vacant houses, giving them an official home in the county. Though the movement continued to gain supporters, the majority of blacks in Lowndes County did not join in the protest efforts. The small group of independently wealthy blacks stayed away because they did not want to associate with

¹⁶ NPS Interview with Timothy Mays, #12, 12-13.

¹⁷ Jeffries, “Freedom Politics,” 69.

¹⁸ Ibid, 66-74.

¹⁹ NPS Interview with Bob Mants, #15, 6.

²⁰ Jeffries, 64-66.

the poorer and less educated movement participants. The working poor, most of whom were tenant farmers, did not want to jeopardize their jobs and homes.²¹ Though they were not as poor, schoolteachers also chose not to participate as they “were just as vulnerable as sharecroppers since their jobs were in the hands of the white school board,” J. L. Chestnut later remembered.²²

Even more frightening than the economic reprisals were the threats of physical violence, especially in Fort Deposit, Lowndes County’s largest town. Stokely Carmichael noted that Fort Deposit’s “Klan had been intimidating people,” including SNCC workers who had been run out of town.²³ “Racial terrorism had paralyzed [most of] the black residents,” and the overwhelming majority did not visibly support the movement. Bessie McMeans, however, was one of the few blacks who refused to be scared. After attending mass meetings and hosting activists at her home, McMeans became a target for violence. She dealt with the threat like many Lowndes County residents, by arming herself. According to Jeffries, “nonviolence was a non-issue. It simply did not resonate with local people.” Most black homes were well armed, and even children received weapons training for hunting.²⁴ When whites took violence to the extreme, blacks did not hesitate to protect themselves. McMeans moved her mattress to her living room, where she surrounded herself with an arsenal of guns and threatened to “shoot the sheets” off any Klansman who might try to hurt her family.²⁵

On August 14, 1965, a group of twenty four, young protestors and SNCC members were arrested for picketing in Fort Deposit. The group was taken to jail in Haneyville, and then abruptly released on August 20 when county officials learned that the LCCMHR was threatening a federal lawsuit. Some members went in search of telephones to call family and friends to come pick them up. Another group, including two white ministers, Jonathan Daniels and Richard Morrisroe, and two young black women, Ruby Sales and Joyce Bailey, went to a convenience store across the street from the jail to buy snacks and cold drinks.²⁶ Tom Coleman, a Lowndes County posseman, was enraged by the protestors’ release from jail, and he took his shotgun down to the store in hopes of

²¹ Jeffries, “Freedom Politics,” 72-73.

²² Chestnut, *Black in Selma*, 119.

²³ Stokely Carmichael as quoted in Jeffries, “Freedom Politics,” 79.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 199.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 80.

encountering them. As Sales walked in the door, Coleman pointed his shotgun at her, saying, “Get off this property, or I’ll blow your god damn heads off, you sons of bitches.”²⁷ Daniels stepped in front of Sales, and asked Coleman if he was threatening them. As most of the protestors watched from across the street, Coleman shot Daniels in the chest, and shot Morrisroe as he fled the scene. Morrisroe survived, but Daniels died at the scene. In September 1966, an all white jury acquitted Coleman of manslaughter charges for Daniels’ death, and he was never charged with attempting to kill Morrisroe.²⁸

Unlike in Selma, the violence in Lowndes County did not receive media attention and therefore, did not spark national outrage as Bloody Sunday and Rev. James Reeb’s murder had created. Though the American public was largely unaware of the severe conditions in the Black Belt, the Justice Department kept a close eye on voter discrimination. By August, over one thousand people had applied for registration. Blacks won a small victory when the threat of a federal lawsuit forced the registrars to drop the literacy test and process more applications. Despite the relaxed requirements, only two hundred were able to register. On August 6, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The law authorized federal examiners to oversee the registration process in counties that had less than fifty percent of the voting age population registered. Eight of the first nine counties to receive federal registrars were in the Black Belt, including Lowndes and Dallas counties. After starting the year with no black voters in Lowndes County, by the end of October, forty percent of blacks in Lowndes County had registered to vote.²⁹

The success of the voter registration campaign made LCCMHR leaders think about the next step in the fight for political equality. John Hulett explained, “we thought about what we were going to do with these 2,500 registered voters in the county, whether or not we were going to join Lyndon Johnson’s party,” or Bull Connor’s or Jim Clark’s.³⁰ Stokely Carmichael had hoped the locals would reach this level of political awareness, and once they did, he proposed what he had hoped to establish during the Mississippi Freedom Summer: an independent political party. The locals were

²⁶ Ibid, 82-84.

²⁷ Tom Coleman, as quoted in Jeffries, “Freedom Politics,” 85.

²⁸ Jeffries, 85-86, 180.

²⁹ Ibid, 74-78.

³⁰ Ibid, 91.

eager to learn more and SNCC began to educate them on state and county laws so that they could use enfranchisement to the fullest extent to improve their political and economic situations.³¹

In late 1965, SNCC began conducting workshops for Lowndes County residents from their headquarters in Atlanta to give the locals the “technical advice about how to proceed.” The locals were concerned about change at the local level, and sought to be elected to office. In turn, SNCC organizers, including Courtland Cox, informed participants in “everything they needed to know about the political laws of Alabama as they applied to county government.”³² SNCC researcher Jack Minnis found that “Alabama Law says it is possible to bring to existence a totally new political party.”³³ In late December, the LCCMHR announced that they were forming an independent political party, the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), and that they intended to run a full slate of candidates in the November 1966 election. Though the LCFO kept a separate paper identify from the LCCMHR, the groups retained the same membership and leadership. Nonetheless, John Hulett resigned as LCCMHR president to assume leadership of the LCFO.

Alabama law required them to select a party symbol for illiterate voters, and they chose the black panther. Hulett felt that the black panther symbolized blacks’ attitudes in the county, “when [the panther] is pressured it moves back until it is cornered, then it comes out fighting for life or death.”³⁴ In the summer of 1966, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale from Oakland, California, came to volunteer in Lowndes County. The LCFO allowed them to use their black panther mascot for their new organization, the Black Panther Party for Self-defense. Therefore, the LCFO was the first black panther party, though the locals referred to it as the LCFO, the Freedom Organization, or the Freedom Party.³⁵

As to be expected in the seemingly endless cycle of black defiance and white resistance, violence hit an all time high in December 1965. White assailants fired shots at several Jackson family members’ homes in a series of attacks during one night. Many residents stood guard all night to ensure the safety of family and friends. Along with the physical retaliation, white also inflicted

³¹ Ibid, 87-93.

³² SNCC researcher, Jack Minnis as quoted in Jeffries, “Freedom Politics,” 93 and 95.

³³ Personal Correspondence from Jack Minnis to Stokely Carmichael, 4 September 1965, as quoted in Jeffries, “Freedom Politics,” 89.

³⁴ John Hulett as quoted in Jeffries, “Freedom Politics,” 98.

³⁵ Ibid, 99.

economic reprisals on blacks. Many African Americans lost their jobs, and dozens of families were evicted from their homes. Most had been long-time tenants, including Viola Luscund's family who had lived on E.R. Meadow's plantation for sixty years. The evictions were not limited to Lowndes County. White landowners across the Black Belt, including Greene and Wilcox counties, forced tenants from their land for participating in the movement. Several families moved away from Lowndes County, while other families had split up to stay with friends and family. In order to keep families together, and in the county, SNCC and the LCM built a makeshift tent city just off Highway 80 near Mt. Gilliard Church. Mathew Jackson offered some of his land for the campsite, but SNCC wanted a more visible location. Jonathan Jackson remembered Stokely Carmichael saying that, "no we don't wanna put 'em back off the highway. We wanna put 'em on Highway 80 where the world can see what's going on."³⁶ They ended up using just under seven acres of land that Viola Smith, a longtime black landowner, had recently sold to a cooperative established by LCM leaders. SNCC purchased the tents, cots, stove heaters, and other supplies. On December 30, 1965, LCM and SNCC members, along with volunteers from Tuskegee Institute, including Sammy Younge who would be murdered by a white man in less than a week later in Tuskegee, pitched four tents for eight families.

Over the next few months, at least ten tents were erected for dozens of families. Life in Tent City was hard, with no electricity or running water, but residents were not that much worse off than their lives on the tenant farms.³⁷ Despite the dire conditions, many enjoyed their time in the tents. As blacks in Lowndes County had done for a century before, they took comfort in their community by forming bonds of trust with their neighbors. Annie Bell Scott fondly remembered the lifelong friendships she made in Tent City, saying "it was like one big family. Everybody was trying to help each other. And that was the most important part."³⁸ Living off Highway 80 made the blacks much more susceptible to white violence. SNCC's C. J. Jones later recalled that "Tent City was like a shooting gallery for the local folks in Lowndes County," with whites shooting at the tents at least three or four times a week.³⁹ But the violence only strengthened their resolve, vowing that they

³⁶ NPS Interview with Jonathan Jackson, #48, 5.

³⁷ Jeffries, "Freedom Politics," 201-203.

³⁸ NPS Interview with Annie Bell Scott, #25, 2.

³⁹ Jeffries, "Freedom Politics," 202-203.

“were not going to run. We [were] going to fight,” according to Annie Bell Scott. She explained that they “had a lot of peoples around [Tent City] that started shooting back. So that took care of that.”⁴⁰

The residents were happy to be off the tenant farms and be free “to make a start for [themselves],” Josephine Mays later recalled. They had lost almost all of their worldly possessions, but were enthusiastic by the possibilities for the future. Annie Bell Scott remembered that “it felt [like] we owned the world even though we didn’t have a dime.”⁴¹ Tent City inhabitants viewed the situation as the first step in freeing themselves of white control. Now that they were unemployed, many took the opportunity to devote themselves full time to educating others on the LCCMHR’s mission. Mays explained:

There were so many things that blacks didn't know about, especially when we become registered voters. We got involved with lots of activities to help black peoples to get jobs and learn how to do things for themselves like we bought land and then after we got the land, we'd able to have something that we had never had before, our own house was something that you wouldn't have to worry about the white man telling you to move or you have to leave.⁴²

In January 1966, the locals filed a lawsuit against eleven white landowners for taking part in a “total conspiracy” designed to deprive black residents of their “meager livelihood and their homes if they persist in exercising their right of franchise.”⁴³ Judge Frank M. Johnson who had sided with black plaintiffs many times in the past, ruled in favor of the landowners in June 1966. Despite more than a dozen black witnesses testimony, Johnson found “absolutely no evidence” of a conspiracy to disfranchise the evicted African Americans.⁴⁴

Some residents lived in Tent City for nearly two years, but eventually all of them moved off the land into permanent homes. According to Jeffries, LCCMHR leaders worked to secure benefits under the Economic Opportunity Act and wrote a grant for funding for a Community Action Program to educate black tenant farmers so that they could get better jobs. The money would also be used to provide construction training and to purchase supplies and equipment so that blacks,

⁴⁰ NPS Interview with Annie Bell Scott, #25, 3-4.

⁴¹ Ibid, 3.

⁴² Josephine Mays, *Eyes on the Prize* interview transcript, Question #6, < <http://digital.wustl.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eop;cc=eop;rgn=main;view=text;idno=may5427.0576.106>>

⁴³ As quoted from *Miles, et. al v. Dixon, et. al*, “Complaint” in Jeffries, “Freedom Politics,” 203.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 204.

including Tent City residents, could build themselves new homes.⁴⁵ The local people remembered the project as the Poor People's Land Fund. Regardless of its name, blacks came together to rebuild their community one house at a time. Jonathan Jackson later recalled, "The most important thing about living in Tent City, it made 'em self-efficient, and everybody now wants to own their own home so I can decide what I do- nobody else can dictate to me what to do."⁴⁶

In early 1966, SNCC organizers began conducting civic education workshops in Lowndes County. In April, they officially announced the LCFO and a slate of six men and six women who sought nomination for several positions in county government; among the candidates were longtime LCCMHR leader Sidney Logan, Jr. for sheriff, benevolent society secretary Alice Moore for tax assessor, and Annie Bell Scott for the school board.⁴⁷ The LCFO introduced the candidates to residents at a countywide mass meeting, and the nominees explained their platform to the audience, appealing to the practical concerns of residents. Alice Moore declared that "if everyone had been taxed their fare share, we'd have better schools and good roads today."⁴⁸ As the convention date neared, the LCFO struggled to find a county-approved polling place to host the election; approved polling places included the courthouse, and white homes and businesses. After the LCFO threatened to hold the primary at the courthouse without permission, all but ensuring a race riot far worse than Bloody Sunday, officials finally allowed them to hold the election at the First Baptist Church. Nomination convention day went smoothly, and the LCFO announced the winners for five county positions.⁴⁹

In the months before the November election, the LCFO launched a widespread registration drive and educational program to teach the county's least educated residents about their party's vision. They continued to promote their uniquely democratic agenda by not just telling voters who to elect, but educating them so that they came to the decision on their own. SNCC's Courtland Cox and Jennifer Lawson wrote and illustrated a "Freedom Primer" with a history of the local movement, along with photographs of the LCFO's candidates and a short description of what each

⁴⁵ Ibid, 160-164.

⁴⁶ NPS Interview with Jonathan Jackson, #48, 6.

⁴⁷ Jeffries, "Freedom Politics," 104, 108-109.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 110.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 112-114, 120.

position entailed. Jeffries notes that “the primer was one of the many unique and creative ways SNCC successfully combated exclusivity in political participation and decision-making.”⁵⁰

Despite their registration and education campaigns, the LCFO did not win a single race in the general election. However, the election was not a complete defeat of the LCFO, as they received forty-two percent of the total vote, enough to earn them state recognition as an independent political party. Though the LCFO continued to gain supporters, voter registration had only grown ten percent since the year before. On Election Day, only fifty percent of the county’s African American residents were registered to vote and of those, twenty percent chose not to vote. Many of the blacks that did vote chose not to vote for black candidates, for reasons including intimidation from whites, lack of confidence in blacks to be effective leaders. Some chose to support whites who had helped them in the past, while others knew, even without being told “what they were supposed to do.”⁵¹ In addition to the divisions in the black community, a white voting bloc and voter fraud through absentee ballots and other means contributed to the failure of the black candidates.

Another factor in the LCFO’s failure to secure elected positions was the negative publicity surrounding SNCC’s “Black Power” motto. The black panther emblem popularized by the Black Panther Party started in California had also come under fire for symbolizing Black Nationalism. SNCC leaders had a specific definition of Black Power, one that referred to “a political context of building political and social institutions in the black community where we worked.”⁵² They also decided to no longer permit whites to organize in black communities, reasoning that whites simply could not relate to the plight of black sharecroppers, and therefore could not “convince them of their power to be self-determining and independent,” according to SNCC member Gloria Larry.⁵³

Unfortunately, the media, white politicians, and black leaders misinterpreted Black Power in various ways, most often criticizing SNCC and the Black Panther party as militant groups that promoted reverse racism. Carmichael explained that Black Nationalism was to “knock out the idea of morality as if morality will decide our relationship to capitalism.” Though most outsiders misunderstood it, Black Power was not a foreign concept to the working poor residents in Lowndes County and throughout the Black Belt. The slogan appealed to them because it was what they had

⁵⁰ Ibid, 126.

⁵¹ Ibid, 136-139.

⁵² Ibid, 263.

⁵³ Ibid, 257.

already organized around: the idea of electing officials to give them a voice in decisions that affected their lives, including in political, social, and economic equality and safety from white violence.⁵⁴

The negative publicity, coupled with SNCC's loss of fundraising support because of the misinterpretation, caused them to leave the Black Belt. By 1967, most of the organizers left Lowndes County, except for Bob Mants who took up permanent residence. Local people were not angry with them for leaving. They knew that SNCC came to help them, not to support them permanently.⁵⁵ In the 1968 election, the LCFO employed the same political education strategies they had in the election two years earlier, including workshops and canvassing the county to get the word out. LCFO president John Hulett was a particularly dedicated organizer, spending so much time knocking on doors and driving people to the courthouse to register that his wife "doesn't know him." The LCFO won two justice of the peace seats, but lost all their other positions by a narrow margin once again.⁵⁶

Before the 1970 election, Hulett and other LCFO leaders began to look at new strategies to gain more supporters. They convinced party members to join the National Democratic Party of Alabama (NDPA), the mostly-black alternative to the state Democratic Party. The LCFO's alliance with the NDPA also gave them a much-welcomed party symbol switch from the black panther to an eagle. The shedding of the controversial emblem, along with John Hulett's negotiation of a backroom deal with white probate judge Harrell Hammonds led to the success of the NDPA candidates in 1970. Hulett delivered black votes for Hammonds and Hammonds ensured the election of three black officials, including Willie McGhee for coroner, Alma Miller for circuit clerk, and Hulett himself for sheriff. The deal was the start of a longtime political machine between Hulett and Hammonds.⁵⁷

The NDPA candidates would not repeat their success in the 1972 election, with only one of the eight Lowndes County candidates winning office. Among the factors contributing to the local failure were: the local leaders did not conduct a voter registration or education campaigns; white voter fraud mainly involving absentee ballots; continued disinterest among blacks in voting; and divisions in the black community. By 1972, there were also divisions within the LCFO, as members

⁵⁴ Ibid, 271.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 261, 273.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 280.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 284, 289-293.

lost faith in the party's leaders, particularly John Hulett, as they began engaging in the same politically opportunistic strategies they had worked so hard against. After 1972, "never again would African Americans challenge white power by fielding a slate of independent candidates."⁵⁸ By the 1974 election, all of the black candidates had defected to the Democratic Party and many, including John Hulett, were reelected. An era of black dominance in the county government began, but unfortunately, black political power did not deliver on the promises it held.⁵⁹ According to Jeffries, "structural restrictions limited the effectiveness of black officeholders, [but they also] could have done more to meet the needs and expectations of their constituents."⁶⁰

In addition to the local government, the federal and state governments continually let Lowndes County people down in a multitude of ways, especially by controlling local politics by granting or denying state and federal funding to the county. Though the local political makeup had changed, the social and economic conditions persisted. In the early 1980s, black unemployment was nearly sixteen percent and half of the African American population lived in poverty.⁶¹ Despite continued intervention from all levels of government, the social and economic conditions of Lowndes County residents continue to remain bleak. In 2000, one third of the population lived below the poverty level, and unemployment was at seventeen percent. In 2003, Jonathan Jackson, a teenager during the movement who later served as mayor of White Hall from 1979 to 2007, said that although the movement helped blacks gain political equality, there is still much work to be done.⁶²

⁵⁸ Ibid, 302.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 293-301.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 325.

⁶¹ Ibid, 321-323.

⁶² Ibid, 329-330. Political controversies still abound in Lowndes County. Jonathan Jackson resigned as mayor after pleading guilty to misdemeanor theft of funding for a casino across the street from the Lowndes County Interpretive Center site. He agreed to pay \$46,000 in restitution and received a one-year prison sentence. Associated Press, "White Hall mayor pleads guilty in bingo land sale scandal; will resign," *Mobile Press-Register*, 5 October 2009. As recently as April 2012, a black county official admitted to distributing racially charged campaign materials. The flyers had supposedly been jointly published by the local Ku Klux Klan chapter and Tea Party members. The lengthy diatribe urged voters to elect three white officials, while insulting the three black candidates with racial slurs. The election was also investigated by the U.S. Attorney's office for an excessive number of absentee ballots; Lowndes County totaled almost 1,500 while the next highest county, nearby Elmore County, had 76. "Red flags raised over Lowndes Co. absentee ballots," WSFA News website, 25 April 2012. <<http://lowndescounty.wsfa.com/news/news/157040-red-flags-raised-over-lowndes-co-absentee-ballots>>; "Commissioner admits handing out racial flyers," WSFA News website, 23 April 2012. <<http://www.wsfa.com/story/17660133/commissioner-admits-handing-out-racial-flyers>>

The only thing we find that's really oppressing our people now is economic development, and we must move beyond being able to go in that front door everybody talks about, but to begin to own those cash registers and in the South there's a dying need for us to begin to own our businesses, create businesses, become entrepreneurs so that we can have been better able to serve our community. The-- the right to vote and the right to be a judge and the right to be a senator don't mean anything if you don't have a dollar.⁶³

Historiography of the Lowndes County Voting Rights Movement

Local studies of the civil rights movement in communities across the South have been part of a growing historiographical trend that started in the early 1990s. Though many locations have yet to receive the scholarly attention they deserve, history of the movement in the Black Belt has been covered in a few publications.⁶⁴ In 1993's *Outside Agitator: Jon Daniels and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama*, Charles W. Eagles explores minister Jonathan Daniels' life, including his involvement in the movement in Lowndes County. In 2004, Cynthia Griggs Fleming chronicled the movement in nearby Wilcox County from the late nineteenth century through the present in her book, *In the Shadow of Selma: The Continuing Struggle for Civil Rights in the Rural South*. One of the most recent works that covers the movement in Alabama's Black Belt is Susan Ashmore's *Carry it On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, 1964-1972*. Ashmore, like several historians before her, argues that after the Voting Rights Act of 1965, "the civil rights movement carried on, but so did the forces of white supremacy."⁶⁵

The most thorough examination of the Lowndes County movement available at the time of the National Parks Service interpretive efforts was Hasan Jeffries' 2002 dissertation, "Freedom Politics: Transcending Civil Rights in Lowndes County, Alabama, 1965-2000." In 2009, Jeffries published his important book *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*, adding even more detail to the Lowndes County narrative.⁶⁶ However, even in its earlier form as his dissertation, Jeffries' work provides an in-depth look not only at the black struggle for political

⁶³ NPS interview with Jonathan Jackson, #6, 20.

⁶⁴ Charles W. Eagles, *Outside Agitator: Jon Daniels and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *In the Shadow of Selma: The Continuing Struggle for Civil Rights in the Rural South*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), Susan Youngblood Ashmore, *Carry It On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

⁶⁵ Ashmore, *Carry It On*, 15.

⁶⁶ Hasan Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009).

equality, but also for social and economic rights, revealing that the organizers' grassroots tactics brought about significant change in Lowndes County, if only for a short while.

Though the Lowndes County movement suffers from a lack of book or even chapter-length narratives, it has benefited from a few oral history projects. As part of the filming of *Eyes on the Prize I and II*, in 1985 and 1988, oral history interviews were conducted with civil rights movement leaders, foot soldiers, politicians, and other key players from the 1950s and 1960s. The focus of the project was not limited to the Black Belt, but several interviewees detailed their experiences in Lowndes County, including John Hulett and Ruby Sales, who was with Jonathan Daniels when he was shot.⁶⁷ In the early 1990s, and again in 2003, the National Parks Service interviewed several Black Belt residents and movement participants as part of their interpretive efforts along the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail. These interviews reveal many new details from locals about the Lowndes County movement, including personal accounts about the founding of the LCFO and life in Tent City.

They also illuminate obstacles in how the movement would be remembered by the federal agency. Though the identity of the interviewer remains unclear, she was contracted by the National Parks Service and was ultimately charged with obtaining information about the history of specific aspects of the movement. When participants would stray from those topics, she reminded them that they were only looking for stories for their video *Never Lose Sight of Freedom*.⁶⁸ For example, when Scott B. Smith began speaking about present-day racism, the interviewer announced that while she appreciated what Smith was saying, “the National Parks Service probably won’t.”⁶⁹ The interviews also indicated what the locals hoped for in the commemorative efforts of their history. Bob Mants had a clear idea of how he wanted the movement to be remembered, saying:

The voting rights movement was an act of a disfranchised people. And that’s where it belongs, not with these icons, not with these organizations and so-called leaders, but with the people, these people who make sacrifices. Many of these people that we view as quote, “leaders” will never cross the plantations, never had to drive up and down those long roads at night, never had to sleep in a cold house or stood up all night peeping out the window, under bushes or behind trees with shotguns. This is their story. That’s what I want to be told. I want their story to be told. We have

⁶⁷ The interviews are part of the Henry Hampton Collection housed at the Film and Media Archive at Washington University Libraries, and are available online. *Eyes on the Prize Oral History Interview Transcripts*, Washington University Digital Gateway, <<http://digital.wustl.edu/e/eyes/index.html>>.

⁶⁸ *Never Lose Sight of Freedom* interview transcripts, <<http://www.nps.gov/hfc/av/semo/docs/>>.

⁶⁹ NPS interview with Scott B. Smith, #3, 10.

enough being told these so-called leaders. How does Miss Bessie Lou's story get told? How do Brother John's story get told? That's-- that's the heart. That's the heart of the movement; those who bore the burden in the heat of the day.⁷⁰

History of the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail

On March 5, 1990, thousands of people gathered in Selma to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery march. Just as he did twenty-five years earlier, John Lewis helped to organize the event, and lead the group over the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Lewis, now a US representative from Georgia, also planned an even bigger commemoration – federal recognition for the voting rights movement in Selma. On March 7, the twenty-fifth anniversary of Bloody Sunday, Lewis rushed from Selma back to Washington, DC to introduce the Selma to Montgomery National Trail Study Act of 1989 to Congress. The bill would authorize the National Parks Service (NPS) to conduct a study to determine if the fifty-four mile march route along Highway 80 qualified for designation as a national historic trail. Congressman Lewis hoped the commemoration would “recognize the sacrifices of those who fought to ensure the right to vote, and serve as a reminder of the responsibility to vote.” Congress passed the act in July 1990. The NPS pledged full support for the project, calling the March 1965 events “a turning point in the nation’s history.” The agency normally did not consider designation until fifty years after an event, but the march was “transcendental,” according to chief historian Edwin Bearss.⁷¹ If approved the trail would be the shortest trail in the system.

⁷⁰ NPS interview with Bob Mants, #15, 15-16.

⁷¹ Associated Press, “Selma historic trail designation wins support,” *Selma Times-Journal*, 8 March 1990.



Figure 3.1: Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail, modified from NPS map⁷²

The NPS began their study in May 1991, and traveled to the Black Belt to conduct historical research and oral history interviews with participants of 1965 voting rights march. They met with state and local government officials, discussing ways to partner and fund the project. The City of Selma immediately saw the benefits of a federal partnership when the NPS organized a self-guided civil rights walking trail in Selma. The NPS recognized the civil rights heritage efforts already underway in Selma, including guided tours and interpretive signs on Martin Luther King, Jr. Avenue. NPS officials also met with the general public in several Black Belt locations, including Selma, Hayneville, Montgomery, and Marion. Many residents showed their support at the meetings, and hoped to sway officials to include their location on the trail. The locals also suggested ideas for museums and other commemorative activities.

In February 1992, the National Parks System Advisory Board confirmed the route's national significance under the Historic Sites Act of 1935. The NPS released the National Historic Trail Study later that year, suggesting four alternative implementation plans with varying levels of federal involvement, including no federal action at all. Alternative A proposed the highest level of federal involvement, and featured NPS managed interpretive trail and a visitor center in Selma or Montgomery. The NPS was sympathetic toward interpretive efforts in other locations, but the scope

⁷² National Parks Service, Harpers Ferry Center Cartography Department, Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail map, < <http://www.nps.gov/hfc/cfm/carto-detail.cfm?Alpha=SEMO>>

of the project was clear; only sites along the original fifty-four mile march could be considered. They recommended, however, that Congress consider side projects to recognize sites in Perry County and another trail in Marion, the site of the police attack on the peaceful protestors the night Jimmie Lee Jackson was killed.⁷³

Meanwhile, city officials in Selma were busy promoting their other civil rights sites, including the National Voting Rights Museum, which opened in 1993. The NVRM was a stop on the city's civil rights trail, along with Brown's Chapel and the Dallas County Courthouse. Selma Community Development Director Elizabeth Driggers lobbied the NPS to establish a visitor center in Selma. The city purchased three buildings along Water Avenue at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in "preparation to partner with the Park Service for the implementation of the trail." Driggers felt the national trail was "not only important to history, but important to the tourism effort. It will bring continuity to other things we're trying to do." Many Selmans hoped the designation would occur before the march's thirtieth anniversary in 1995.⁷⁴

Congressman Lewis introduced a bill to designate the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail in 1993, but two years later, the thirtieth anniversary passed with no federal decision. As Congress waited, the state of Alabama began pursuing other official designations for the march route. In 1995, Governor Fob James declared Highway 80 between Selma and Montgomery a state scenic byway. US Congressman and a Black Belt native, Earl Hilliard lobbied for federal funding from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA).⁷⁵ In January 1996, the FHWA designated the historic highway as an All American Road, and awarded \$1.5 million to the Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT) to develop a management plan for Highway 80.⁷⁶ In November 1996, Congress finally passed the National Historic Trail Act. Now the highway had three different designations and several state and federal agencies involved in its administration. The agencies, including the NPS, the ALDOT, the FHWA, and the Alabama Historical Commission (AHC), along

⁷³ National Parks Service, "Selma to Montgomery Historic Trail Study," July 1992.

⁷⁴ Penny Pool, "Hilliard, others push to open trail," *Selma Times-Journal*, 26 February 1995.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Alabama Historical Commission, "Dallas, Lowndes, Montgomery Counties: Federal Highway Administration Awards \$1.5 million to interpret historic highway," February 1996.

with local governments and the general public, would all be involved in the project to varying degrees. However, the NPS would be the primary administrator of the Trail.⁷⁷

In the spring of 1999, the NPS began planning for the historic trail's interpretation, once again consulting with state and local interests. The NPS met with the ALDOT, the Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel, the AHC, and city officials from Montgomery and Selma. The only nongovernmental organization they consulted was the NVRM, meeting with Jo Ann Bland and Sam Walker. They also heard from movement veterans and Black Belt residents in several public meetings.⁷⁸ The NPS appointed Selma's F. D. Reese, former SNCC member Bob Mants from Lowndes County, and Dr. Gwen Patton to the trail's advisory council for the interpretive center. A native of Detroit, Patton moved to Montgomery as a teenager in the late 1950s. She lived with her grandparents, and was inspired by their own activism, including holding citizenship classes in their home. Patton joined the Montgomery Improvement Association, and later served as Tuskegee's student body president in the early 1960s. She now served as head archivist at Trenholm State University. Reese, Mants, and Patton also acted as liaisons between the NPS and the public as presidents of the Friends of the National Historic Trail groups for their respective locations.⁷⁹ The Friends of the Trail would assist by fundraising and offering suggestions. In 1996, the groups began to meet individually to discuss the project. The Montgomery Trails' Friends first meeting drew one hundred supporters, and many expressed their ideas for commemoration sites. Veteran attorney Fred Gray said that "no voting rights trail would be complete without Macon County and Tuskegee." Several people thought the City of St. Jude, where the marchers camped the last night before reaching Montgomery on March 21, 1965, was the perfect site for a visitor center.⁸⁰

After months of planning with all interested parties, the NPS released their Alternatives Study in September 1999. The four alternatives ranged from minimal interpretation through signs along the highway, to full interpretation at wayside exhibits and three interpretive centers in Selma, Lowndes County, and Montgomery. The plan also included several options for exhibit themes, including information related only to the March 7-March 25, 1965 events, or the broadest story presenting the voting rights march in a local, regional, and national context. Though the scope of the

⁷⁷ National Park Service, "Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail: Comprehensive Management Plan," July 1999.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Dr. Gwen Patton, Interview with author, 27 September 2012.

⁸⁰ Alvin Benn, "Trail officials look for friends," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 19 March 1998.

project remained limited to the voting rights march on Highway 80, the Alternative Study mentioned several Black Belt locations, including Tuskegee, and Perry and Marion Counties, that could help illustrate the story.⁸¹

In July 1999, before the NPS released their Alternatives Study, the ALDOT issued their own management plan for the highway, recommending roadway improvements and an interpretive visitor center. The Alabama State Historic Preservation Office raised several historic preservation concerns regarding the planned improvements, including repaving portions and widening the highway.⁸² In February 2000, as the state agencies struggled to reach a compromise, the NPS suspended their planning activities. In a memo to all southeastern district employees, an NPS official noted that the SEMO project is “one of the more difficult planning projects that the NPS has attempted due to the volatility of the issues, interpretation of the history, agencies, and personalities involved.” The official indicated that the large number of governmental agencies involved was a “very unique aspect” of the project, and stressed the importance of communication between the agencies, as well as the general public.⁸³

The communication problem was evident in July 2000, when Lowndes County residents discovered that the Alabama Department of Environmental Management approved a permit for a landfill to be built five hundred feet from the historic highway. Unbeknownst to the public, in 1998, the Lowndes County Commission also had approved the permit for the two hundred acre landfill. Bob Mants called it an “insult. You can’t commemorate it on the one hand and desecrate it on the other.”⁸⁴ The County Commission, which held a black majority, agreed to the project because the poverty-stricken county stood to benefit \$350,000 in annual revenue and they felt that it would not affect the national historic trail. The landfill’s developer, Waste Management, Inc., also offered to donate thirty acres for archaeological digs and to build an interpretive kiosk along Highway 80.

Lowndesboro resident and former Montgomery Chamber of Commerce Director Rod Frazer lived near the proposed site on his family’s homestead since the 1820s. Frazer appealed to the

⁸¹ National Parks Service, “Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail Alternatives Study and Comprehensive Management Plan,” September 1999.

⁸² National Parks Service, “Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail, Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement,” July 2004.

⁸³ Southeast Region Director Memo to All Employees, Southeast Regional Office, Name of Official is Blacked Out, 2 February 2000.

⁸⁴ Somini Sengupta, “At odds in Alabama Over a Landfill on a Historic Trail,” *New York Times*, 2 October 2000.

county commission to reconsider their permit, and when they refused, Frazer contacted lawyers in Montgomery. The Lowndes County Commission also contacted lawyers to represent them, Chestnut, Sanders, Sanders. While pursuing a lawsuit, Frazer employed a familiar civil rights strategy, and invited national leaders to come to Selma to attract media attention.⁸⁵ In September 2000, Rev. Jesse Jackson led a rally at Lowndesboro, and John Lewis denounced the landfill as “environmental racism.”⁸⁶

The battle over the landfill was not the typical Lowndes County black/white struggle. Instead, it drew support and resistance from both races, and united black and white residents on both sides. Lowndes County Civil Rights legend, John Hulett was the landfill’s biggest advocate because of the economic benefit to the community. He was especially angry that many of the landfill’s white opponents cited the historic highway as the reason not to build it. “We didn’t have any white participation in the civil rights movement in this town. Suddenly, it’s the trail they’re interested in.” Lowndesboro Mayor John H. Nichols, a vocal protestor of the landfill, had served as a National Guardsman during the Selma to Montgomery March. Nichols considered the “trail mine as much as it is anybody’s. I was there,” he said.⁸⁷

The Montgomery County Circuit ruled in favor of the protestors citing that the ADEM did not follow its own rules in notifying county residents of the landfill. However, subsequent legal challenges delayed a final decision on the landfill until 2005, when the Waste Management Inc. decided to withdraw their petition.⁸⁸ Though the national historic trail inspired protests against the Lowndes County landfill case, it is unclear as to how the litigation affected the trail’s development, as the project faced numerous delays. It does not appear to have directly affected the Lowndes

⁸⁵ Sebastian Kitchen, “Family, attorneys remember Lowndes landfill fight,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 12 September 2010.

⁸⁶ Somini Sengupta, “At odds in Alabama Over a Landfill on a Historic Trail,” *New York Times*, 2 October 2000.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Sebastian Kitchen, “Family, attorneys remember Lowndes landfill fight,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 12 September 2010. *Mobile Press Register* reporter Eddie Curran covered the landfill case in a series of stories about Lanny Young, a lobbyist and close friend of Governor Don Siegelmen. The stories attracted the attention of US Attorney Louis Franklin, who began investigating Young’s relationship Siegelmen. Young was charged with federal corruption and accepted a plea deal to cooperate with a federal investigation involving Siegelman, now former Governor, and HealthSouth director Richard Scrushy. Young testified against his former friend and both Siegelman and Scrushy were convicted. Though guilty on other corruption charges, Siegelman and Young were found not guilty in the case related to the Lowndes County landfill. In his book *The Governor of Goat Hill*, Eddie Curran claims that it was the Lowndes County case that “ruined Lanny and set in motion Siegelman’s downfall.”

County Interpretive Center, though the controversy certainly did not help the strained relationships between the branches of the government or with the general public.

Though interpretive planning was on hold for most of the landfill controversy, fundraising efforts for the national historic trail continued. Selma made national headlines in March 2000, when President Clinton attended the annual Bridge Crossing Jubilee. Clinton praised the NVRM and promised federal funding to preserve Selma's history. In 2000, NPS director Robert Stanton and Department of Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt traveled to Selma for the Jubilee and announced \$160,000 in federal funding for the national historic trail.⁸⁹ FHWA official Joe Wilkerson indicated that \$8 million had been set aside at the federal level for the project. Congressman Hilliard also sought \$6 million in federal grants for the development of the Lowndes Center. Hillard suggested that a memorial park should be built at the Tent City site first, not in Montgomery or Selma.⁹⁰ The funding efforts looked promising, but local residents grew frustrated with the lack of "constructive progress" on the trail. They voiced their concerns to the NPS at a public meeting in October 2001. Superintendent of the Trail Catherine Farmer cited the number of federal, state, and local entities involved as one of the reason for the delays. Farmer understood that many locals did not trust the government, but urged them to be patient, saying that a building should be up in two or three years. Rose Sanders attended and said that she would continue to support the national efforts to commemorate the trail, and that others should too. Sanders reminded the audience that the National Voting Rights Museum and Memorial Park were already open to visitors.⁹¹

The national historic trail finally received its first physical markers in June 2002 when the NPS unveiled historic route signs at sites in Selma, Lowndes County, and Montgomery. Selma Mayor James Perkins noted due to federal highway guidelines, Selma's sign could not be located at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Instead, it was placed at the corner of Broad Street and Water Avenue, where the city had already purchased buildings for the future NPS Selma Interpretive Center.⁹² Later in 2002, the AHC and Alabama Tourism Department began to focus on the City of St. Jude as the site for Montgomery's interpretive center. Alabama state representative from Montgomery and march veteran John Knight helped secure \$800,000 in state funding for the St. Jude Center. State officials hoped to purchase ten acres where the marchers camped, part of which was now a

⁸⁹ NPS Press Release, "NPS to preserve legacy of historic march from Selma to Montgomery," 4 March 2000.

⁹⁰ Alvin Benn, "Hilliard requests funding for National Historic Trail," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 13 February 2001.

⁹¹ Alvin Benn, "Trail progress slow," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 4 October 2001.

⁹² "Sign commemorates route of 1965 Selma to Montgomery march," *Selma Times Journal*, 13 June 2002.

shopping center. Though the NPS had yet to decide the site for the Montgomery center, Alabama Tourism Department Director Lee Warner indicated that the state wanted to secure the land to make sure it is not destroyed. Warner noted the urban revitalization efforts in Montgomery, and the possibility of new industries coming to the Black Belt. He was most excited about “the most sustainable, clean industry there is – heritage tourism.”⁹³

Though the state agencies would not reach agreement until 2003, the NPS resumed their planning efforts for the interpretive centers on the trail. Based on comments from the public meetings and the Friends of the Trail groups, they decided to focus on the Lowndes Center first. Dr. Patton later remembered that the overwhelming majority of locals felt it was important to honor the Lowndes story, as Selma and Montgomery already had museums and other memorials. The NPS hired Amaze Design of Boston to develop the conceptual plans for the exhibits at the Lowndes County Interpretive Center. The Trail’s Advisors were concerned that the team of white northerners might not be able to tell the story accurately, and the exhibit designers felt the advisors’ uneasiness. After all, the project had now been in the works for twelve years, with few concrete results. Many locals blamed the federal government for the project delays, and were even more skeptical when they brought in outsiders to tell their story. Amaze Design held a three-day project kick-off meeting with the NPS staff, including the NPS’ interpretive specialists from Harpers Ferry Center, and the advisors in the fall of 2002. The meeting left Amaze with a clear direction on content and design, and a budding relationship with the advisors, especially Dr. Patton and Bob Mants. Perhaps in an effort to streamline the project, the NPS did not invite the public to meet with Amaze Design, at the kick-off or at subsequent meetings. Nonetheless, the advisors served as the liaisons between the public and the government throughout the project.

Amaze Design began work quickly, traveling to the Black Belt to conduct research. Patton and Mants hosted the exhibit team, taking lead designer Scott Rabiet and content specialist Sara Smith around Selma, Montgomery, and Lowndes County to teach them more about the area’s history. During the time they spent together, the designers and the advisors developed a mutual respect and fondness for each other. Dr. Patton remembers being “humbled and grateful” for the designer’s passion for the project.⁹⁴ Sara Smith was honored to be a part of the team, recalling it was an “amazing experience” to get to work with the people who were actually involved in the nationally

⁹³ Mike Sherman, “St. Jude part of plan for civil rights center,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 23 September 2002.

⁹⁴ Dr. Gwen Patton, Interview with author, 27 September 2012.

significant event.⁹⁵ Scott Rabiet grew especially close to Mants, and although the NPS was technically Amaze’s client, Rabiet considered Mants his ethical client, and wanted to get the story right for him and all of Lowndes County’s residents. Rabiet later recalled that once Mants trusted them, he opened up, even inviting the design team to his house where they stayed up all night drinking while Mants told them about how the Black Panther Party was formed. Despite Mants’ openness on some topics, Rabiet recalled that he did not tell them the entire story of the longer movement, or Stokely Carmichael, or Mants’ own personal feelings about his experiences. Rabiet would not learn the full history of the Lowndes County movement until he read Hasan Jeffries’ 2009 book *Bloody Lowndes*.⁹⁶

The NPS and design team also scoured the Black Belt for artifacts for the new interpretive center. “In order for us to tell the story accurately, and for future generations to understand the story, it’s always better to have firsthand materials for people to see,” explained NPS Superintendent Catherine Light. Dr. Patton offered the use of Trenholm’s extensive civil rights archives. Patton had been collecting since the late 1970s, when her grandparents and her mentor, veteran leader Rufus Lewis, passed their papers onto Patton, “trusting [her] to keep them safe.” The historian knew how important the materials were, and began to seek out other manuscripts, documents, pamphlets, and ephemera related to the voting rights movement in Montgomery. When the archives outgrew her house, Patton asked Trenholm administrators to consider an archives facility in the new university library. They agreed in 1993, and the Trenholm State Archives would become one of the Alabama’s premier civil rights repositories.⁹⁷ Bob Mants had also amassed a collection of local civil rights memorabilia. Over the years, he had displayed documents, photographs, audio and video recordings, and other civil rights memorabilia at several locations, including the National Voting Rights Museum. Unfortunately, Mants did not have Patton’s same training or resources, and by the time the exhibit designers saw his collection, much of it had deteriorated beyond use.⁹⁸

In addition to their own preservation efforts, the advisors pointed the design team to other local sources of artifacts. Bob Mants introduced them to Timothy Mays, who grew up across the street from future site of the interpretive center and was a student at Alabama State University in

⁹⁵ Sara Smith, Content Specialist, Amaze Design, Interview with author, 25 September 2012.

⁹⁶ Scott Rabiet, Exhibit Designer, Amaze Design, Interview with author, 26 September 2012.

⁹⁷ Dr. Gwen Patton, Interview with author, 27 September 2012.

⁹⁸ Scott Rabiet, Exhibit Designer, Amaze Design, Interview with author, 26 September 2012.

1965. He sold the American flag that he carried during the march to the NPS for the center. The museum's collection slowly grew, as the design team had a difficult time connecting with the local population. Not enough people were coming forward with their memorabilia, particularly white residents.⁹⁹ NPS employee Carla Whitfield conducted oral history interviews for the project, and said that “not many whites want to talk about what happened. I guess it’s understandable, but I wish somebody would let us interview them.”¹⁰⁰

The project team managed to pique the public’s interest with an “Antiques Roadshow” type event in November 2003. The NPS brought in experts from the television show and hundreds of locals showed up to have their memorabilia appraised. The NPS purchased over 1,000 artifacts from the local residents that day. The event also generated interest in local whites, and a former state trooper sold his uniform and a gas mask to the NPS. Trenholm’s archives also gave Lucille Times’ shoes and hat from the march, and loaned many documents, including voter questionnaires and tests from the 1960s.

In addition to working with the exhibit design firm, the NPS also partnered with the interpretive specialists at the NPS Harpers Ferry Center. The project team decided to produce a film that could be shown in the interpretive center, and be distributed to teachers as part of a civil rights education resource kit. Tim Radford, the film’s director, envisioned “more than a chronicle of the events of the march, but an attempt to address the meaning of the march today.”¹⁰¹ The team organized a seminar for local high school students to learn about the voting rights movement from the march foot soldiers and leaders. For four months, the students were filmed interacting with veterans in classrooms, on the trail, and at the 2004 Bridge Crossing Jubilee. The students also met without adults to discuss civil rights issues that affect them today, including racial profiling and unfair curfew laws. The students reported that the project was life-changing, and inspired many to keep the civil rights movement alive by educating others about it. The film *Never Lose Sight of Freedom* was also adapted into an oral history interactive kiosk and an educational DVD available to teachers.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Sara Smith, Content Specialist, Amaze Design, Interview with author, 25 September 2012.

¹⁰⁰ Alvin Benn, “Couple prepare way for civil rights trail,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 21 July 2003.

¹⁰¹ NPS, “When Generation Y Asks, Why Vote?” *HFC on Media*, September/October 2005, 2.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 3-4.

With the NPS' interpretive efforts underway, the construction side of the project also moved ahead in 2003. The ALDOT, AHC and the FHWA were able to reach an agreement in their three year dispute over how to handle the road. They unveiled their \$22 million plan for the construction of the Lowndes County Interpretive Center and the addition of a nine-mile long pedestrian trail parallel to Highway 80. The twenty-acre site was just east of the Lowndes' County Tent City, where local residents lived when they were evicted from their homes by their white landlords. A twelve thousand square foot visitors' center would house exhibits and rest area facilities, and picnic pavilions and walking trails would be available outside.¹⁰³ The ALDOT expected to break ground on the "national tourist attraction" within a few months and that the \$7.4 million center would be open by the end of 2004. ALDOT director Don Vaughn indicated that the parallel road project would take much longer, but once complete, would allow visitors and historians to closely examine the trail, allowing them to fully experience the marcher's 1965 journey. Alabama Tourism Department Director Lee Warner recognized the state's ongoing commitment to commemorating both their Civil War and civil rights legacies. Warner considered the historic trail a fitting tribute to the march's foot soldiers, and declared the project a sign of "a new Alabama."¹⁰⁴

Selma leaders continued to push their own city's dual heritage, capitalizing on the buzz surrounding the historic trail by promoting Selma's civil rights history through brochures and a walking trail. In 2002, the city added the NVRM's new Slavery and Civil War museum to their roster of tourist attractions. Several hotels opened in Selma in the early 2000s, providing over six hundred rooms for tourists. The occupancy rate remained consistently high during the peak season of February to June, according to the Dallas County Chamber of Commerce.¹⁰⁵ They knew the trail would be a huge asset to their heritage tourism industry, and they moved forward with their own plans for developing the Selma leg. In April 2003, Mayor James Perkins secured \$1 million in federal funding for renovations of the buildings that City had already purchased in preparation for the Selma Interpretive Center.

In August 2003, the historic trail received its first facility when the Selma Friends of the National Historic Trail opened an office in downtown Selma. The office would mainly serve as a volunteer headquarters, but it would also be open to the public. NPS volunteers at the makeshift

¹⁰³ Alvin Benn, "Plans pay off with funding," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 15 January 2003.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Alvin Benn, "Historic trail progress," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 24 April 2003.

welcome center distributed brochures for local tourist destinations, and also offered guided tours of Selma's civil rights attractions. The NPS formed a cross-promotion alliance with several museums, including the NVRM, the Slavery and Civil War Museum, and the Old Depot Museum. F. D. Reese was pleased with collaboration between the federal and local entities, saying that they both benefitted from the partnership.¹⁰⁶

The momentum the trail picked up in Selma did not spread to Lowndes County. In 2003, FHWA administrator Joe Wilkerson announced that \$8 million in state and federal funding had been secured, but officials struggled to find the rest of the money for the \$22 million project. Construction was delayed and the interpretive center did not break ground until December 2004. Bob Mants was once again frustrated by the lack of progress, saying he had been working to make the center a reality for over fifteen years.¹⁰⁷ Lowndes County officials had high hopes for the economic development and were anxious for the new center to open. The NPS projected over 185,000 visitors to the trail annually, and a potential \$14 million boost in the local economy from the heritage tourism in Dallas, Lowndes, and Montgomery counties.¹⁰⁸ Lowndes County officials expected that the new tourism industry would create hundreds of jobs, as new hotels, restaurants, and other attractions opened up along Highway 80. Local resident Catherine Flowers saw the center as a way to honor the role of Lowndes County and hoped that "the historic struggles of the past as a unifying force for residents today."¹⁰⁹

On August 26, 2006, ten years after the historic trail was established, the Lowndes County Interpretive Center finally opened. The long awaited center did not receive positive reviews from most local residents. A group toured the museum before the grand opening expressed disappointment that the Lowndes County story did not receive more attention. Though the NPS provided several opportunities for public input, Alabama state representative James Thomas commented that "the right people were not consulted or talked to."¹¹⁰ Local official Willie Ruth Myrick denounced the museum, saying that "they ought to tear it down and start all over." Trail

¹⁰⁶ Alan Riquelmy, "Selma to Montgomery Trail office opens here," *Selma Times Journal*, 7 August 2003.

¹⁰⁷ William F. West, "Activists cheer site's progress," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 15 August 2005.

¹⁰⁸ NPS, "Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail: Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement," July 2004, 129.

¹⁰⁹ Catherine Flowers, "Rights trail boon for Lowndes County," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 24 August 2006.

¹¹⁰ Alvin Benn, "New museum: Was Lowndes County ignored?" *Montgomery Advertiser*, 24 August 2006.

Superintendent Catherine Light anticipated the visitor's comments, but she was surprised by the anger they expressed. The federal legislation that created the national historic trail required the interpretation to focus on the national perspective, not the local one. "There are many areas throughout the South that went through a lot," Light explained. The NPS could not change the center's exhibits, but Light offered to partner with the locals to establish their own museum.¹¹¹

Lowndes County Judge John Hulett, Jr., son of the Lowndes County hero, did not expect much from the facility, saying that he "didn't think it would show the truth." The senior Hulett passed away just before the center opened, and his funeral was scheduled for Saturday morning, August 26. The NPS shortened the Lowndes Center's grand opening ceremony to accommodate Hulett's service. Attendance during the opening weekend was low, a trend that would continue for the next several months. According to museum chief of interpretation Tyrone Brandyburg, "the problem is letting people know that we're here." Like other local attractions, the Center's main advertising strategy was listings in the area's civil rights brochures and cross-marketing partnerships with other attractions. The new museum struggled to find their niche in the community and only saw a few hundred in its first seven months. Visitorship increased during the peak season from February to June, and Brandyburg said the center had "pretty fair sized" crowd for the 2005 Jubilee.¹¹² Interestingly enough, Rose Sanders did not criticize the museum, at least not overtly. She commented that she supported any effort to tell the voting rights movement story, and emphasized that activity not only occurred along Highway 80 in Selma, Lowndes County, and Montgomery, but throughout the Black Belt.¹¹³

After the Lowndes County center opened, attention shifted to the Selma Interpretive Center. Throughout 2007, Selma Mayor James Perkins made several trips to Washington, DC to meet with US Senator Richard Shelby to discuss local issues, including the Selma Center. Senator Shelby was confident that the trail would become an international tourist destination and pledged his full support. In addition to the economic benefits, Shelby hoped that the trail would provide "the history and perspective necessary to ensure we never reverse course."¹¹⁴ Longtime trail supporter Congressman Artur Davis lobbied for a \$528,693 grant from the US Department of Transportation.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² "Lowndes Co. Interpretive Center preps for first tour season," *Selma Times-Journal*, 12 March 2007.

¹¹³ Alvin Benn, "\$10 million center opens," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 27 August 2006.

¹¹⁴ Cassandra Mickens, "Center will add much to Selma," *Selma Times Journal*, 12 May 2008.

Congressman Davis also worked with Mayor Perkins to secure \$1 million House appropriation.¹¹⁵ Davis credited the Mayor and other city leaders for their hard work at the local level, saying that Selma had “turned a corner politically, economically, and in terms of faith in the community.”¹¹⁶ In 2008, Mayor Perkins and Congressman Davis teamed up again to secure a \$7 million NPS grant. The city of Selma matched the federal funds, for a total of \$14 million to be used towards the adaptive rehabilitation of the building.¹¹⁷

In July 2007, NPS representatives traveled to Selma to begin planning to transform the dilapidated building into a thirty-thousand square foot, state-of-the-art tourist destination. The three-story facility would house exhibits, a theater, public meeting space, and an oral history and research center.¹¹⁸ Local officials predicted that the historic trail developments would reinvigorate the downtown revitalization project that began in 1998. Over the years, the city had planned for several improvements, including riverfront development, a walking trail and bicycle path, more downtown parking, and cleaning up vacant lots, but due to lack of funding, little had come to fruition. Dallas County Chamber of Commerce Director Lauri Cothran said that the funding to the Selma Center was a sign that revitalization on “Water Avenue [was] beginning to take off.”¹¹⁹

Not all local residents shared Cothran’s enthusiasm for the Selma Center. In a letter to the editor of the *Selma Times Journal*, Gene Hisel raised concerns about the funding of a museum when the city faced high poverty, unemployment, and crime. Like Jacqueline Smith, the longtime protestor at the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Hisel felt the city should address social problems before building a tourist attraction.¹²⁰ NVRM volunteer Tarana Burke also criticized the new center and called for more local support for the NVRM. Burke was disturbed by Mayor Perkins and Rev. Reese’s interest in preserving the voting rights movement through the national trail, yet they had never worked with the NVRM. She also expressed disappointment that “some people are so afraid of inadvertently supporting Rose Sanders, that they stay clear of the museum.”¹²¹ Though Sanders

¹¹⁵ Cassandra Mickens, “U.S. Rep. Davis presents \$1M check for Interpretive Center,” *Selma Times-Journal*, 5 July 2007.

¹¹⁶ “Selma Interpretive Center design plans in the making,” *Selma Times Journal*, 20 July 2007.

¹¹⁷ National Park Service, “Centennial Initiative Grant Memo,” January 2008.

¹¹⁸ “Interpretive Center predesign up for approval,” *Selma Times Journal*, 19 March 2008.

¹¹⁹ “Life on Water Avenue,” *Selma Times Journal*, 25 June 2008.

¹²⁰ Gene Hisel, “Will new Center help the city?” *Selma Times Journal*, 22 March 2006.

and the NVRM had been supportive of the national historic trail, the partnership was apparently severed by 2007. Two years later the NVRM moved out of downtown to their new location across the bridge.

By early 2008, the \$35 million interpretive center project had garnered over \$16 million in federal, state, and local funding. But later that year, funds dried up as a result of the global economic recession. The poverty-stricken Black Belt was hit especially hard by the recession, and the unemployment rate was at 18% in Dallas County. Selma's downtown revitalization efforts, including the interpretive center, came to a halt.¹²² Of the planned improvements to the old Peoples Bank building, only the roof had been repaired by 2009. Selma Mayor George Evans hoped that "the Annual Bridge Crossing Jubilee [would] bring politicians and donors who are willing to help."¹²³ The Planning and Development Committee, now under the leadership of city council president, Cecil Williamson, stopped meeting during 2009 and 2010. According to *Selma Times Journal* editor Leesha Faulkner, the public was kept in the dark about the Selma Center.¹²⁴ By 2011, the city was able to secure enough economic stimulus and other funding to resume their downtown improvements. The Water Avenue revitalization project was nearly complete and progress had been made on the Riverfront Park and amphitheatre. Exterior work on the much-anticipated Selma Interpretive Center was almost complete, but the interior "would take a lot more time," explained Mayor George Evans.

Nevertheless, the center held a soft opening on March 2, 2011, just before the annual Bridge Crossing Jubilee. There was little fanfare, and only forty people attended.¹²⁵ Only the first floor of the three story facility is open to the public, and the exhibit space features a makeshift theater where visitors can watch *Never Lose Sight of Freedom*, the same film that is shown at the Lowndes County Interpretive Center. There is also an oral history interactive station and space for temporary exhibits, which are usually traveling photographic exhibits. The facility currently serves as more of a welcome center than an interpretive center, with an NPS employee on duty to answer tourists' questions and provide information about area attractions. Despite the thousands of tourists in Selma for the

¹²¹ Tarana Burke, "Museum deserves support," *Selma Times Journal*, 8 July 2007.

¹²² "Davis sets meeting for stimulus talk," *Selma Times Journal*, 10 June 2009.

¹²³ "Roof ready for interpretive center," *Selma Times Journal*, 5 February 2009.

¹²⁴ Leesha Faulkner, "City planning needs more organization," *Selma Times Journal*, 5 June 2010.

¹²⁵ Desiree Taylor, "City, civic leaders marvel at center," 4 March 2011.

Jubilee and the Battle of Selma reenactment during March, only eight hundred people visited in its the first month. Mayor Evans admitted “the overall impact still isn’t all the way there yet.”¹²⁶

Since its opening in 2011, the Center has seen some improvements. Using funds from the BP claim, the city was able to complete the façade work on the buildings near the Selma Interpretive Center, wrapping up the last of the Water Avenue revitalization. The NPS hopes to have permanent exhibits installed sometime in 2013, but exhibit concepts and interpretive plans have yet to be released to the public.¹²⁷ Like the Lowndes Center, the Selma Center has yet to achieve its expected visitorship and economic impact. The relationship, if there is one at all, between the Selma Center and the NVRM remains unclear. Perhaps one clue might be the recent NPS sponsorship of Selma’s annual Juneteenth celebration. The NVRM began hosting the annual festival in 2002, when they opened the Slavery and Civil War Museum. But in 2012, the Selma Center sponsored the celebration for the first time. NPS Park Ranger Theresa Hall noted that while other organizations have hosted the event in the past, she “hoped attendees would feel more pride in their heritage this year, and that people begin to realize that, as a community, if we work together we’ll get a lot more accomplished than if we’re working against each other.”¹²⁸

Progress on the third interpretive center in Montgomery has been even slower than in Lowndes County or Selma. Like the first two, construction of the third facility has been delayed due to lack of funding. The Montgomery Center’s biggest controversy, however, has been over its location. Even before the historic trail was established in 1996, many Black Belt residents felt that the center should be located at the City of St. Jude, the site where the protestors camped the last night before finishing their march to the state capitol. In addition to the site’s significance, the location near Interstate 65 was ideal for attracting tourists. In 2002, the AHC earmarked \$800,000 to purchase a 10-acre site on Fairview Avenue from the Catholic Diocese of Mobile. In 1937, the Catholic Diocese formed the City of St. Jude, a religious mission, not an actual city, to provide a school, hospital, and other social services to African Americans during segregation. The former campsite that the AHC wanted to purchase was now a shopping center that the City of St. Jude used as rental property, one of their biggest funding sources. The NPS said that while the City of St. Jude

¹²⁶ Veronica Pitts, NPS Park Ranger, Interview with author, 6 September 2012 and Chris Wasson, “Interpretive Center a popular draw,” *Selma Times Journal*, 9 April 2011.

¹²⁷ “Selma’s history should be preserved,” *Selma Times Journal*, 1 June 2011.

¹²⁸ Taylor Holland, “Juneteenth is scheduled for Saturday,” *Selma Times Journal*, 15 June 2012.

was under consideration, it was too soon to decide the final site for the interpretive center. The AHC did not purchase the property.¹²⁹

In 2004, the NPS officially announced that the center's location would be the City of St. Jude, and the AHC agreed to purchase the site on Fairview Avenue.¹³⁰ Three years later, the AHC had not yet purchased the property, and a new location was in the running. Alabama State University (ASU) officials submitted a proposal to the NPS to build the Montgomery Interpretive Center on their campus in May 2007. ASU archivist and history professor Howard Robinson argued that although the university was not along the historic trail, it "was incredibly important as a staging area," and key events leading up to the march occurred at ASU and in the surrounding neighborhoods. Robinson emphasized the university's plans for revitalizing part of their campus, and hoped to partner with the NPS. Dr. Gwen Patton noted a possible stipulation that required the center to be built on the actual march route, and Trail Superintendent Catherine Light agreed to look into it.¹³¹

Indeed, the national historic trail designation only applied to the marcher's route to the capital. But the NPS decided to consider the university, along with the City of St. Jude and three other sites, as potential locations for the center. The new sites included Trenholm State University, a historic black college, which was along the route; the old Mount Zion AME Church, where the Montgomery Improvement Association was founded, also along the route; and the old Durr Drug Building, civil rights attorney Clifford Durr's father building, and not along the route. In December 2007, the NPS held a public meeting and invited representatives from the five sites to make presentations. Only the ASU and Mount Zion came to the meeting, but Catherine Light said that the other locations would still be considered. Several meeting goers wondered why locations that were not along the march route were being considered. Bloody Sunday march leader and Lowndes Trail Advisor, Bob Mants criticized ASU for their "pitch for the site at the 11th hour."¹³² Father James Holden from the City of St. Jude declined to make a presentation saying that "the site [was] going to be there whether they have an interpretive center or not." Catherine Light indicated that the advisory council, a group of twenty-four foot soldiers and activists, would consider several factors

¹²⁹ Mike Sherman, "St. Jude part of plan for civil rights center," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 23 September 2002.

¹³⁰ NPS, "SEMO NHT Comprehensive Management Plan and Environmental Study," June 2004, 56, 62.

¹³¹ Alvin Benn, "ASU wants historic trail site moved to campus," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 18 May 2007.

¹³² Andre Coe, "Activists can't decide on historic site," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 7 December 2007.

including location, land ownership, and availability of parking. She said the decision would take several months and urged the public to be patient.¹³³

In October 2008, the advisory council met to vote on their decision for the Montgomery center location. Before the vote took place, Catherine Light surprised the council by announcing that she had already made up her mind; she was recommending ASU to the NPS officials.¹³⁴ Light said she came to her decision through the university's "model partnership plan," in which the NPS funded most of the construction and ASU pledged to cover the operational costs, including the maintenance, security, and groundkeeping. In addition to the university's generous funding offering, the estimated cost of \$14.6 million was the lowest of all the potential sites.¹³⁵ Many on the advisory council favored the City of St. Jude. They argued that if ASU is chosen visitors "will have to bypass the actual ending of the march and go to another part of town to learn what happened [at St. Jude]." Light said that the council could still vote, and if the City of St. Jude received the majority, the NPS would reexamine the issue. NPS official Jim Hainey indicated that ASU would likely be the location, unless environmental studies proved construction to be detrimental.¹³⁶

Two years later the NPS had not made a decision on the location for the interpretive center. However, they did announce plans to improve another portion of the trail near Interstates 65 and 85. The area was a thriving neighborhood when the marchers passed through in 1965, but was wiped out in the late 1970s when the interstates were built. The city of Montgomery partnered with Five Star Consortium LLC, a real estate development firm, in an urban revitalization project called the Renaissance Community. NPS hoped to join the public/private partnership, and announced plans to restore the trail in the Renaissance Community and place interpretive signage at key locations, including Mount Zion AME Church. NPS official Michael Burns emphasized the agency's primary focus was attracting visitors to the trail. Burns also said that although the new interpretive center was likely to be located off the trail, interpretive enhancements were being made along the trail.¹³⁷

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Alvin Benn, "Interpretive center recommendation raises eyebrows," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 27 October 2008.

¹³⁵ Alvin Benn, "Park service taps ASU for interpretive center," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 24 October 2008.

¹³⁶ Alvin Benn, "Interpretive center recommendation raises eyebrows," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 27 October 2008.

¹³⁷ Jill Nolin, "Businesses courted for historic marching trail's development," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 15 October 2010.

In January 2011, the NPS officially announced ASU as the Montgomery Interpretive Center's location. The trail's new superintendent Sandra Taylor did not think the university's location one mile from the trail would affect how the story was told. In fact, she thought ASU "enabled the center to tell the best story of the march." Bob Mants and other advisors were not pleased with the decision. Mants said that the process in which the Selma and Lowndes County centers were chosen was not the same one used in Montgomery, he had "no doubts that politicians interceded here." Many of the details had yet to be worked out, but initial plans called for a fifteen thousand square foot building with archives and a research facility. NPS officials hoped to open the interpretive center by the Selma to Montgomery March's fiftieth anniversary in 2015. The City of St. Jude and Mount Zion AME Church said they planned to develop their own historical attractions.¹³⁸

In September 2012, the NPS moved forward with their plans for the revitalization of a one mile portion of the trail near the interstates. After receiving a \$100,000 grant from the Environmental Protection Agency, they contracted with an urban planning firm to develop a master plan. The project team includes the AHC, the ALDOT, and the city of Montgomery. They are currently in the fundraising phase. Montgomery Planning Director Robert Smith indicated that the improvements would not be finished in time for the march's fiftieth anniversary.¹³⁹ The Montgomery Interpretive Center likely will not be completed by 2015 either. Plans for the center have not yet been made available to the public.

Exhibit Review

It is impossible to miss the massive, modern building rising from the empty, rural landscape, about halfway down the national historic trail. The Lowndes County Interpretive Center sits a football field's length from the highway, and its attractive exterior is loaded with symbolism. Lowndes County is represented through domed metal roof resembling a barn. Selma's Brown Chapel AME Church inspired the building's Romanesque Revival façade. The Edmund Pettus Bridge is displayed through a curved panel of windows on the top of the building. As the visitor approaches the center, historic highway improvements are evident through the dedicated turn lanes and the widened median to safely accommodate heavier traffic flow. A parking lot stretches over at least an acre of Black Belt soil. On the sidewalk in front of the center, an orientation kiosk welcomes

¹³⁸ Jill Nolin, "Interpretive center to be built at ASU," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 12 January 2011.

¹³⁹ Kala Kachmar, "Montgomery works to restore one-mile portion of the SEMO NHT," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 8 September 2012.

the visitor to the center and provides overviews of the Selma to Montgomery March and the Tent City site.



Figure 3.2: Lowndes County Interpretive Center

The visitor enters the building into a corridor that divides the rest area and museum sections of the building. A large map of the Selma to Montgomery March is shown on a long kiosk in the center of the hallway. The map marks key sites along the national historic trail and is repurposed in multiple formats, including interpretive panels and brochures. The kiosk also holds brochures and rack cards promoting civil rights attractions in the area. The National Voting Rights Museum is absent from the display, although it is mentioned in the state’s pamphlet for the “Alabama Civil Rights Trail.”

Off the hallway to the left, the visitor enters the museum portion of the building. The front desk extends out from the wall, and partitions off a large working area for staff directly behind it.

Opposite the desk on the south wall, several large graphic panels display images of the Selma to Montgomery March, Tent City, and people signing voter registration cards. The photos and text panels establish the center's storyline: the Selma to Montgomery march in local, regional, national, and international contexts. Each gallery in the museum encompasses each of the larger contexts, though the national story receives the most attention. The center presents the perspectives of Selma, Lowndes County, and Montgomery, but as the scope of the national historic trail designation required, or at least as the NPS chose to enforce, the focus is on the events related to the Selma to Montgomery March.



Figure 3.3: Introductory Exhibit

The visitor encounters the theater just before entering the main exhibit portion. The multipurpose space includes a large projection screen on the wall and seating for sixty people, and visitors can watch *Never Lose Sight of Freedom* in an “on-demand” format. The first gallery highlights the severity of the economic conditions and segregation before the march. On the far wall, two photomurals depict African American housing in the Black Belt, including a dilapidated shack on a

black tenant farm in Lowndes County and shotgun houses on an unpaved street in a neighborhood in Selma. Freestanding kiosks in the middle of the gallery feature frosted, translucent backgrounds with darkened silhouettes of a man, woman, and child. This is the first of many exhibits that avoids the use of traditional text panels, in a refreshing variation of the interpretive approach of many history museums. The photomurals are interpreted through a simple headline and caption, and the kiosks utilize personal statements as a secondary feature. These exhibits demonstrate the effectiveness of a minimal text strategy where images and other graphic treatments are used to convey content.

The next area serves as one of several transition exhibits between galleries in the museum. The simple displays provide a break in the larger exhibits and help prevent “information overload.” This section focuses in the larger historical context of the voting rights movement, with a quote from the 14th Amendment to the US Constitution prominently displayed on a curved wall. Several smaller photographic panels, including Emmett Till and “separate but equal” schooling environments, are interspersed across the wall along with a short text panel. The exhibit also features a video display covered by an “out of order” sign. Unfortunately, this is one of the four screens out of the five in the center that are broken.

As visitors move into the next gallery, they come across a four-part diorama depicting multiple local perspectives of the voting rights movement, including white landowners, poor blacks, middle-class blacks, and black churches. The thoughtful design of each vignette, along with the quotes and local photographs shows the extensive research efforts undertaken by the designers. The “independent African American” panel reveals that they had less to fear than poor blacks, and therefore were more likely to participate in the movement. The accompanying vignette features the Trickum Store, a Lowndes County black convenience store. The storefront is recreated through 1960s-era, metal sign advertisements for RC Cola and other products, and features a man sitting on the store’s porch about to play a game of checkers.



Figure 3.4: Lowndes County Residents Diorama

On the wall opposite the dioramas is the first of a series of timeline exhibits that cover key events related to the Selma to Montgomery March. The content is a perfectly balanced outline of the topics covered by the scholarly literature and follows along with the standard chronology of events before, during, and after the march. The exhibit design is consistent throughout the museum and incorporates multiple layers of interpretation. Interpretive panels are mounted at eye-level, and appeal to the standard levels of visitor engagement: streakers, strollers, and studiers.¹⁴⁰ A compelling photo dominates the panel and captures the attention of “streakers.” The short bold-faced headline appeals to “strollers,” while “studiers” will enjoy the longer interpretive text. The timeline sections in this gallery present such topics as mass meetings, the Dallas County Voters League inviting King to Selma, the city’s efforts to control Sheriff Jim Clark, and Jimmie Lee Jackson’s murder in Marion.

¹⁴⁰ Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* (Walnut Creek: CA, Altamira Press, 1996), 41-42.

Underneath the panels, artifact cases and reproductions of primary source documents sit on top of a long reading rail about three feet from floor level.



Figure 3.5: Selma to Montgomery March Timeline Exhibit

Artifacts in this exhibit include SNCC buttons and an electric cattle prod, while the original documents consist of a sworn statement of Montgomery registration applicants who were discriminated against, a voter registration literacy test, and voter education pamphlets. Above the interpretive panels, several quotes from march participants and local residents provide a more personal account of events. Perhaps the most insightful quote in this gallery is one from a white resident of Selma, “the colored people of our area have actually been the happiest of any others.” The perspective of many white citizens who were not involved in the Citizens’ Council or the Ku Klux Klan is usually overlooked in both civil rights literature and museums. However, it demonstrates exactly how ingrained and subtle racism was, and perhaps still is, in communities across the South.

Next, the visitor enters a transition area that portrays the events of Bloody Sunday. The wall is covered with a photomural of state troopers, many of whom are wearing gas masks, calmly approaching John Lewis, Hosea Williams, Albert Turner, and Bob Mants, at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The image does not depict the violence of Bloody Sunday, but instead conveys the suspense and tension moments before the brutal attack. The use of the less-violent image is not as much an attempt to sterilize the history, as it is an effort not to offend or scare visitors, especially children. The NPS carefully considered their approach to the controversial history. They hired Randi Korn & Associates to conduct frontend and formative evaluations to identify engaging content, including overly disturbing images. Lynching images were excluded as a result of the evaluation. The exhibits do not shy away from depicting the truth, including violence and offensive language, yet they are careful not to be excessively gruesome. In between the troopers and the marchers on the photomural is another “out of order” video display. Before leaving this section, the visitor encounters an artifact case holding a state trooper’s uniform with a nightstick mounted like it is about to be struck down on a marcher, along with the movie camera used to film the footage on Bloody Sunday.



Figure 3.6: Bloody Sunday Exhibit

Note: John Lewis, Hosea Williams, Bob Mants, and Albert Turner are shown to the right of the video display.

The timeline resumes in the next exhibit and features the events between Bloody Sunday and the subsequent marches, including “Turnaround Tuesday” and violence during student protests in Montgomery. Next to the timeline, an eye-catching display highlights the national attention the march received through a montage of enlarged newspaper headlines covering the wall. The wall also holds the museum’s only functioning video screen. The video display resembles a 1960s television set and shows President Lyndon Johnson’s March 15, 1965 speech to Congress. Along the wall leading to the next gallery, multiple perspectives of the march are presented through quotes, large images, and short text panels. These viewpoints, including supportive bystanders, white marchers, reporters, hecklers, and National Guardsmen, emphasize accounts that are often overlooked in other narratives.



Figure 3.7: Marcher Mannequins

Note: Bob Mants’ quote, “To those who bore the burden in the heat of the day,” inscribed in floor.

The visitor moves into a large, open exhibit space dedicated to the events during the Selma to Montgomery March. The center of the room is filled with several life-sized, resin-cast mannequins representing the marchers. With their shiny, metallic finishes, these monochromatic mannequins are an updated version of the popular neutral-hued ones used in earlier civil rights museums. The best view of the diorama is looking at the mannequins head-on, with the sea of people behind them visible in the photomural background. In the far corner of the gallery, the visitor finds another cleverly designed, but poorly executed, low-tech interactive. Photographs of the march taken by journalist Peter Pettus are shown as strips of negatives on an attractive back-lit display. Each of the negatives is numbered to correspond with a marcher's quote or description that is displayed on nearby, handheld graphics. Unfortunately, the graphic cards are difficult to flip through, and the cord that attaches them to the wall is too short to reach to the corresponding image. This display, however, like many in the museum, highlights the primary sources that historians use to examine the movement. By not only showing the original sources, but also discussing who created them and why they were created, inspires visitors to think critically about the historical research process.

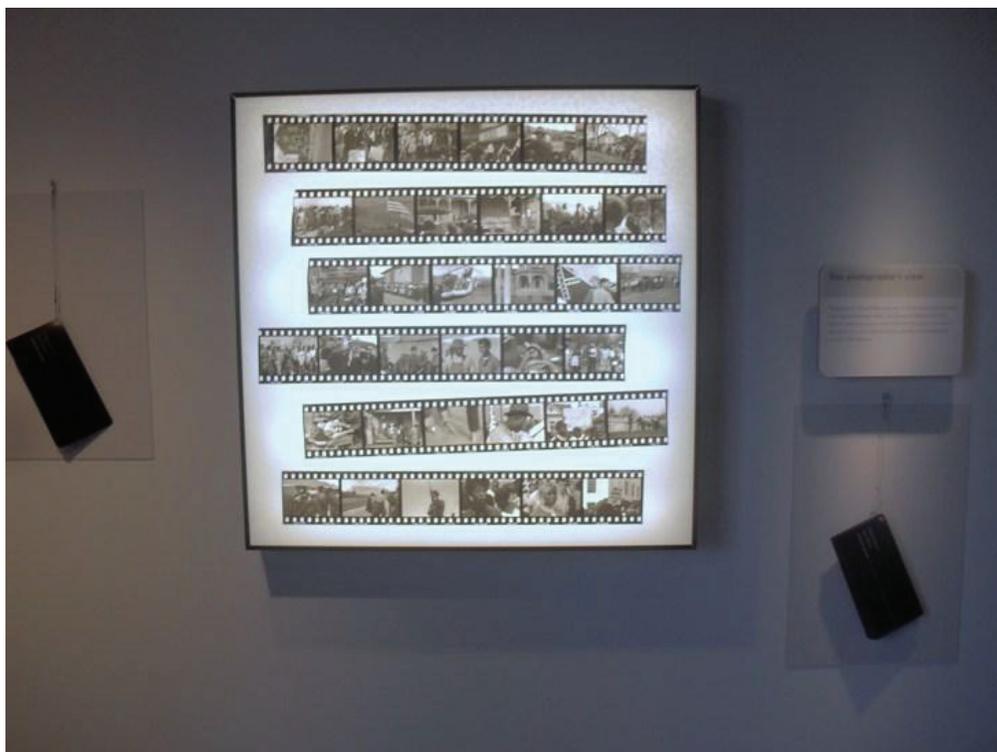


Figure 3.8: Peter Pettus Photo Interactive

On the other side of the gallery, the visitor encounters the familiar trail map now included as part of an interpretive panel that details the daily events of the march. This is also an often overlooked area in the academic literature, as few sources cite the day to day activity of the march. The map is color coded to show the distance traveled each day, and also includes several photographs. The image of Viola Liuzzo is noteworthy; instead of the usual headshot of the Detroit housewife turned protestor, it depicts Liuzzo participating in the march. Just past the map, a large graphic panel shows another lesser-known image of the march. The compelling photo is taken from the fields alongside the highway, at an angle looking up at the marchers. The shot makes the marchers appear larger than life, and also captures the ominous thunderclouds swirling in the sky above their heads.

Underneath the photo, the visitor peers into three artifact cases near floor level. The case in the middle holds the American flag that Lowndes County resident Timothy Mays carried during the march. Artifacts in the outside cases represent white and black perspectives, and include a state trooper's rain poncho and a marcher's shoes and hat. Particularly interesting are the propaganda brochures distributed shortly after the march to denounce the "immoral" and "communist" marchers, including "The Other Side of the Story" printed by the Dallas County Chamber of Commerce. This gallery's concluding exhibit is a freestanding interpretive panel that presents the "triumph at the capitol." A quote from Martin Luther King's "How Long, Not Long" speech is a prominent feature at the top of the panel. Perhaps footage of the speech is shown on the broken video screen included in the display. The visitor next moves onto a transition exhibit that discusses the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The wall consists of interpretive text and a large photo of President Johnson signing the act in front of King and other leaders. A simple, yet effective, flipbook displays the verbatim text of the law, along with plain language translations of many sections. Most of the academic sources would benefit from a similar straightforward explanation of the act.

Leaving the transition section, visitors enter a huge, green canvas tent and find themselves in a walk-through diorama of a Lowndes County family's tent "home." The immersive environment uses furniture, other objects, photographs, and interpretive labels to depict daily life in Tent City. First the visitor encounters a bed with the butt of a shotgun poking out from under the mattress. The label notes that residents needed guns to protect themselves from frequent acts of violence. A dresser stands at the foot of the bed, and visitors are invited to open the drawers to see representative objects of personal belongings, such as toys and clothing. Above the dresser, historic photographs present interior shots of a tent and of another encampment in nearby Greene County.

A particularly compelling photo shows a pregnant young woman and her family in their tent. The label explains that she went into labor and was denied treatment at a white hospital. She died en route to another hospital.



Figure 3.9: Tent City Diorama

The canvas doors at the back of the tent are tied up to reveal more tents in a photomural background. An interpretive panel notes that many families who were evicted left Lowndes County, or had to split up to find housing. SNCC helped organize Tent City so that the families could stay together. In front of the mural, the visitor sits on a bench and notices another clumsy set of graphic cards tethered to the tent's pole. The cards contain a transcription for the audio program for this exhibit, however, there was no audio program in the exhibit. On the wall near the tent's exit stands a makeshift shelving unit for family belongings, including a kerosene lamp, cooking and eating

utensils, and personal hygiene items. A two-way radio interactive on the top shelf helps to shed light on an often ignored aspect of communication during in the movement, a particularly timely topic given the recent protests in the Arab world that utilized social media. Sadly this interactive was broken, as well.

The visitor steps out of the tent into the final gallery and encounters the conclusion of the timeline along the wall to the left. The overview of events includes voter registration attempts after the march, continued racism and violence, and the founding of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. Documents are displayed on the reader rail, including a pamphlet written by Stokely Carmichael on the history of the Black Panther Party and a cartoon-strip voter registration guide from the LCFO. The most powerful item, however, is a crime scene photo of murdered Tuskegee Institute student Sammy Younge lying in a pool of blood. Separating two sections of the timeline, an artifact case houses an LCFO newsletter from 1966 that talks about the failure to secure blacks in local government in the recent election. The case also holds a mechanical voting machine model used by Montgomery's citizenship schools. The final section of the timeline brings the movement to the present, highlighting that success of the voting rights movement in bringing political equality not only for African Americans, but all citizens. The exhibit also points out that economic power has been slow to come, and that flaws remain in the electoral system.

Visitors are invited to sit around a table in the center of the room and write their thoughts or comments on paper, which can be deposited into a receptacle resembling a ballot box. Across two walls behind the table, the exhibit's conclusion connects the voting rights movement in the Black Belt to the larger national and international contexts, and emphasizes that the struggle for political equality continues today. Another montage of newspaper headlines documents recent international voting triumphs and challenges, including events in South Africa, Namibia, Jordan, and India. The final panel seeks to inspire visitors by noting "citizens like you can make a difference," and extends an invitation to the rest of the sites on the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail.



Figure 3.10: Conclusion Exhibit

Overall, the Lowndes County Interpretive Center is an outstanding museum grounded in all of the professional-industry standards, especially those related to accessibility, interpretive, and learning styles. The museum's federal funding is obvious through its professionally designed and fabricated exhibits. The superb research and interpretive efforts undertaken by both the content and design teams should also be noted. The museum incorporates all of the available scholarly literature, and even adds to the scholarship through the oral history project the NPS conducted. The exhibits constitute a perfectly balanced presentation of the Selma to Montgomery March, focusing on the national scale, but also incorporating the voice of the local participants.

Unfortunately, the Lowndes County story became a victim of the NPS' overview approach, along with the historiographical debate between the agency and the public related to the national historic trail legislation. Though local stories are presented throughout, both Selma and Lowndes County's narratives focus on the national perspective. Lowndes County receives much less attention than Selma, but the county was never meant to be the focus. However, it appears as though the general public neither consented to nor was aware of the museum's storyline. The museum

highlights Tent City, a dramatic and important part of the Lowndes County story, but the exhibits barely touch on the Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights or Lowndes County Freedom Organization. Only a small fraction of the county's rich history is shown. It certainly did not live up to Bob Mants' hope of honoring "those who bore the burden in the heat of the day."

To be sure, the lack of scholarly literature is partially to blame, though Jeffries' dissertation and the oral history interviews shed much light on the county's history. The biggest factors in the way the Lowndes Story was commemorated were the NPS' bureaucratic obligations and the interpretive approach of the museum's designers. As a result, the museum has alienated many local, and perhaps outside, visitors. As for the national historic trail's failure to deliver on the economic benefits it promised, perhaps the project planners were too optimistic in their predictions. The museum's projected annual visitorship of 185,000 rivals that of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Alabama's top civil rights attraction. Some might wonder how a museum in the middle of the rural Black Belt could ever attract as many visitors as one in the state's largest city.

It is easy to offer advice for improvement six years after the center opened. But the absence of plans for the other two centers begs the question: What stories could or should be told at the three interpretive centers? Perhaps the national historic trail would benefit from looking at the voting rights movement in the same way historians have, as a series of unique local movements. Each Interpretive Center could have focused on the Selma to Montgomery March, along with the local events during the voting rights movement. This approach would have covered the events of the march and honored the local story, allowing for unique and compelling stories at each facility.

CONCLUSION

Museums are significant agents in constructing public memory. There are many factors that influence the collective memory of the movement. The museum's creation is often spurred by, and widely supported, because of the promise of economic development through heritage tourism. Government officials, local residents, and other stakeholders anticipated that the museums would prove to be economic boosts. The museums are funded by a combination of the government, corporate, philanthropic, and private entities who all hoped that, in addition to commemorating the movement, the museums would generate revenue and provide jobs in the local area. It is difficult to isolate the museum's impact on the larger local economy, but overall, heritage tourism in Alabama is a \$6.8 billion industry. Not all of the museums in this study have lived up to expectations.

The development of each museum, and other cultural heritage sites, are almost always accompanied by larger revitalization projects. The Rosa Parks Museum was tied to Troy State University's campus and other downtown renovations. The National Voting Rights Museum was part of, and then removed itself from, Selma's downtown historic district improvements. The interpretive centers along the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail have been tightly woven with revitalization projects, from the Selma Center's spurring of improvements along Water Avenue, roadway enhancements along Highway 80 near the Lowndes Center, and the Montgomery Center's future construction as part of the city and Alabama State University's urban renaissance plans.

Though visitorship to each site has remained consistent or increased in recent years, the museums have suffered under the current economic climate due to lack of funding. Indeed, it seems as though cultural and educational institutions will always be short of monetary, staff, and other resources. Funding remains one of the biggest obstacles for museums.

In addition to impacting the economy, museums also influence the scholarship of the movement. Unlike the scholarly literature, museums can connect with its audience by presenting the real, or recreated, objects and places of history. Civil rights museums are taking advantage of these interpretive opportunities to personally engage the public with the story of the movement. In addition, museums offer new ways to look at the civil rights movement. Each of the museums has contributed to the scholarship by creating, preserving, and displaying new resources from which to examine the movement through documents, objects, and oral histories.

The Rosa Parks Museum inspired the preservation of police and government documents, as well as Bus 2057, though it is not located at the museum in Montgomery. While the Rosa Parks Museums has focused on documents, the NVRM and the Lowndes County Interpretive Center

boast collections of both 2D and 3D items. The NVRM has collected many unique items, including marchers' clothing, Sheriff Jim Clark's personal items, and the compelling photographs of Bloody Sunday from the Alabama State Troopers.

Through their "Antiques Road Show" event and their connections to local veterans, the NPS has amassed a collection of over one thousand items, including SNCC's and the LCFO's political flyers and other publications, Peter Pettus' photographs of the march, and artifacts from state and local law enforcement.

In addition to collecting and preserving physical items, all three of the museums conducted oral history projects, and often use the interviews to enhance their exhibits. The Rosa Parks Museum and the Lowndes County Interpretive Center used the interviews to create interactive oral history exhibits at both facilities. In addition to the interactive, the NPS has also used the interviews in a video, an educational resource kit, and the transcripts are available online. The NVRM has collected over five hundred interviews, though it is unclear how they are used in the museum or if they are available to researchers.

Civil rights museums allow the public to explore the history of the movement by engaging in the authentic places of history. Each of the museums seeks to make a personal connection of the visitors through their proximity of the physical sites they interpret and their recreation of the "scenes" of the history. The sites of the history are an important theme in all of the museums. The exhibits evoke a sense of place through photographs, dioramas, and other design elements.

In Montgomery, the historic Empire Theater was torn down to make way for the new \$7 million Rosa Parks Museum. Though the theater building had its own history, value was given to the site of Rosa Parks' arrest, not Hank Williams, Sr.'s musical debut. Inside the museum, great attention has been paid to reconstructing the scene of the arrest through the impressive bus theater. The bus' importance is reinforced in the time machine in the museum's Children's Wing.

In Selma, the story of the voting rights movement is most often told near the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The NVRM's first location was in an old cotton warehouse, near the old Citizen's Council hangout near the bridge in downtown Selma. The present locations of the NVRM and the Selma Center are at opposite ends of the bridge. The Selma Center is housed in a newly renovated historic building on the Selma side of the foot of the bridge, while the NVRM is located in a less attractive facility, at the site of Bloody Sunday.

In Lowndes County, the White Hall site was chosen over other Black Belt sites because of its location along the national historic trail. Though the tents at the temporary site had long been

disassembled, the state and federal governments purchased the land in part due to its proximity to Tent City. The building's exterior incorporates design elements representing iconic places in Selma to Montgomery March. The Center recreated the interior of a tent inside the museum, in what proved to be an effective interpretative tactic. In Montgomery, controversies related to the site abounded when deciding where to locate the interpretive center. Ultimately, Alabama State University was chosen, and while it has an historical tie to the march, it is not along the historic trail. Many locals felt the museum should have been located at the City of St. Jude, an important civil rights site, including where the marchers' camped on the last night before Montgomery.

Along with the theme of place, civil rights museums are also looking at many of the same themes addressed in the academic literature. In many ways, the museums follow in the path set by the historians' in the evolution of the scholarly literature. Museums have begun to address the more recent historiographical trends, but seem to lag just behind historians in their incorporation of local studies, the long civil rights movement, and multiple perspectives in the civil rights history. Historians have been addressing the movement at the local level for over two decades, but some civil rights museums continue to suffer lack of resources documenting the local history of the movement. Many locations that are worthy of museums have undoubtedly suffered from the lack of primary and secondary sources at the local level through which to examine the movement. Hopefully as historians continue to address the movement at the local level, new museums will be created to display the scholarship.

However, the museums in this study have not been affected by a lack of published literature. A variety of primary and secondary sources documenting the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Selma to Montgomery March are available. The Lowndes County movement has not received as much scholarly attention, but Hasan Jeffries' dissertation and the oral history interviews offer thorough enough analysis to construct a narrative of the local history. However, the availability of more sources likely would not have changed the focus of the story the NPS chose to tell at the Lowndes County Center, and this is representative of the larger historiographical debate in museums. The lack of museums presenting the local story reveals that museums have yet to realize what the historians have: that each of the local movements provide a unique opportunity in which to examine the one of the most significant social, political, and economic revolutions of modern times.

Like historians, civil rights museums do not agree on a standard chronology of the movement. Each museum constructs its own narrative of the long civil rights movement. They begin their story in different places. The Rosa Parks Museum begins their timeline in the 1830s with

the origins of the Jim Crow tradition. Both the NVRM's and the Lowndes Center's voting rights narratives start during Reconstruction in late 1860s. The museums end their stories in the present in an effort to make the history relevant to visitors, and also provide a sense of triumph over our painful, racial history.

Historians have begun to examine the movement from many different perspectives, and civil rights museums have followed suit in many ways. All of the museums employed the Great Man and the everyman narratives of the movements, focusing on both the leaders and the foot soldiers of the movement at both the national and local levels. Each of the museums also examined the white perspective to varying degrees. The NVRM chose to leave out many key viewpoints to focus on the black perspective. They presented Ku Klux Klan violence, and to a lesser degree white martyrs, as their only versions of white involvement in the movement. On the other hand, the Rosa Parks Museum and the Lowndes Center display the diverse roles and actions of whites in the movement, including supporters, martyrs, officials, politicians, Citizens Council, KKK, and everyday citizens. Unlike historians, museums have yet to examine the more controversial story of divisions within the black community.

Perhaps not surprisingly, politics plays the biggest role in remembering the civil rights movement in museums. All of the museums included local movement veterans in the commemoration process. And they all receive funding from a combination of federal, state, and local agencies. Each museum found a different balance between the political entities and historical actors, and this balance directly impacted the version of the civil rights history that is exhibited. The museums' creators hold enormous power in the collective memory process. Whether foot soldiers or government agencies, the museums' creators draw from the past and the present to create a powerful vehicle by which to convey civil rights history, along with their own unique agendas. The stories that the creators choose to highlight, and those they choose to leave out, offer much insight into the collective memory of the civil rights movement.

Each museum's own history and the history they present offer new insight on the movement's meanings and legacies. In many ways, the legacy of the movement as shown through the museum parallels the movement itself in each of the communities. The events of the Montgomery Bus Boycott proved to be much less "messy" than those in the larger Black Belt. The boycott was universally supported, and united the black community. Likewise, the Rosa Parks Museum has escaped much controversy that surrounds the other two museums.

At the other end of the spectrum is the NVRM, whose founders and exhibits are steeped in controversy. Selma's long held racial tensions continue to permeate throughout the local community. The museum's founders, Rose and Hank Sanders, have both come under fire for their controversial actions, both inside and outside the context of the NVRM. Indeed, Rose Sanders has made many enemies in her attempt to tell the "story of the movement left out of the history books." Sanders and her museum are sources of much disagreement in the local community. As they did in March 1965, Selma's controversies continue to make national headlines; most recently through the ongoing saga of the Nathan Bedford Forrest memorial.

The legacy of the Lowndes County Interpretive Center is similar to the county's civil rights history in that it highlights local peoples' disappointment with the government. As they had so many times in the past, locals felt as though they were failed by the federal government, this time through the exclusion of their story from the NPS' museum. State and local officials' involvement in the landfill scandal adds to the public's mistrust of government. In addition, the multiple communication failures and time delays did not endear the museum to residents' hearts. At least for now, the Lowndes County movement and its legacies remain out of the public view.

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