

A City Embraces Its Past, Looks to the Future

A Perspective on the Evolution of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute

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ABSTRACT: The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute marks its twenty-fifth year as the focal point for the city's civil rights district. Inspired by the vision of Mayor David Vann, it became a reality under the leadership of the Dr. Richard Arrington, the city's first African American mayor. A team of committed community volunteers led the institute through thirteen years of development in spite of corporate skepticism and citizen resistance. BCRI evolved as a model for staff development, community engagement and leadership and is now a key partner in the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument, a unit of the National Park Service established in 2017.

KEY WORDS: civil rights, local politics, museums, Birmingham, community engagement,

“The Civil Rights Institute will challenge the long-respected notion that museums are only a lifeless series of static exhibits. Every phase of development has been skillfully designed to recapture the energy of the civil rights movement. Every detail, including the location of the Institute, is significant in telling the story of the civil rights struggle in Birmingham and around the nation. . . . The Institute will celebrate the civil rights movement's transformation of the nation and the world.” *Birmingham Civil Rights Institute Brochure, City of Birmingham, Mayor's Office, 1990*¹

This aspirational quote from an early promotional brochure created by the mayor's office reflected the philosophy that guided the early development of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BCRI) and continues to shape its programming. The choice of the name “institute” rather than “museum” resulted from the belief that the word museum implies static, boring, elitist content without wide appeal. It was important that the new institution celebrate and be accessible to the people whose commitment fueled the Civil Rights Movement, that is, “ordinary” citizens. This

¹ City of Birmingham, *Birmingham Civil Rights Institute* brochure (Birmingham: The Office of the Mayor, 1990).

theme of “elites” versus “common folk” would emerge as a point of contention throughout the development of the institute.

The institute’s founders selected a location that was an integral part of the city’s civil rights history. Erected on the southwest corner of Sixteenth Street and Sixth Avenue North, it was built directly across from two of the iconic sites of the Civil Rights Movement, Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and Kelly Ingram Park. Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was the “staging area” for the hundreds of young demonstrators who participated in the May 1963 Children’s Campaign and was subsequently bombed on September 15, 1963 killing four girls. In Kelly Ingram Park, young demonstrators faced violent opposition from police commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor. Images of these confrontations, including the use of attack dogs and fire hoses, seared the conscience of the nation and have become iconic symbols of the Civil Rights Movement. The fact that Birmingham continues to be identified with those horrific pictures contributed to some local resistance to the establishment of an institution that commemorated civil rights.

Today, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute enjoys a reputation as a national leader in the field, a catalyst for state and local heritage tourism, and the educational anchor for the new Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument established in 2017. Although BCRI opened on November 15, 1992 to much fanfare with participation by high profile leaders and coverage by national and international news outlets, its future path was uncertain and success yet to be proven. Along with its sister institution, the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, which opened a year earlier, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute was a pioneering institution in civil rights history and heritage tourism. Reports that more than 25,000 people visited the site during the opening week indicated the level of interest and need for such an institution. Its creation, however, was rife with struggle and controversy.

Not Without Struggle

Between the passage of the city council resolution supporting a “civil rights museum” in 1979 to the opening of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in 1989, there was a thirteen year journey fraught with delays and disappointments that were overcome by a determined group of leaders who refused to be discouraged or defeated. Within the narrative of its development, there are intriguing subplots of race and politics.

Former Mayor David Vann is credited with bringing the initial vision for a civil rights “museum” to the City of Birmingham. During a tour of Israel with the nation’s mayors, Vann was deeply impressed by his visit to Holocaust memorials. He was convinced that Birmingham needed a museum to commemorate the Civil Rights Movement. Vann’s assessment was rooted in his involvement in events that transformed Birmingham in 1963. A white attorney and political liberal, Vann came to Birmingham after clerking for US Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black. Vann was a leader of the Young Men’s Business Club, the organization that promoted the

petition drive that led to a change in city government from commission to mayor and city council and ultimately, resulted in the ouster of Bull Connor. Vann also mediated negotiations that led to the “Accord of Conscience,” a commitment by key businesses to end segregated service and hiring.² Vann was elected to the new Birmingham City Council in 1971 along with Richard Arrington Jr., a zoologist and faculty member at Miles College. The two developed a friendship and strong alliance that helped Vann be elected as Birmingham’s mayor in 1975. Subsequently, a resolution supporting formation of a civil rights museum was passed by the city council in 1979.

In that same year, an officer-involved shooting would contribute to Vann’s defeat and Arrington’s election as the city’s first Black mayor. Bonita Carter, an unarmed twenty-year old African American woman, was shot and killed by a white police officer. Disorder and violent confrontations erupted between whites and Blacks in the surrounding neighborhood. The police department’s ruling that the shooting was “justified” and Vann’s failure to dismiss the officer enraged the Black community. Using many of the organizational tactics developed during the Civil Rights Movement, leaders activated the city’s majority black electorate to give Arrington a small margin of victory in the hotly contested race. Arrington would go on to become the city’s longest serving mayor, retaining the office for twenty years (1979–99).³

As would be the case throughout its development, political turmoil and controversy delayed but never derailed the effort to develop an institution to memorialize Birmingham’s Civil Rights Movement. As historian Glenn Eskew writes, “A core group of six individuals deserve credit for seeing the project through to completion . . . four trained historians, four white men, and two African Americans.” The individuals involved included, “David Vann, Marvin Whiting (Birmingham Public Library Archivist), Robert Corley (Historian, University of Alabama at Birmingham), Edward Lamont (Arrington’s Chief of Staff), Horace Huntley (Historian, University of Alabama at Birmingham), and Odessa Woolfolk (Director, Center for Urban Affairs, University of Alabama at Birmingham).”⁴ Over the ensuing years, this core group joined by other dedicated individuals would work unwaveringly to develop the concepts that would eventually be incorporated as part of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute.

During this time, some state legislators were also proposing the creation of a museum to commemorate the Civil Rights Movement. Although these proposals were never implemented, the Alabama Department of Tourism began to promote the state’s civil rights heritage. Ironically, or perhaps fittingly, these initiatives

² Richard Arrington, *There’s Hope for the World: The Memoir of Birmingham, Alabama’s First African American Mayor* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2008), 171.

³ Glenn Eskew, “The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and the New Ideology of Tolerance,” in *The Civil Rights Movement and American Memory*, eds. Renee C. Romano and Leight Raiford (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2006), 30.

⁴ Ibid.

started during George Wallace's fourth term as governor in 1984. Wallace, who infamously blocked integration at the University of Alabama and preached "segregation today, segregation forever" at his inauguration in 1963, came to embrace civil rights history as a catalyst for tourism twenty years later.

In 1982, Arrington named Vann and Huntley as co-chairs of a Civil Rights Museum Study Committee. Based on the committee's recommendations, Arrington created the Civil Rights Institute Task Force in 1986 and named as co-chairs the interracial team of Woolfolk and businessman Frank Young, chairman of the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce. The 1986 mission statement for the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute provided the philosophical and practical guidelines for its development.

The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute will be an educational, cultural and research center. It will include an exhibition and information center as well as a depository of historical materials. . . . Significantly, the Institute will be not only a local history museum, but also a "living institution" with a national and international scope. The basic purposes of the Institute are to focus on what happened in the past, to portray it realistically and interestingly and to understand it in relationship to the present and future development of human relations.⁵

As the task force continued its work, many in the business community remained skeptical and opposed the project. This opposition was expressed in concerns that such a museum would dredge up bad memories, open old racial wounds, and reinforce the negative images of the city. As a result, many white business leaders declined invitations to serve on the founding board of directors. According to founding board member Frank Young, "It was not a popular cause. I was in my early forties when I was appointed to the task force. More senior partners and business people tried to persuade me personally to get out of the project. . . . I respectfully disagreed. To heal, you face very squarely what you did wrong and admit you are sorry."⁶

The project had detractors in the Black community as well. Although movement leaders were named to the board of directors, some complained that movement "foot soldiers"—the men, women, and children who participated in the demonstrations—were not involved in the leadership or planning. Others, including neighborhood leaders, grumbled that city funds would be better spent on improvements to city services such as street maintenance. Even the high-profile endorsement of Rev. Fred L. Shuttlesworth, the leader of the Birmingham movement, could not defuse the criticism.

⁵ "The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (1992–2002)," *Alabama Heritage Magazine* 66 (Fall 2002): 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*

This depth of opposition became apparent when voters rejected two successive bond measures that included funding for building the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. The 1986 bond required a property tax increase and was soundly defeated by both Black and white voters. Arrington acknowledged his deep disappointment, particularly with Black voters who previously had never failed to approve a single bond issue.⁷ Confronted with strong opposition from white corporate leaders, Arrington pressed on and the city council approved a second bond measure to go to voters in 1988. Concentrating his efforts to rally support in Black neighborhoods, the mayor's actions drew criticism from local media and vocal opposition from "an anti-tax and anti-Arrington group calling itself the Tax-Busters."⁸ Noting the lukewarm reception he received from public housing residents on referendum day, Arrington was again disappointed when the bond issue was defeated for a second time. On behalf of the task force, Odessa Woolfolk suggested that the mayor explore other ways to raise the needed funds.

In describing these setbacks and the new plan to raise money, Arrington explained:

Licking my wounds, most of which had not healed from the defeat of the first referendum, I began to search for other ways to fund BCRI . . . Finally, the staff came up with the suggestion that the city sell a building owned by the city's Building Authority. The sale of that building for \$7.2 million in revenue bonds from the Historical Preservation Authority, and \$2 million in city warrants, generated \$9.2 million that would eventually be used toward the \$12 million BCRI cost. Work on the BCRI accelerated.⁹

Ground was broken for the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in 1990 and it quickly became embroiled in controversy that persisted during what Arrington described as the "three most turbulent years of my twenty-year term as mayor."¹⁰ Arrington's administration was the object of more than a dozen investigations related to allegations of misconduct by the US Attorney's office. Arrington was never indicted and categorized the investigations as "racially motivated." Arrington's decision to protest the investigation by marching in chains in downtown Birmingham with civil rights leaders was a controversial move that drew criticism from political opponents and some allies. Management of the BCRI project was the subject of one investigation that resulted in a guilty plea for bribery by an Atlanta architect and conviction of a Birmingham consultant. Two days before the opening of BCRI in 1992, the mayor was exonerated when the US Attorney's office announced that the two-year inquiry had ended.¹¹

⁷ Arrington, *There's Hope for the World*, 173–74.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 175–176.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 175–176.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹¹ "Facing Up to Racial Pains of the Past, Birmingham Moves On," *The New York Times*, November 15, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/15/us/facing-up-to-racial-pains-of-past-birmingham-moves-on.html>.



Mayor Richard Arrington Jr. and Odessa Woolfolk, BCRI Founding President Emerita, during construction of Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. (Photograph courtesy of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute.)

In spite of failed bond measures, corporate resistance, community skepticism, and legal controversy, the BCRI Task Force continued its work and local support increased. In addition to funding from the city, Odessa Woolfolk and Frank Young effectively utilized their combined influence and contacts to overcome initial resistance from the business community to launch a successful corporate capital campaign. Although the City of Birmingham provided funding for the construction of the building, Woolfolk and Young secured the support of a team of corporate leaders, and raised more than \$4,000,000 to finance the creation of a permanent exhibition and sustain the operating budget.

A Place of Revolution and Reconciliation

Although the BCRI Task Force engaged noted national firms with proven professional expertise, they worked to assure that the project was informed by local voices and directed by experienced Birmingham residents. The group approved schematic drawings designed by the architectural firm Bond Ryder James and a program statement developed by the American History Workshop. Wetzel and Associates led the exhibition design.

The building's inspirational design, created by Max Bond, was as intentional as its location. The circular dome atop the L-shaped building immediately became the



The building of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute was designed by Max Bond. The circular dome immediately became the trademark symbol for the Institute. (Photograph courtesy of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Photograph by Billy Brown)

trademark symbol for the institute. The pattern of the earth-tone bricks installed within the concrete sidewalk is reminiscent of traditional African mud cloth and repeats the design of walkways through Kelly Ingram Park. A tree-lined, tiered courtyard allows visitors to enter via steps and ramps and opens into a circular rotunda highlighted by the dome with light from its center and circling small windows creating a welcoming space. Located on the second floor of the 58,000 square foot building, the permanent exhibition is divided into thematic galleries with no windows and low lighting. As the storyline moves into the March on Washington, the space opens with windows overlooking Kelly Ingram Park to the east and Sixteenth Street Baptist Church to the north. A “processional” of life-size monochromatic figures depicts marchers.¹²

The tour experience begins with an opening film that tells the story of Birmingham’s post–Civil War founding in 1871 to its rise as “The Magic City,” a southern industrial powerhouse producing much of the nation’s iron and steel. The film ends with President Warren Harding’s landmark speech on race during a visit to Birmingham in 1921, marking the city’s fiftieth anniversary. President Harding spoke of

¹² “Civil Rights: A Complete Guide to Birmingham’s Civil Rights District,” *Birmingham Business Journal*, October 1992.

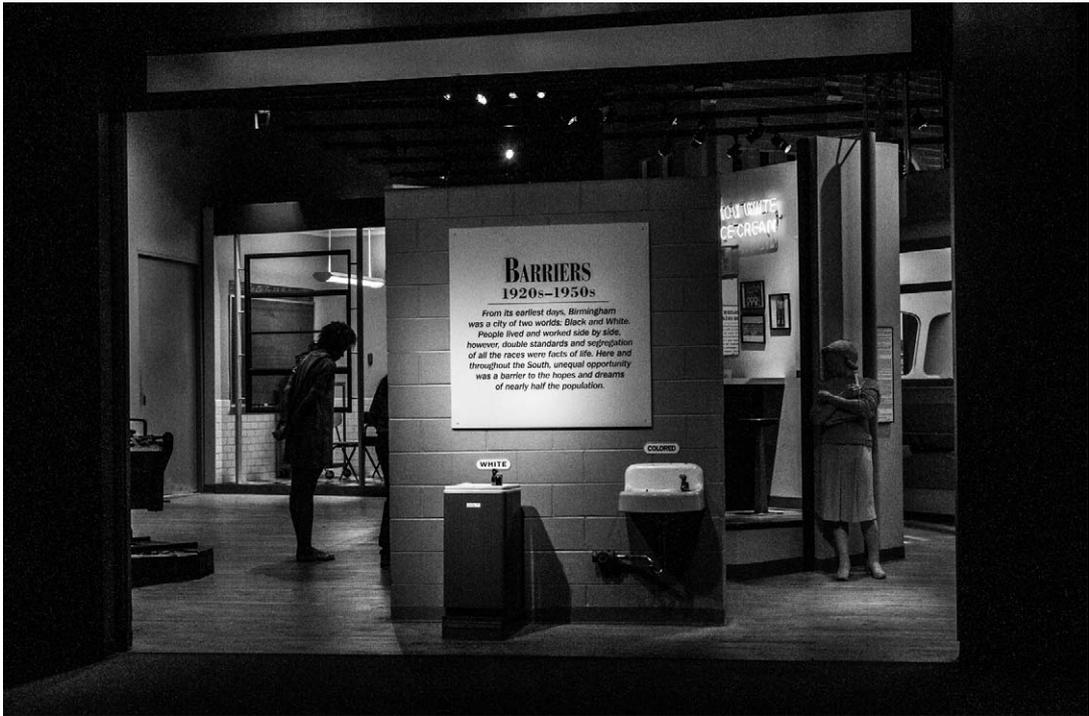


The processional gallery of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute features life-sized monochromatic marcher figures. (Photograph courtesy of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Photograph by Billy Brown)

political equality as a guarantee of the US Constitution, stating: “Let the Black man vote when he is fit to vote; prohibit the white man voting when he is unfit to vote.”¹³ The narrator of the film concludes: “Black people cheered. Whites were silent.” The film sets the stage for exploring the struggle for racial equality in Birmingham.

Although the building design and exhibitions drew rave reviews, some controversy continued. People questioned the use of monochromatic (gray) statues even though racial ethnicity was captured in the features of the people. An even greater controversy erupted over a statue of three kneeling ministers to be located at one entrance to Kelly Ingram Park. The statue originally was designed to have the images of three ministers who led a march on Palm Sunday 1963—Reverends N. H. Smith, John Porter, and A. D. King—after Martin Luther King, Fred Shuttlesworth, and Ralph Abernathy were arrested. Responding to protests from Rev. Shuttlesworth and others, the sculptor removed the likenesses and used models to create a more generic statue recognizing the involvement of all ministers in the movement. In 2009, seventeen years later, a plaque was installed that named the three ministers.

¹³ Warren G. Harding, speech, October 26, 1921.



The “Barriers” Gallery of BCRI depicts life under segregation, beginning with two water fountains marked “white” and “colored.” (Photograph courtesy of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Photograph by Billy Brown)

The “Barriers” gallery depicting life under segregation reveals two water fountains marked “white” and “colored.” This gallery poignantly and pointedly illustrates the impact of segregation in work, play, school, worship, and the courts. The board, however, was insistent that this gallery also highlight the vibrant, independent Black community that developed its own businesses, places of worship, schools, and cultural institutions during this era of oppression and violence. A section labeled “Black Images in the White Mind,” which included racist objects, was the subject of much debate among members of the Task Force. It was determined that displaying everyday objects that reinforced negative stereotypes of Black people was crucial to understanding how segregation and racial violence became an accepted way of life.

The “Confrontation” gallery features haunting, life-size figures etched in plexiglas that loom over visitors as their voices express racial sentiments of the era. At the end of this tunnel-like display, a burned cross (donated by the FBI) sits in a case along with a donated vintage Ku Klux Klan costume. Flyers and photographs tell of the frequent racial violence and explosions that earned Birmingham the nickname of “Bombingham.”

The section labeled “The Movement” dominates the permanent exhibition. Key events are the central focus of the permanent exhibition, including “The Path to

Montgomery.” Major displays are also devoted to incidents in Birmingham utilizing exceptional artifacts and video programs. The “Bus Ride to Freedom” depicts the bombing of the freedom riders’ bus in Anniston and documents the assaults perpetuated against riders in Birmingham. The shell of a Greyhound bus from the era was restored and burned to replicate the original, drawing questions from curious visitors about whether it is the “real” bus. *Give Us the Vote* features a video program that traces the struggle for Black voting rights from emancipation through the Voting Rights Act of 1965. *Birmingham the World is Watching* (my personal favorite) features vintage television sets showing news reports and commercials from 1963 interspersed with interviews with demonstrators recalling their role in the protest. The jail cell where King was imprisoned sits across from a wall-high reproduction of excerpts from his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

About 60 percent of the permanent exhibition was revamped as part of the first major renovation in 2009 that included an expanded storyline and technology upgrades. New oral history interviews were installed in the extended Black business section as well as the processional gallery where visitors can look out the windows into Kelly Ingram Park while listening to accounts from people who participated in the demonstrations. This boosted a new cooperative relationship between BCRI and the Civil Rights Activist Committee (CRAC), which in the past had expressed concerns about whether the institute was responsive to movement “foot soldiers.” The family of Denise McNair, one of the bombing victims, loaned some of her personal effects for display in a larger interpretation of the Sixteenth Street bombing. The renovation also expanded the storyline to include events beyond the 1960s, including a replica of Mayor Arrington’s office.

The Human Rights Gallery was completely redesigned to incorporate new interactive elements and to appeal to younger audiences using the graphic novel format to explore human rights struggles in other countries. The renovation included the installation of a section of the armored personnel carrier (or tank) used by Bull Connor to intimidate demonstrators in 1963. Found in a city landfill, the thirteen thousand pound vehicle was refurbished and the front portion installed in the Human Rights Gallery by removing a bay window and lifting it into the building with a crane. Also displayed in the gallery is the 2013 Congressional Gold Medal that was created in honor of the four girls and two boys who were killed on September 15, 1963. US Senator Doug Jones, also former US attorney and BCRI Board Chair, donated artifacts that were used as evidence in the 2002 trial that convicted the last two Sixteenth Street bombers.

The experience continues with a visit to the Richard Arrington Resource Gallery, an interactive computer lab where visitors can access oral history interviews and other online resources. The Odessa Woolfolk Gallery is a major space for changing exhibitions, including those curated from BCRI’s collections. The board viewed the inclusion of an archive and collection space as critical to BCRI’s role as an educational and research resource.



The 16th Street Church Bombing display at BCRI features personal effects from the family of Denise McNair, one of the bombing victims. (Photograph courtesy of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Photograph by Billy Brown)

Archives and Fine Arts: Telling Our Story

The BCRI Oral History Project is one of the most impressive, professional and historically important ongoing oral history projects in the country. —*Joseph M. Turrini, Wayne State University*¹⁴

BCRI's Oral History project has been a significant resource for scholarly, educational, and popular research and publications about the Civil Rights Movement. Launched in 1996, under the leadership of early BCRI visionary and founding board member Horace Huntley, the project was one of the first in the nation to conduct interviews with individuals who participated in the movement, from leaders to foot soldiers. Crucial to the project's early success was the involvement of Lola Hendricks, corresponding secretary for the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) who acted as liaison between local community organizers and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1963. With her extensive knowledge, credibility, and contacts, Hendricks was able to engage people who previously had

¹⁴ Joseph M. Turrini, "Foot Soldiers for Democracy: The Men, Women, and Children of The Birmingham Civil Rights Movement," *The Oral History Review* 38, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2011), 439–441.

not shared their stories with anyone. Minister Carolyn McKinstry, a survivor of the 1963 bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, was among those. She reported:

We were encouraged by our parents, other church members, and our Black community to forget what happened. For almost five decades, I had not been able to muster the courage, nor the composure to publicly record the stories that have become such a dark part of our nation's past . . . They proved too horrible, too painful, to dredge up to memory.¹⁵

The oral histories are the most utilized collection at BCRI. They have been used as source material in dozens of books, articles and video projects. BCRI has published two books from the collection edited by Huntley, *Black Workers' Struggle for Equality* (2005), and *Foot Soldiers for Democracy: The Men, Women and Children of the Birmingham Movement* (2009). BCRI's oral history interviews are also credited in the documentary films of Emmy winning producers and directors, including *Citizen King* by Orlando Bagwell (2004) and *Freedom Riders* by Stanley Nelson (2010). Teachers from around the world have access to the interviews on the award-winning Teacher's Domain website developed by WGBH-TV in Boston (www.teachersdomain.org). Interviews with lesson plans are included on the Alabama Learning Exchange (ALEX) website developed by the Alabama Department of Education.

The golden anniversary of the Birmingham movement in 2013 brought unprecedented attention to Birmingham and Alabama and resulted in the BCRI archives fielding dozens of requests from media including MSNBC, C-Span, The Biography Channel, The History Channel, *Southern Living* magazine, *Time* magazine, and others. Film and photographs from the BCRI archives were featured in popular media projects including Lee Daniels's *The Butler*, Hallmark Channel's original movie, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* based on the book by Christopher Paul Curtis, a Korean language version of Cynthia Levinson's book for young readers, *We've Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children's March*, and a tabletop book by Birmingham journalist Barnett Wright, *1963: How the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement Changed America and the World*.¹⁶

As a new institution, BCRI faced some skepticism about its capacity as both a repository for archival materials and venue for exhibitions. In 2003, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute scored a major coup when it was selected as the only site in Alabama to display an original copy of the Declaration of Independence. One of twenty-five surviving copies, the document was part of the Declaration of Independence Road Trip from the National Archives sponsored by Norman Lear.¹⁷ Over the ten-day period it was displayed, BCRI reported that 18,686 visitors braved

¹⁵ Carolyn McKinstry, *While the World Watched: A Birmingham Bombing Survivor Comes of Age during the Civil Rights Movement* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2011), ix.

¹⁶ Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, 2012-13 *Birmingham Civil Rights Institute Annual Report* (Birmingham: Birmingham Civil Rights Institute).

¹⁷ *Birmingham Business Journal*, January 9, 2003.

long lines to view the document along with historic photographs and video of social and political movements.

Both the archives and fine arts collections have benefitted from generous donations from the community. The 2006 exhibition, “A Voteless People Is a Hopeless People: W. C. Patton and the Struggle for Voting Rights,” was developed from the papers and artifacts of the Birmingham educator and tireless civil rights worker. BCRI celebrated its twentieth anniversary with the staff-curated exhibition, “Vision and Voice, Freedom and Future: Birmingham Civil Rights Institute 1992–2012,” which featured archival images, video, articles and interactive media. The fiftieth anniversary exhibition in 2013, “Marching On: The Children’s Movement 1963,” utilized images and video clips from the collection.

Two major photographic collections bridge both archives and fine art. “The Selma to Montgomery March: Photographs by Spider Martin” was unveiled at BCRI in 2007 through a gift from a local donor. In 2011, BCRI premiered the exhibition, “Courage Under Fire: The 1961 Burning of the Freedom Rider’s Bus,” which highlighted photographs by Joseph Postiglione that were donated by an Anniston law firm. BCRI offers exhibitions for rental through its traveling exhibition program, including items from the Paul Jones Collection, donated by the Birmingham native and avid collector.

Famed photographer Chester Higgins donated his groundbreaking exhibition, “Elder Grace” to BCRI. The longstanding relationship between Higgins and BCRI began in 2001 after “Elder Grace” opened in the Woolfolk Gallery. The collaboration continued in 2017 when Higgins was commissioned to create photographs of Birmingham foot soldiers for an exhibition of those images accompanied by oral history interviews to be unveiled in 2018 as part of BCRI’s twenty-fifth anniversary programming.

Who’s Movement Is It Anyway?

One of BCRI’s greatest assets is also one of its greatest challenges: interpreting recent history while many of the participants are still living. First-person accounts and available artifacts greatly enrich the documentation and preservation of that history. However, the institute staff must also navigate disparate recollections of the same events and a deep-seated sense of ownership of the subject matter. From its inception, the institute’s board was committed to using lessons from the civil rights story to illuminate global human rights issues. Many within the civil rights community expressed resentment of other movements pilfering the tactics and language of “civil rights” and applying them to other issues, noting that issues of racial inequality continue to plague the Black community. Drawing on the legacy of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, the institute has remained constant in its original commitment to engage the community in conversations about human rights. The result has led to unique partnerships with diverse constituencies.

FBI Conference

Given J. Edgar Hoover's animosity to King and other Black activists, the request from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)–Birmingham Division to partner on a community project was unprecedented. Long before the current conversation about police and community relations, the FBI and BCRI collaborated on a series of conferences on civil rights and law enforcement by engaging community leaders and law enforcement in discussions of contemporary civil rights issues, including race and ethnicity, police/community relations, hate crimes, human trafficking, women's issues, physical ability, gender identification, religious beliefs, and native language. In 2016, then-FBI director James Comey was the keynote speaker, addressing an overflow crowd at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, specifically about issues of race. Through information sharing, dialogue, and sometimes-heated exchanges, police and leaders from diverse constituencies have examined challenging issues and gained understanding that has influenced community interactions. Through the planning committee, BCRI established ongoing partnerships with new constituencies.

The Hispanic Community—Latino New South

Two converging events deepened BCRI's interaction and relationship with the Hispanic community. In 2011, the Alabama state legislature passed HB56, a regressive anti-immigration bill, and a new wave of activism swept the state and the city. I was stunned when a civil rights activist and board member asked "why don't they just get legal?" And I was proud when the City of Birmingham, local police, and civil rights organizations rejected the legislation, drawing parallels between its regressive policy and the Jim Crow laws. Recognizing the need for accurate information about immigration policy, BCRI joined Welcoming Alabama (an immigrant advocacy organization) to present Immigration 101, a community-training program focused on the challenges facing undocumented individuals. The institute became a rallying place for Hispanic activists who viewed it as a source of inspiration, encouragement, and legitimacy.

Simultaneously, BCRI embraced the opportunity to partner in a unique regional collaboration called the "Latino New South Project." Led by the Levine Museum of the New South in Charlotte, North Carolina, BCRI and the Atlanta History Center joined in developing a regional learning network to more effectively engage Latino/Hispanic communities with their museums. Through a series of "listening sessions," BCRI built lasting relationships with the Hispanic community, including an advisory committee and collaborative programming. Nationally, the project was highlighted in the inaugural publication of the *American Alliance of Museums*, a technical leaflet produced by the American Association for State and Local History, as well as in presentations at national and regional conferences. The result of this collaboration is the exhibition, "Nuevolution: Latinos in the New South." Curated by the Levine Museum, this multi-media, interactive, and bilingual exhibition incorporates images and stories from all three cities.

Living in Limbo: Lesbians in a Deep South State

Perhaps the institute's most controversial exhibition was "Living in Limbo: Lesbians in a Deep South State," featuring photographs by Carolyn Scherer. In 2012, BCRI displayed Scherer's images of local lesbian families. The subjects included prominent professionals and unknown individuals, some photographed from the front and others with their backs turned. For many, it was the first public acknowledgement of their sexual orientation. Adding fuel to the controversy was the decision to mount a life-sized banner with a photograph of two women embracing, one in uniform. Some reacted negatively, such as the city council member who in a public meeting called it was "disgraceful" for LGBTQ issues to be connected to the Civil Rights Movement. In general, however, this exhibition and related programs was successful in creating community discourse about social issues, which is at the core of BCRI's mission. More than five hundred people attended the opening reception for "Living in Limbo" and it received media coverage throughout the country. The "Living in Limbo" exhibition is a popular addition to BCRI's touring exhibition program. The exhibition inspired the creation of a nonprofit organization by the same name and the documentary film *Alabama Bound*.

Culture of Collaboration

These unique partnerships reflect a culture of collaboration that has been cultivated as part of BCRI's evolution. In spite of some early tension, foot soldiers have always played a key role in the institute. Serving as volunteers and board members, veterans of the Civil Rights Movement have contributed time, money, energy, and expertise to BCRI. Individual foot soldiers greet visitors and participate in BCRI's "living history" outreach program. They also are in demand as speakers sharing their firsthand experiences with local and national audiences.

One of the Institute's most ambitious and lasting collaborations is the Birmingham Cultural Alliance Partnership (BCAP), an innovative after-school program that was launched in 2001. Partners include Birmingham city schools and local cultural institutions, including the Alabama Jazz Hall of Fame, Birmingham Botanical Gardens, Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham Public Library, McWane Science Center, Sloss Furnace National Historic Landmark, Southern Museum of Flight, and Vulcan Park and Museum. In 2007, the project received an award from the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities for after-school youth programs. A group of BCAP students were the youngest winners selected for the 2008 "Save Our American History" project award sponsored by the History Channel and Lowe's.

BCRI's education programs have benefited from an enduring relationship with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, DC that began with USHMM's "Burning of Black Churches" initiative and the "Fire in the Sanctuary" conference hosted by BCRI. Emulating USHMM's prestigious "Bringing the Lessons Home" youth docent program, BCRI developed its Legacy Youth

Leadership Program. The two institutions collaborated on a summer initiative that brought the two groups together with young people from across the country for a National Youth Leadership Summit in Washington, DC. In addition, the institutions have sponsored joint workshops for educators and scholars examining the connections between the lessons from the Holocaust and the American Civil Rights Movement.

Collaboration became truly global in 2011, when BCRI received a grant from the American Alliance of Museum and Community Collaborations Abroad program (now Museums Connect) to launch the International Youth Legacy program. In collaboration with the Apartheid Museum and Nelson Mandela House Museum in Johannesburg, South Africa, ten students from each city were selected to participate in a study of freedom movements in both countries that culminated with exchange visits to each city. In 2013, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) recognized BCRI's track record of successful collaboration and community engagement by awarding it with one of the inaugural IMLS Medals for Museum Service.

Evolution of the Staff and Board

The culture of collaboration at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute developed as an internal as well as external mode of operation. The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute opened in 1992 without a director. Founding board chair and committed volunteer, Odessa Woolfolk, was working with a skeleton day-to-day staff of three—an operations manager, receptionist, and volunteer coordinator. Opening events were executed by consultants and nearly fifty volunteers, supported by the twenty-four member board of directors. The first director was hired fourteen months later, in January 1994, but stayed less than a year. Woolfolk stepped into the role of interim director and nine additional staff members were added, bringing the total to twelve.¹⁸

It would be the vision and skill of the next director, hired in July 1995, that would build a professional team and propel the BCRI into national prominence as a world-class institution.

After a distinguished career as an educator and immediately following two years at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, Lawrence J. Pijeaux Jr. assumed leadership of BCRI in 1995 and remained at the helm for nineteen years, retiring in 2014. Recognizing that his staff had limited experience in the museum field, he encouraged professional development.

Pijeaux took pride in referring to his staff as one of the best trained in the country. At one point, BCRI had more staff (four) complete the Getty Museum Leadership Institute, the nation's premier museum training program, than any other museum in the country. Staff also participated in other Getty programs and

¹⁸ Wayne Coleman and Angela Fisher Hall, "The 15 Year Struggle Acquiring Collections and Credentials," *The International Review of African American Art* 21, no.4.



In 1995, after a distinguished career as an educator, Lawrence Pijeaux assumed leadership of BCRI and remained at the helm for 19 years, retiring in 2014. (Photograph courtesy of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute)

those offered by the Smithsonian Institution, Southeastern Museums Conference, and American Association for State and Local History. As Pijeaux said, “The Institute had funds, and Odessa (Woolfolk) and others on the board and corporate leaders saw the value of investing money in training the staff . . . We have been able to send staff members to all the top museum training programs in the country.”¹⁹

Staff members pursued other development opportunities, presented at conferences, contributed to professional publications, reviewed grant applications, and served in leadership roles with state, regional, and national museum organizations. BCRI served as host for three national conferences of the Association of African American Museums (AAAM), an organization that Pijeaux served as a board member and president from 2005–7. BCRI also hosted the American Association for State and Local History national meeting in 2013. In 2010, Pijeaux was elected to the board of the Alliance of American Museums (AAM), the nation’s premiere museum organization. He was also appointed to the board of the Institute of Museum and Library Services by President Barack Obama.

“It’s a team effort,” he said in an interview before his retirement. “We have an extremely talented, well-trained, committed staff that is dedicated to our mission . . . I like to think we have created an environment where people are encouraged to share

¹⁹ Michael Huebner, “Lawrence Pijeaux Reflects on nearly two-decade career at Birmingham Civil Rights Institute,” *AL.com*, June 3, 2014, <https://www.al.com/entertainment/index.ssf/2014/06/pijeaux.html>.

their ideas and opinions. They have been given an opportunity to grow.”²⁰ Pijaux noted that this work reflects his core values, “the importance of an education, hard work, treating people the way you want to be treated, [and] helping our own in times of need. Our staff embraces that.”²¹

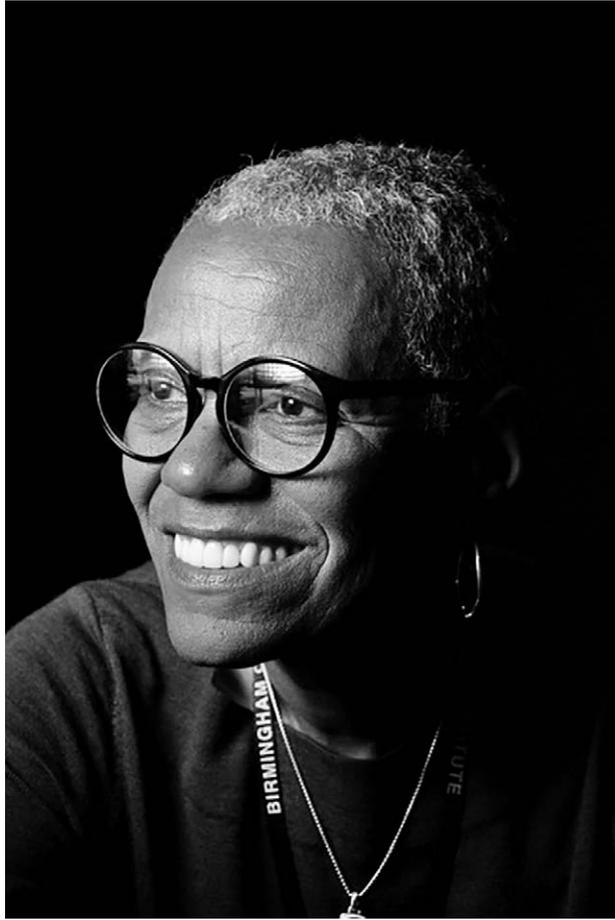
Building a professional staff was only one challenge Pijaux faced when he arrived as executive director. When Pijaux was hired, the board was largely comprised of movement veterans, scholars, educators, and a few business leaders. These board members were vigilant in guiding the mission of the institute and securing community support, including the collection of artifacts for the permanent exhibition. In the absence of an executive director, some board members became engaged in aspects of the day-to-day operation. During his first years, Pijaux found himself navigating this sometimes-rocky transition from an operating board to a policy-making governing body. Over time, the composition of the board shifted to include more corporate leaders and was more focused on policy and fundraising. Titles were changed to reflect this shift in governance. The board president became the board chair and the executive director was now named president and CEO. As a private nonprofit, board members determined their successors. However, the City of Birmingham owns BCRI’s building and the management agreement requires city council approval of all new board members. This sometimes has resulted in long delays in appointments being confirmed, and the board continues to be limited to local residents.

Pijaux and the BCRI board also evolved during the period when the role of nonprofit leaders was shifting from intellectual content and institutional management to public relations and fundraising. Through the work of the founding board and the first capital campaign, BCRI opened in a position of financial stability that allowed leadership to focus on developing staff and operating procedures. The City of Birmingham continued to provide annual support averaging between \$750,000 and \$1 million. Sporadic operational funding was provided by Jefferson County and the State of Alabama. Grant funding became a more substantial source of revenue. A second capital campaign, “Expanding the Legacy” was launched and raised about \$4.2 million for the 2009 renovation of the permanent exhibition and expanded programming. The 2009 recession dealt a major blow to BCRI’s budget as the City of Birmingham reduced its support to cultural agencies and investments were devastated by the decline in the economy. As a result, BCRI suffered a reduction in about 30 percent of its staff.

At that time, BCRI’s operating budget averaged about \$2.1 million. About one-third of that funding came from the City of Birmingham to mediate the costs of operating and maintain the facility. The other two-thirds of the budget were derived equally from earned income and contributions including grants. Fundraising was a key priority as the board began the search for a new president and CEO in 2014.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.



In her first two years as President and CEO of BCRI, Andrea Taylor oversaw a major renovation project and the inclusion of BCRI in the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument. (Photograph courtesy of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute)

Creating A Twenty-first Century Museum

Reflecting on her tenure as president and CEO, Andrea Taylor points out that her first two years were shaped by events she could not have predicted when she assumed the helm of BCRI in 2015: overseeing a major renovation project and becoming part of a National Monument.

Taylor assumed the helm of BCRI after a distinguished career in education, media, and philanthropy. She retired as director of citizenship and public affairs at Microsoft, had served as president of the Benton Foundation, and taught at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. She is a trustee of Boston University, her alma mater. As founder of the Ford Foundation Media Fund, Taylor was directly involved in the development of the groundbreaking television documentary series, "Eyes on the Prize," which premiered in 1987 as a comprehensive chronicle of the Civil Rights Movement.

For the first year, much of her attention was directed to overseeing a \$3 million restoration of the physical plant paid for by the City. Describing it as a “facelift for the 25th year,” Taylor explained that work included water remediation and installation of 140 new windows. A separate energy efficiency project replaced outdated technology for all mechanical systems, heating and air conditioning, and lighting to assure that the building is “environmentally sound and artifacts are protected.” The National Monument was “an unexpected development,” according to Taylor. “It took a village,” she said, noting that collaboration between political, community, academic, and economic interests made it a reality.

The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute was named as part of the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument, a unit of the National Park Service created by President Barack Obama in January 2017. Inspired by national interest in the fiftieth anniversary of the Birmingham movement in 2013, former Mayor William Bell ignited efforts to achieve national park status for the district. The multiyear campaign seeking this designation included visits from the Secretary of the Interior and director of the National Park Service, petition drives, public hearings, and special events. With support from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and Congresswoman Terri Sewell (D-Alabama), the BCRI played a critical role in the process as an educational resource, community liaison, and meeting place.

The National Monument encompasses much of the original district identified by the city in 1992 including sites adjacent to BCRI like the A. G. Gaston Motel, Kelly Ingram Park, Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, St. Paul United Methodist Church, and the nearby Fourth Avenue Business District. Not adjacent but included is the historic Bethel Baptist Church where Rev. Shuttlesworth pastored during the movement.

According to Taylor, the National Monument designation raises the profile of BCRI from a regional heritage destination to a global one with three million visitors since its reopening. It also builds BCRI’s brand as one of the state’s leading tourist attractions. Taylor notes that as part of the National Monument, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute now has a mandate to potentially serve more than 300 million people who visit National Park sites each year. BCRI continues to be a strategic partner with NPS during this planning phase, providing office space for the interim park superintendent, and affixing the official stamp to visitors’ NPS passbooks.

Taylor is reflective as she considers the importance of the institution that she has led since September 2015. “We are at an inflection point (as a nation). . . . Democracy is being challenged. Gains made over the last few decades are being compromised or eroded. Civil and human rights have never been more important. It is an opportunity and privilege for me to have responsibility to be a steward of the history interpreted at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute.” Relevancy and technology are particularly important, noted Taylor, as BCRI seeks to reach a new generation and diverse audiences with “the stories of the foot soldiers and build on that narrative of courage to provide real lessons about change. We are excited about the future ahead of us. We have a broad pathway of opportunity to offer an

enriching, informative and, for some, once-in-a-lifetime experience that can be transformative.”²²

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Priscilla Hancock Cooper retired as Vice-President of Institutional Programs at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BCRI) in April 2017. She served as BCRI Interim President and CEO from 2014–15. From 1990–92, Ms. Hancock Cooper served as researcher and copywriter for the permanent exhibition and education consultant. She returned to the Institute in 2000 to direct the Birmingham Cultural Alliance Partnership (BCAP) project, an innovative after-school program. She directed a national training program for museum professionals sponsored by BCRI and the Association of African American Museums with funding from the Institute of Museum Services. Currently, she consults with BCRI as project director for the Alabama African American Civil Rights Heritage Sites Consortium. In 2008, Ms. Cooper was selected to participate in the Getty Museum Leadership Institute, the nation’s premier training for museum professionals. A writer and performer, she has received two independent artist fellowships from the Alabama State Council on the Arts. She is a member of the 2011 Class of Leadership Birmingham and 2013 Class of Leadership Alabama.

²² Ibid.