Chronicling the Journey from Slavery to Civil Rights: African American Public History in the US South

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Faculty Introduction

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The following essay examines how historical sites and museums in Mississippi and Alabama portray African American history and the ways those interpretations intersect with the ongoing battles over which narrative should predominate in classrooms and civic spaces across the country. The authors of this article—all students in a Maymester Honors course—read about and traveled to key historical sites, . Along the way, the authors grappled with the many forms of racial discrimination that have shaped United States history, from poll taxes and literacy tests to enslavement and lynching. They found the impact of these terrible injustices to be profound and devastating, yet, at the same time, the authors found hope in the personal contacts they made with Freedom Riders from the 1960s who inspired them with tales of hope and change.

Abstract

The ways the public commemorates the past fundamentally shapes how Americans live in the present. In recent decades, the traditional narrative written by generations of white Americans has been challenged by a diverse group of scholars and researchers seeking to present American history in a more nuanced manner. Rather than a rosy march to American progress, this more complex narrative highlights the voices of marginalized groups and emphasizes how systemic inequality and violence aided in the nation's development. The following research paper examines how historical sites and museums in Mississippi and Alabama portray African American history and the ways those interpretations intersect with the ongoing battles over which narrative should predominate in classrooms and civic spaces across the country.

On May 20, 1961, Freedom Riders traveling from Nashville, Tennessee, to Montgomery, Alabama, were greeted by a violent white mob outside the Montgomery bus station. The Freedom Rides had begun two weeks prior when Black and White volunteers from the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) set out from Washington D.C. to compel the federal government to enforce the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to ban segregated seating on interstate buses and waiting rooms throughout the South. When Riders crossed into Alabama they were brutally attacked by White supremacists in Birmingham and on the road outside of Anniston. The violence prompted CORE volunteers to consider ending the ride, but members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) vowed to continue on to Montgomery. As they streamed off the bus, the bloodthirsty mob was given free reign by Montgomery police officers to beat the Riders and reporters on the scene with baseball bats, lead pipes, and other makeshift weapons. President John F. Kennedy's administration quickly intervened to ensure the Riders safe transit out of Alabama, but the injustice continued in Mississippi, where federal officials allowed Governor Ross Barnett to imprison more than three-hundred Riders at the notorious Parchman Penitentiary, where they were harassed and abused.[1]

In May of 2021, members of our Honors seminar made our own trek across the South, spanning six days and covering 2,000 miles, to document how African American history is remembered and memorialized in public spaces. Understanding the ways historical narratives are constructed and presented is central to how individuals and communities formulate values and beliefs, and the sites we visited offered ample opportunity to connect the past to the present. This was particularly true in Montgomery, where our visit coincided with the 60th anniversary of the Freedom Rides. To our surprise and delight, we were invited by officials at the Freedom Riders Museum to join in a commemorative celebration. Freedom Riders Ernest 'Rip' Patton, Catherine Bunks-Brooks, and Bob Zellner headlined the event and spoke about their experiences in front of a renovated Greyhound bus in the section of the street where they had narrowly escaped with their lives sixty years earlier. Also in attendance was Valda Harris Montgomery, whose father, former Tuskegee Airman

[1] Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

and drugstore owner Richard Harris, sheltered the Freedom Riders in his home. As they shared their harrowing experiences, they reminded those in attendance that the fight for racial equality is an ongoing struggle and called on younger generations to take up the mantle of change.

...so many individuals, stolen from their homes across the African continent, forever transformed the Americas.

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Our travels began with a look back at how the journey of so many individuals, stolen from their homes across the African continent, forever transformed the Americas. In what became the largest forced migration in World History, more than 12 million Black people were kidnapped and transported across the ocean between 1550 and 1850 in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Although they resisted when and where it was possible, the lives of the enslaved were a series of horrors. Physical violence and torture were used to extract labor and dehumanize those in bondage, and plantation owners and community members built an elaborate legal, economic, and cultural system to protect the institution of slavery and maintain White supremacy at all costs. During the American Revolution in the 1770s and 1780s, the states of the North provided for the gradual abolition of the enslaved, while the states of the South insisted that slavery must be protected by the new Constitution of the United States.[2]

The growing regional divide over slavery intensified in the early 19th century after Eli Whitney developed a cotton gin that processed short staple cotton and transformed the economy of the South. The cotton boom increased the demand for enslaved labor just as the U.S. Congress outlawed the international slave trade, long perceived by antislavery crusaders as the most inhumane part of the slave system. As a result, would-be plantation owners moving westward to Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas clamored for a new way to purchase enslaved laborers. This demand created what some scholars have called the "Second Middle Passage," a massive domestic slave-trading system that operated in the South between 1810 and 1860. During this period,

[2] David Eltis and David Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

more than 1.2 million enslaved African Americans were forcibly moved from the upper South to the lower South. In some cases, slave traders used new transportation methods, like the steamboat and railroads, to decrease their travel time, but most of the enslaved were marched hundreds of miles in chains to be sold "down the river."[3]

Natchez, Mississippi, the first stop on our trip, emerged during the 1830s as the second largest slave-trading site in the region. Situated in the heart of cotton country along the Mississippi River, Natchez was a center of commerce and wealth. Today, its spectacular homes and churches stand as beautiful reminders of the city's antebellum past. Yet it was the trade in human beings that made Natchez rich, and while slavery is central to its story, its position within the city's public narrative is far less conspicuous than its stately riverside mansions. The Forks of the Road Slave Market, located southeast of downtown, was one of the largest slave markets in the nation. Though thousands of individuals passed through its gates, what remains is a depressing, largely empty field bracketed by a few informational placards situated across the street from an auto mechanic's shop.

As we took in the heavy air and dark feelings that seemed to engulf the site, we met local historian, tour guide, and activist Shabilla Adams, who explained how local Whites and their trading partners ripped the enslaved from their families, stripped them of their humanity, and traded them like cattle. Despite this horrific history, however, the city of Natchez has done almost nothing to recognize the lives of the enslaved whose bodies were sold there. Mostly forgotten, all that remains are sets of slave shackles and chains excavated from the site and cemented into the ground without any meaningful commentary to explain their significance. On July 13, 1863, U.S. Colored Troops tore down the slave market as part

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[3] Edward Ball, "Retracing Slavery's Trail of Tears," *Smithsonian* (November 2015), https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/slavery-trail-of-tears-180956968; Equal Justice Initiative, "Domestic Slave Trade," https://eji.org/news/history-racial-injustice-domestic-slave-trade; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "What was the Second Middle Passage," https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/what-was-the-2nd-middle-passage

of the Army's efforts to destroy the Confederacy during the Civil War. But while the structures were demolished, they could not tear down the trauma and pain that the Forks of the Road brought to millions of enslaved people and their ancestors throughout the United States.[4]

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From Natchez, we traveled 75 miles northward to Vicksburg National Military Park in Vicksburg, Mississippi. There, the transformation from slavery to freedom played out in one of the most decisive battles of the Civil War. As we drove along Highway 61, the beautiful trees, lush grass, rolling hills, and earthy smells brought on thoughts of the enslaved. Did they jump in these very rivers and hide in these very hills? Did they resist their masters and run for freedom? And, how did they feel, when they learned about Southern secession? Were they disheartened and forlorn or did they have hope and optimism about the time to come?

The Battle of Vicksburg, which took place in July of 1863, was a turning point in the western theater of the Civil War. Because of its location along a bend in the Mississippi River, the city was vital to the Confederacy's ability to control trade and military movements up and down the waterway. Vicksburg was, according to historians Steven Woodworth and Charles Gear, "the South's lifeline." Not only would its capture by U.S. General Ulysses S. Grant mean "the Union would control the rebel forces and divide the Confederacy into two parts," but victory there, coupled with the defeat of Robert E. Lee in Gettysburg, would bring the United States much closer to quelling the Southern insurrection altogether.[5]

A Union victory in Vicksburg would also bring the South's four million enslaved Blacks closer to freedom. On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring that "all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforth shall be free." Yet so long as the Confederacy endured, the status of both free and enslaved Blacks remained dependent on location

[4] Christian Pinnen, *Complexion of Empire in Natchez: Race and Slavery in the Mississippi Borderlands* (University of Georgia Press, 2021), 174-223; Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1-44.
[5] Steven E. Woodworth and Charles D. Gear, *Vicksburg Besieged* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2020), 3.

and circumstance. However, this did not stop Black men and women from actively working to alter the progression and outcome of the war. The enslaved who ran away from their masters to join the Union cause became "contrabands of war" and pressured Lincoln to reconsider the relationship of the U.S. government to African Americans. What followed was the formation of the United States Colored Troops (USCT), comprised of 180,000 enlisted men.

Throughout the Vicksburg campaign, the USCT fought admirably. When Union troops clashed with Confederate forces trying to shore up Vicksburg's defenses at the Battles of Port Hudson and Milliken's Bend, USCT regiments suffered some of the highest casualties, earning them a reputation for bravery and the respect of many White northerners. In their analysis of the battle, historians Woodworth and Gear explained that "the contribution of Negro soldiers helped the North win the war and convinced Whites that the Negro deserved to be treated equally as a man."[6] In sum, then, it had taken the sacrifice of Black soldiers' lives for Vicksburg to be captured and for Whites to see them as respectable fighting men. Yet, despite the magnitude of their achievements and the larger context of their participation in the war—they were fighting for their freedom in a conflict over slavery—the Vicksburg National Military Park has only one monument to the sacrifices of Black soldiers there.

Forty-six days after Union forces began their siege of Vicksburg, Confederate General John C. Pemberton surrendered the city on July 4, 1863. Without the willpower and strength of Black troops, General Grants' White soldiers might have been beaten back, leaving one of the most important cities in the South under Confederate control. Black fortitude and heroism helped the Union win control of Vicksburg, however, and soon the Mississippi River was under Union direction as well. It is truly shameful that the contributions of Black soldiers in the Vicksburg campaign have not been incorporated into the landscape and commentary on the battle that is currently presented at the National Battlefield Park.[7]

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[6] Steven E. Woodworth and Charles D. Gear, *Vicksburg Besieged*, 11.
[7] Steven E. Woodworth and Charles D. Gear, *Vicksburg Besieged*, 11.

From Vicksburg, our trip took us 290 miles eastward to Montgomery, Alabama. Once promoted as "the cradle of the Confederacy," Montgomery is a place where some of the most important battles over historical memory have recently played out in the public sphere. Our stay began with a visit to the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), founded by civil rights attorney and prize-winning author Bryan Stevenson. Born in Milton, Delaware, in 1959, Stevenson overcame the prejudiced policies of the era to attend Harvard Law School. After serving on an internship with the Southern Center for Human Rights, Stevenson moved to Montgomery and founded EJI to overturn the death penalty and life-without-parole convictions of numerous individuals. In 2005, he successfully argued before the U.S. Supreme Court in Roper v. Simmons that the death penalty could not be applied to persons convicted of crimes under the age of 18. Seven years later, the Court again sided with Stevenson, declaring in Miller v. Alabama that mandatory sentences of life-without-parole for people under the age of 18 were unconstitutional. These crucial decisions have affected the sentences of thousands of people nationwide and overturned statutes in dozens of states.[8]

Stevenson's legal work has served as the basis for his new critique of the traditional U.S. history narrative, which continues to treat slavery, segregation, lynching, and mass incarceration as peculiar anomalies in the greater story of American liberty. Stevenson sees the historical narrative in a much more nuanced and inclusive manner. At EJI's recently constructed Legacy Museum in Montgomery, he and his colleagues present slavery, segregation, lynching, and mass incarceration as key elements in the development of the United States. The museum is located on the site of a former warehouse where enslaved Black men, women, and children were held in dark cells before being marched to the nearby auction block and sold to the highest bidder. The museum uses "interactive media, sculpture, videography and exhibits to immerse

[Stevenson] and his colleagues present slavery, segregation, lynching, and mass incarceration as key elements in the development of the United States.

[8] Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2014); Jeffrey Toobin, "The Legacy of Lynching on Death Row," *The New Yorker*, August 15, 2016, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/08/22/bryan-stevenson-and-the-legacy-of-lynching.

visitors in the sights and sounds of the domestic slave trade, racial terrorism, the Jim Crow South, and the world's largest prison system."[9]

When walking into the main room of the museum, visitors confront a long timeline that takes up an entire wall. This timeline goes from slavery to mass incarceration, showing how slavery and the racists ideas behind it never ended, but rather evolved. Although slavery was abolished in 1865, African Americans did not truly become free. During the Reconstruction Era (1865-1877), they made steps toward equality but faced Southern White resistance at every turn. With the ratification of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, slavery was outlawed, birthright citizenship was established, and Black men were ensured the right to vote. As a result, thousands of Black men registered to vote, schools were founded for Black children, and Black men held positions in public office. This triggered a backlash from Southern Whites, however, and led to a turbulent period of segregation and violence against African Americans.[10]

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The Legacy Museum focuses special attention on the Jim Crow era that followed Reconstruction. After the removal of Union troops from the South in 1877, Southern Whites reasserted control in the region by passing new discriminatory laws and engaging in terrorist activities. White Democrats first disenfranchised Black men, taking the vote away through literacy tests, poll taxes, and outright violence. Next, Southern Whites passed laws in every state requiring the separation of Whites and Blacks in public facilities. Then, in the infamous case, Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation did not violate the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection Clause. As a result, train cars, hotels, restaurants, schools, hospitals, and even cemeteries were soon segregated.

[9] Equal Justice Initiative, "The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration," https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/.
[10] Equal Justice Initiative, "Reconstruction in America: Racial Violence After the Civil War," https://eji.org/reports/reconstruction-in-america-overview.

African American activists and educators like Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Mary McLeod Bethune fought against the racism they encountered during the Jim Crow era. Their work inspired other African Americans to join organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to resist White supremacy. But Southern Whites did not leave anything to chance. As the Legacy Museum points out, White Americans participated in at least "4075 racial terror lynchings of African Americans in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia between 1877 and 1950."[11] The EJI seeks to educate the public about these racial injustices by presenting horrific photographs from the lynching period, as well as soil collections made at lynching sites.

At the organization's new National Memorial for Peace and Justice (a short distance from the Museum), EJI has established a beautiful, but haunting memorial to recognize and commemorate the acts of racial terror committed against African Americans. An elegant garden surrounds the memorial's perimeter. The flowers represent the life of the victim as human beings. The memorial also includes terrifying sculptures of enslaved African Americans, moving poetry to honor the victims, as well as copper coffins honoring victims in every county where the EJI has discovered lynching cases. Overall, the importance of these markers are to assist in the goal of the EJI: to reflect the true American history and combat racism and abolish racial injustice.[12]

Finally, the Legacy Museum addressed mass incarceration in the U.S., pointing out that our country incarcerates more people per capita than any other nation in the world. Our criminal justice system has grown dramatically since the 1970s, and we now incarcerate over 2 million people in prisons and jails around the country. The War on Drugs, discriminatory policing, and racism have led to this tragic situation. One in three African American young men can expect to be incarcerated during his lifetime. As a result, the African American family and community have been traumatized by state action meant to punish

[11] Equal Justice Initiative, "Lynching in America Report," https://eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america.
[12] Equal Justice Initiative, "The National Memorial for Peace and Justice," https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/.

racial and ethnic minorities. The Legacy Museum presents this fact as the most recent stage in America's history of racial injustice, allowing visitors "to draw dynamic connections across generations of Americans impacted by the tragic history of racial inequality."[13]

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After a full day of touring the EJI museum and memorial, our second day in Montgomery was spent examining the city's role in the Black Freedom Struggle. Perhaps no place in the South presents such a stark reminder of how African Americans were battling against a false history, used to maintain White supremacy, than Montgomery. From the steps of the state capitol, where Jefferson Davis was sworn in as President of the Confederacy in 1861, visitors can look across the street at Dexter Baptist Avenue Church, where Martin Luther King, Jr. served as minister a century later. A few blocks away, on the campus of Troy University, stands the Rosa Parks Museum. Located on the very site of Parks' arrest for refusing to give up her seat on a city bus to a White passenger, the museum walks visitors through her life and involvement in the boycott that followed.

Most people know the story of how Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, and most have the knowledge of her arrest. Not as many are familiar with how that event was a catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement and set in motion a chain of events that would have an impact for years to come. The arrest of Parks, who worked for the Montgomery NAACP, spurred fellow activists into action. E.D. Nixon, president of the local chapter, posted her bail. It was Jo Ann Robinson of the Women's Political Council who mimeographed leaflets calling on members of the Black community to stay off the buses for a day.[14] Soon after, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) was formed and vowed to continue the boycott. Martin Luther King, Jr. was elected its president. For 382 days, Black people walked or shared rides to work in protest of the unfair bus policies. Because 70 percent of the riders were African American, the bus

[13] Equal Justice Initiative, "The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration," https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/.
[14] National Museum of African American History and Culture, "Jo Ann Robinson: A Heroine of the Montgomery Bus Boycott," https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/jo-ann-robinson-heroine-montgomery-bus-boycott.

companies took a major hit but did not relent until the Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional for city buses to remain segregated. Following the ruling, the boycott ended on December 20, 1956 and Parks went on to dedicate her life to pursuing equal rights.[15]

The Rosa Parks Museum is an educational experience, although not as hard-hitting or expository as the Legacy Museum. It begins with an introductory video and continues with a recreation of her arrest on the facade of a city bus. While the presentation is a bit outdated, it might do well in attracting and keeping the attention of children. The more interesting parts of the museum were its historical documents, including police reports, newspapers, and letters. Overall, the museum provided for a nice respite after the harsh imagery of the EJI, and it did a great job of honoring the life of Rosa Parks.

Later that afternoon, we visited the parsonage that Martin Luther King, Jr., lived in when he served the congregation at Dexter Avenue Baptist. It was there that many planning sessions for the bus boycott and other protests were held. The house is now a historical site, and the inside is kept just as it was when King lived there in 1956. Due to COVID-19, we could not go inside, but were able to view the crater on the porch where a bomb was thrown in an attempt to assassinate King. Even when limited by present circumstances, we could stand atop a piece of history.

Montgomery became a symbol in the fight to break the back of segregation in interstate transportation via the Freedom Rides.

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Just as Montgomery had been the center of the fight to end segregation on public transportation in Alabama, soon after it became a symbol in the fight to break the back of segregation in interstate transportation via the Freedom Rides. The Greyhound bus station where the Freedom Riders arrived and were attacked is now the Freedom Riders Museum, and good fortune provided us with the opportunity to share in the celebration of the individuals who had risked so much for racial equality. When asked what the experience had been like, Catherine Burks-Brooks stated that when the bus first pulled into the station, it was a little too

[15] National Park Service, "The Montgomery Bus Boycott," https://www.nps.gov/articles/montgomery-bus-boycott.htm.

quiet. In fact, you could hear a pin drop. Suddenly, the mob attacked. One of the most shocking pieces of information she provided was about mothers in the mob who encouraged their children to scratch the faces of the Riders.

After their arrests and imprisonment at Mississippi's Parchman Penitentiary, Ernest "Rip" Patton stated that anytime the prison guards would take something from the Riders, they would sing, prompting angry reactions from their captors. Bob Zellner remembered a fellow Rider enduring cold water thrown on him as he slept in the bus station and thanking his aggressor for waking him up so he could remain vigilant with so many Klan members around. Each story contained heartbreak and heroism, injustice and determination to continue on in the face of violence and, potentially, death at the hands of White supremacists. More than anything, the message sent that evening was clear. We remember because the fight for equality cannot continue unless we reckon with the truths of our past.

Perhaps more than anything else, this message permeated every location we visited and our conversations with every historian, historical figure, volunteer, and concerned citizen we encountered. Following our stay in Montgomery, we headed to Jackson, Mississippi. There, we visited the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum and spoke with movement veterans from Mississippi. Barbara Bowie, whose nineteen-year-old brother had been a Freedom Rider imprisoned at Parchman, spoke with us about why she felt so strongly about participating in a movement she knew could end badly for her. In short, she said that when you know your cause is just, you must act. Jackson native and museum tour guide Hezekiah Watkins, who was mistaken for a Freedom Rider and first arrested for civil rights activity at age thirteen (he would go on to be arrested over 100 times), implored everyone in attendance to take the information gained from their visit to the museum and use it to demand change. Parchman Prison, where so many civil rights activists were abused, still operates as an official prison plantation today. In Mississippi's prison system, over 70 percent of the incarcerated population is Black. [16]

"[W]hen you know your cause is just, you must act."

[16] The Innocence Project, "Parchman Prison Farm in Mississippi History, https://innocenceproject.org/parchman-farm-prison-mississippi-history.

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Our final stop took us to the Jackson home of Medgar Evers, the first field secretary of the Mississippi NAACP and martyr for civil rights.[17] Being born in Decatur on July 2, 1925, Evers came of age in the White supremacist world of Mississippi. After receiving his bachelor's degree in business from Alcorn College, he sold insurance before deciding to dedicate his life to activism with the NAACP.[18] The injustices he had dealt with motivated Evers to enact positive change for his home state of Mississippi. At his home, we stood on the spot where he was assassinated on June 12, 1963, by a local White supremacist, Byron De La Beckwith. His wife Myrlie and their three children, Darrel, Reena, and James, were up late watching John F. Kennedy's speech on the civil rights movement. They were waiting for Medgar to arrive home from his work. When he arrived at his home around 12:20 a.m., he was gunned down in his driveway, and a stray bullet ricocheted into the house.[19]

Though he was fundamental in the civil rights movement, Evers is not as well-known as other leaders he helped train and inspire. Acknowledging the groundwork he laid is paramount to understanding how the movement for Black freedom was shaped. Evers conducted boycotts, sit-ins, voter registration drives, and petitions to combat structural and cultural racism in Mississippi and worked with other civil rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., David Dennis, and Robert Moses.[20] The NAACP offered him a position in California due to the number of death threats he faced, but Evers declined the position. He was determined to make Mississippi a better place for African Americans. During an interview in Ebony Magazine, Evers stated, "That's what I want for my kids—freedom—right here in Mississippi. And as long as God gives me strength to work and try to make things real for my children, I'm going to work for it—even if it means making the ultimate sacrifice."[21]

[17] Michael Vinson Williams, *Medgar Evers: Mississippi Martyr* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2011).
[18] Dernoral Davis, "Medgar Evers and the Origin of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi," *Mississippi History Now*, http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/articles/53/m edgar-evers- and- the-origin-of-the-civil-rights-movement-in-mississippi.
[19] *Who Was Medgar Evers?* Films On Demand. 1982. https://fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=103046&xtid=167371.
[20] Williams, *Medgar Evers*.
[21] Medgar Evers, "Why I Live in Mississippi," 1963. *Ebony* 18 (11): 143–48.

Today, Mississippi honors his sacrifice with Medgar Wiley Evers day every July 4th. The United States also dedicates June 9th through the 16th as the Medgar Evers National Week of Remembrance. His home is a National Historic Landmark. However the location is within an impoverished neighborhood, therefore many are unaware or do not visit the location. Doing so offers the opportunity to bear witness to the blood-stained carport and graphic crime scene photos, as we did the morning we visited. It prompted us to discuss Evers' activism and express our disappointment that so many students and other Americans do not know of his sacrifice. Remembering his contributions and martyrdom is essential to understanding the complexities within the civil rights movement and the ways in which inequality continues to exist.

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As our journey drew to a close, we were left to reflect on the numerous ways historical narratives are constructed, packaged, and sold to the public as well as how the gaps in those narratives—often deliberate—have long served to reinforce White supremacy. When the history of slavery's centrality to America's growth as a capitalist powerhouse is whitewashed, when Southern communities choose to preserve and promote a history sympathetic to the Confederate cause, or when the history of lynching is covered up, it feeds a national narrative that praises individual successes and downplays the existence of institutionalized racism. But the reality of those discriminatory systems abound. Prisons are overcrowded, filled with Black and Brown faces, many of whom do manual labor that still includes picking cotton in the South. Values and beliefs beget policy and actions, and only by telling the truth about the past can society fully tackle its problems and right its wrongs.

Museums like the Equal Justice Initiative provide an eye-opening view on the historical trajectory from slavery to mass incarceration and the need for institutional change. As Bryan Stevenson has argued, mass incarceration has become the new enslavement, particularly for children. Recently, the outcry after the murder of the late George Floyd motivated people of all ages, race, and gender to take a stand and fight back against these systems of injustice. Chants of Black Lives Matter are coupled with demands for the truth of American history, in all of its complexity and hypocrisy, to be told. Rather than staying silent, citizens are crying

out for change and pushing for constitutional rights to be afforded to all Americans. Without them guaranteed to people of color in particular, power imbalances will remain.[22] ■

[22] Chris Hedges, "Why Mass Incarceration Defines Us As a Society," *Smithsonian*, December 1, 2012. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/people-places/why-mass-incarceration-defines-us-as-a-society-135793245.

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Student Biographies

Cesar Amaya is a senior double majoring in criminal justice and psychology with a double minor in Spanish and legal studies. After graduating, Cesar plans on attending law school at the University of Texas at Austin and becoming a lawyer specializing in immigration and family law.

Summer Davis is a junior majoring in sociology with a minor in legal studies. After graduating in spring 2023, Summer plans to attend law school, become a civil rights attorney, and open her own law firm.

Krystal De Ochoa is a senior majoring in healthcare administration. After graduating in spring 2022, Krystal plans to own hospitals that are known for being multilingual to help non-English speaking patients receive the quality of care they need.

Teyoncé McDaniel is a senior majoring in criminal justice with a double minor in political science and legal studies. After graduating in fall 2021, Teyoncé plans on attending law school in Texas to pursue a career as a criminal defense attorney.

Jailene Miranda is a bilingual junior majoring in biomedical science and minoring in psychology. After graduating in spring 2024, Jailene plans on becoming a psychiatrist and sharing her passion for learning and teaching with the Latinx community.

Alyssa Newman is a junior double majoring in philosophy and political science and minoring in Spanish. After graduating in spring 2023, Alyssa plans on developing a career working with non-profit humanitarian agencies to further human rights worldwide.

Meredith Springall is a sophomore with a major in criminal justice and a minor in criminal justice equity and inclusion. After graduating in spring 2024, Meredith plans on becoming a detective with the goal of one day working with an organization like the Equal Justice Initiative.

Emily Van Eaton is a junior with a major in English and a double minor in American Sign Language and technical writing. After graduating in fall 2022, Emily plans on pursuing a Master's in library science to eventually become a research librarian at a university.

Kayla Vickers is a senior majoring in criminal justice and minoring in human services sociology. After graduating in fall 2021, Kayla would like to work with a nonprofit organization that is working to end human trafficking and sexual assault.