

Names of Individuals to Honor:

- **Ralph David Abernathy**

Reverend Ralph Abernathy, a 1951 graduate of Alabama State College, emerged to play a pivotal role in the direct-action phase of the American civil rights movement. Rev. Abernathy was included in the inner circle of Black leaders who in 1955 and 1956 managed the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Five years later, after taking over the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) when Rev. King left for Atlanta to head up the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Rev. Abernathy mentored sit-in students at Alabama State College during their 1960 protest. Rev. Abernathy, who would join Rev. King in Atlanta during 1966, participated in the nation's most iconic civil rights campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1968, upon Rev. King's assassination, Abernathy assumed leadership of the (SCLC) and led the organization during the Poor People's Campaign in Washington D.C.

Ralph David Abernathy was born in Lindon, Alabama in 1926. After serving in the Army during World War II, Abernathy, the son of a farmer, sought to expand his intellectual horizons by enrolling at Alabama State College. It was during these undergraduate years that Abernathy honed his activist tradition, leading several student protests that sought to address campus related issues.

Rev. Abernathy first emerged as an important civil rights figure during the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955. He is credited with suggesting 'Montgomery Improvement Association' as the name for the organization created to execute the Bus Boycott. During the 362-day Boycott, Abernathy rose within the ranks of the MIA, and was vice president of the organization when it won a federal lawsuit successfully ending bus segregation in Montgomery.

In 1957, Rev. Abernathy and Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. would take their boycott experiences to Atlanta, Georgia where they convened a meeting to establish the SCLC. Organizers intended the SCLC would export the success of the Montgomery boycott beyond the Capitol City to communities throughout the American South. For over a decade, Abernathy worked with the SCLC at the side of Rev. King. The men were intimately involved in several of the most iconic campaigns of the era, including the Freedom Rides, the Sit-In Movement, Operation Confrontation in Birmingham, the March on Washington, the Selma to Montgomery March, and the Poor People's Campaign. Several of these initiatives helped to usher in remedial federal legislation. With Operation Confrontation in Birmingham and the March on Washington leading to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Selma to Montgomery March and "Bloody Sunday" creating the impetus for the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Finally, the Poor People's Campaign and the assassination of Rev. King catapulted Abernathy to the head of the SCLC, allowing him to oversee passage of the 1968 Fair Housing Act.

- **Johnnie Carr**

Johnnie Rebecca Carr is known as the fifth president of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), a position she maintained from 1967 until her death in 2008. Carr joined the MIA as well as the NAACP during the 1950s. In the NAACP she worked with

both Rosa Parks and with labor organizer and NAACP president E.D. Nixon. Carr enjoyed a career as an insurance agent, and was able to acquire an automobile at a time when most Black people used public transportation. Consequently, Carr joined the Bus Boycott carpool, but she also served on several MIA committees, and she spoke on behalf of the organization at different venues.

In 1964, Carr's son Arlam became a test applicant to the all-White Lanier High School. The successful litigation that grew out of the school's refusal to admit him, ended segregation in the Montgomery school system.

- **Nat King Cole**

Montgomery born Nat King Cole, a jazz virtuoso, singer and movie star, emerged in the mid-twentieth century to become one of the nation's most recognizable and celebrated entertainers. The Montgomery native was known for recording the "Christmas Song" in 1946, and for his chart-topping hits "Mona Lisa" and "Unforgettable" in 1950 and 1951 respectively. In 1956, Cole broke down barriers as the first African American to host his own television variety show, and in 1958, Cole shifted his talents to the big screen with his portrayal of W. C. Handy in the film *St. Louis Blues*. At the height of his popularity, and with a large White following, Cole, who initially avoided any connection to the civil rights movement, embraced the civil rights movement and became an enthusiastic supporter of the direct-action tactics used by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

During the second decade of the twentieth century, Edward Coles, a working-class preacher at Beulah Baptist Church and his wife Perlina Adams Coles, purchased a house on St. John Street in the Montgomery, Alabama community of Bel-Aire. Perlina gave birth to Nathaniel Adams Coles on March 17, 1919.

In 1923, when Nathaniel was about four years old, the Coles family, including Nat and his two siblings, Eddie M. and Edward B., moved to Chicago, Illinois. In Chicago, the family would grow to include additional siblings. Cole's inclination for music began early as he learned to play piano and organ from his mother, who played the piano and directed the choir at her husband's church. Cole himself began playing the piano and organ at his father's Chicago church when he was about five years old. The young virtuoso began formal training as a pianist and achieved notoriety as a musician. A young Cole played in the high school band when he was only nine years old. During this period, against his father's wishes, Nat became interested in jazz music. In Chicago, Cole was exposed to well-known jazz musicians, including Louis Armstrong. In 1937, an eighteen-year-old Nat dropped the "s" from his last name and became known as Nat Cole.

Cole began playing with one of the many small jazz bands in Chicago. At the age of fifteen he formed his own band called the "Rogues of Rhythm." Afterwards he dropped out of high school to pursue a career as a full-time jazz musician. In the "Windy City,"

the piano player became known as a teenage jazz prodigy. In 1937, when Cole was only sixteen years old, he left Chicago and toured as a piano player in Eubie Blake's popular play, *Shuffle Along*.

By the late 1930s, Cole's career as a jazz musician centered in Los Angeles, California, where he became known as Nat "King" Cole. In 1938, the up-and-coming entertainer formed the King Cole Trio. This band emerged as an overnight sensation, and in 1943 the group's fame earned them a music contract with Capitol Records. The King Cole Trio produced a series of record hits including his first mainstream vocal hit "Straighten Up and Fly Right." In addition to jazz music in the 1940s, Cole began to attract considerable attention for his ballads, some of which became national best sellers. They included "(I Love You) For Sentimental Reasons", "The Christmas Song (Merry Christmas to You)", "Nature Boy" and "Sweet Lorraine". By the 1950s, Cole achieved renown as a singer with his number one hit "Mona Lisa" and "Unforgettable", a song his daughter Natalie Cole would re-release as a duet twenty-five years after her father's death.

The 1950s and the 1960s witnessed Cole's further transformation from a jazz musician to a popular music star. The now accomplished musician recorded with leading orchestrators, including American arranger and composer Nelson Riddle. Cole's hits during this period included his rendition of the country tune "Rambling Rose" and "Those Lazy-Hazy-Crazy Days of Summer". Nat King Cole's last highly popular releases, "I Don't Want to Hurt Anymore" and "I Don't Want to See Tomorrow", came in 1964, the year before his death.

In 1956, Nat King Cole became the first African American to host a nationwide television variety show. Although ratings for the show demonstrated wide popularity, corporate sponsors were afraid that running ads on the show would hurt their sales to Whites America. The show featured both Black and White guests and lasted from 1956-1957.

Nat King Cole played leading roles as an actor in several movies in the 1950s and 1960s. The most popular of these roles was his 1958 portrayal of W.C. Handy in the film *St. Louis Blues*.

Nat King Cole believed he could fight racial discrimination in his capacity as an entertainer who interacted based on equality with persons of all races. Therefore, he maintained a distance from the civil rights movement. Yet, he consistently faced racism, as hecklers called him "Nigger" and taunted him during performances. His Los Angeles house was vandalized, and his life was threatened. At the same time few advertisers were willing to purchase commercials on his variety show.

In August of 1948, Cole purchased a house in the previously all-White Los Angeles neighborhood of Hancock Park. Members of the Hancock Park property-owners association told Cole they did not want any undesirables moving in. Cole retorted, "Neither do I. And if I see anybody undesirable coming in here, I'll be the first to complain." The Ku Klux Klan unsuccessfully attempted to scare Cole out of the neighborhood by burning a cross of the lawn of his home in 1948.

Cole, whose music also appealed to white audiences, initially took a behind-the-scenes stance against racial discrimination. He donated monies to the Montgomery Bus Boycott and sued northern hotels that hired but would not serve him. After 1956, when white sponsors refused to buy advertisement on his television show, and Black audiences began to complain that the popular entertainer was not sufficiently committed to the struggle for first class citizenship, Cole paid \$500 for an NAACP life membership, and thereafter emerged as a bold supporter of the civil rights movement.

On April 10, 1956, during a performance before 4,000 White fans at the old City Auditorium in Birmingham, Alabama, members of the North Alabama Ku Klux Klan attacked Cole. The leader of this Klan group, Asa "Forrest" Carter, would go on to become the principal speechwriter for Governor George Wallace in the 1960s. Cole's assailants, who were angry that he made several appearances with white female singer June Christy, and who were opposed to Rock & Roll music, assaulted Cole on stage and knocked him to the floor in a botched attempt to kidnap the popular crooner. Local police thwarted the scheme, quickly apprehended the attackers and several accomplices outside the venue. Cole returned to the stage where he received a ten-minute standing ovation, but he did not finish the concert. After seeing a physician, Cole decided to perform a scheduled Blacks-only show later that same night.

- **Fred Gray**

For fifty years, Fred D. Gray has spent his life in the courtrooms of America fighting for the civil rights of African Americans generally, in Blacks in Alabama specifically. Gray was born in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1930. He started to conceptualize the goal becoming a lawyer from encounters with segregation and other forms of racial discrimination in his hometown. But his final decision to enter law school and become an advocate for the constitutional rights of African Americans was made while he was a student, 1947 to 1951, at Alabama State University. The young energetic student sat at the feet of ASU professors such as political science teacher James E. Pierce, and geography professor Thelma Glass. These among other ASU professors insisted that their students achieve excellence in every arena of life. They also encouraged their students to use education to uplift the race. It was Professor James Pierce who mostly forcefully suggested Gray become an attorney.

By the time Gray graduated in 1951, he had resolved to become an instrument of change for a people locked inside the walls of racial oppression. “Privately, [he] pledged that [he] would return to Montgomery and use the law to destroy everything segregated that [he] could find.” On the way to accomplishing his goal, Fred Gray spent the next three years at Case Western University Law School in Cleveland, Ohio.

When Gray returned to Montgomery in 1954, no one would have predicted he would become the most successful civil rights attorney in the history of the state. For five decades, this tenacious barrister has fought for African American first-class citizenship in a variety of areas, including voting rights, free speech, and freedom of association.

Gray is well known for the role he played in the overthrow of bus segregation in Montgomery. At twenty-five he served as legal counsel for the key bus boycott personalities in Montgomery. His clients included Claudette Colvin, the fifteen-year-old Black teenager arrested when she refused to surrender her bus seat to a white passenger on March 2, 1955, nine months before the arrest of Rosa Parks. He was also the attorney of record for Rosa Parks, well known for her role in triggering the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Gray represented Rev. Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Improvement Association, as the attorney of record in the *Browder v. Gayle* case, the litigation that effectively ended bus segregation in Montgomery. In addition, attorney Gray successfully represented Rev. King against charges the minister violated Alabama’s anti-boycott law. And in 1960, Gray successfully defended King against a tax evasion charge, a thinly disguised effort to undermine King’s leadership.

Attorney Gray’s courtroom battles played an integral role in changing the social fabric of the United States. One of the cases that illustrate the impact of his career is *Gomillion v. Lightfoot*. In this 1960 gerrymandering case, Gray argued against the state of Alabama when it redrew municipal lines to eliminate all but a handful of Black people from the city of Tuskegee. When Gray won this case, Africa-Americans again were included within the City of Tuskegee and were again able to vote in city elections. Moreover, Gray’s success laid the foundation for the concept of "one man, one voice" and opened the door for more racially representative redistricting and reapportioning of legislative bodies across the nation.

Gray also argued important freedom of association cases. As the Attorney General for Alabama, John Patterson identified the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as a foreign corporation and demanded the organization turn over its business records and membership lists. When the NAACP refused to divulge its membership, the Attorney General initiated a lawsuit that effectively barred the organization from doing business in the state of Alabama. Attorney Gray appealed in the

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People v. State of Alabama, ex rel. Before the United States Supreme Court, Gray convinced the Supreme Court to uphold the First Amendment free association rights of the NAACP and its members, from infringement by the state of Alabama. The case allowed the organization to resume the business of protecting the rights of African Americans in Alabama.

In *Dixon v. Alabama Board of Education*, Fred Gray successfully argued a case before the Supreme Court that reversed the expulsion of nine Alabama State College students who participated in a February 25, 1960 sit-in at the Montgomery County Courthouse. When Governor John Patterson and the State Board of Education ordered the expulsion of these college students, the High Court agreed with Gray's argument holding that the students were unconstitutionally expelled. The Court reasoned that the college could not act in *Locos parentis* (in the place of a parent), and that students attending a state-supported institution were entitled to due process including a hearing before any punitive action could take place. The legal principle announced in this case is often cited when the rights of students are infringed on by overreaching administrators.

Gray argued the case *Williams v. Wallace*, the case that allowed the Selma to Montgomery March to take place under the protection state and/or federal authorities. The case was decided in 1965, as a class action suit brought by African Americans against Governor Wallace in his capacity as the Governor of the State of Alabama. The court ordered protection for the marchers as they anticipated walking from Selma, fifty-four miles up Highway 80 to Montgomery. Marchers intended to present voter discrimination grievances to the Governor. This march is often cited as one of the defining protests that led to passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Attorney Gray also filed the *Lee v. Macon Co.* case, which effectively integrated institutions of higher learning in the State of Alabama, in addition to 104 of the 124 elementary and secondary school systems in the state. This case started as a simple desegregation case against the public schools in Macon County, Alabama, but expanded to have statewide ramifications, including a statewide order requesting all public elementary and secondary schools in the state of Alabama be desegregated; the desegregation of all trade and junior colleges; the desegregation of all institutions of higher learning; and the merger of the Alabama Athletic Association (Caucasian) and the Alabama Interscholastic Athletic Association (African-American); as well as the integration of faculty and staff members of the public schools of the State of Alabama.

The Tuskegee Syphilis Study prompted Attorney Gray to file *Pollard v. United States of America*. Beginning in 1932, the United States Government enrolled rural Black males in and around Macon County, Alabama to become involved in what has become known as

the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. In an effort to study the effects of the disease on people overtime the participants were not informed nor treated for syphilis by the government. The *Pollard* case was finally settled and the government was ordered to continue its treatment program. In addition, in 1997 Gray encouraged the President of the United States to make an official apology to the participants of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. The participants also requested a memorial in their honor. The apology was made at the White House in May of that year. Gray was the moving force in the establishment of the Tuskegee Human and Civil Rights Multicultural Center (the Center), Tuskegee, Alabama. When fully developed, not only will it serve as a memorial to the participants of the Study, but educate the public on the contributions made in the field of human and civil rights by Native Americans, African Americans, and Americans of European descent.

- **Clifford and Virginia Durr**

Clifford Judkins Durr was born on March 2, 1899, to John Wesley Durr and Lucy Judkins Durr, a privileged Montgomery family with deep Alabama roots. Educated in Montgomery private schools, Durr was elected president of his class at the University of Alabama and later won a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford University in England. He graduated in 1922 from Oxford with a coveted law degree. Clifford established a private law practice that focused almost exclusively on civil-liberties cases which gained the attention of the FBI, and intermittent surveillance by the agency. The FBI interest increased when Durr became president of the left-liberal National Lawyers Guild in 1949. In the early 1950s, Durr returned to Montgomery and made every effort to establish a general law practice in Montgomery. Clifford Durr appeared as counsel for his good friend Aubrey Williams a resident of Montgomery, president of Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), and publisher of the magazine of the National Farmer's Union, and he gained unfortunate notoriety when he threw a punch at the government's star anti-communist witness, who lied about Virginia (his wife) on the stand. This was during the Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security, which involved Mississippi Senator James Eastland.

After the Eastland hearings, Durr often defended black Montgomerians in civil rights cases that mirrored, in his mind, the civil liberties cases of the professional men and women he had defended in Washington. These new clients, however, could seldom pay for his services. In December 1955, he aided Rosa Parks in posting bail on the night of her arrest for refusing to give up her seat in the white section of a Montgomery public bus. He then assisted Fred Gray, a young African American attorney for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Durr defended clients protesting police brutality or wrongful prosecution. One lengthy federal case finally vindicated a mostly-white student group arrested while dining in a black Montgomery restaurant. Clifford opened his law library, and Virginia opened their home, to new civil rights lawyers needing assistance and to civil rights workers drawn to Montgomery.

Virginia Foster Durr (August 6, 1903 – February 24, 1999) was an American white civil rights activist and lobbyist. She was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1903 to Dr.

Sterling Foster, an Alabama Presbyterian minister, and Ann Patterson Foster. In 1926 Clifford Durr married Virginia Foster. In 1948, Virginia Durr ran for the Senate from Virginia, representing the short-lived, very liberal Progressive Party,

By 1941, Virginia Durr became the vice president of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW) civil rights subcommittee. Working together with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, she lobbied for legislation to abolish the poll tax. She worked jointly with liberal political leaders in order to gain the necessary support needed for legislation, which ultimately resulted in the passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Durr later recalled her work with the SCHW as one of the happiest events of her life.

Virginia Durr met [Rosa Parks](#) through close friend E.D. Nixon, who worked with Parks during his time working with the NAACP. Durr employed Rosa Parks part-time as a seamstress; she considered Parks a close friend. In an exclusive interview with “[Eyes on the Prize](#)”, Virginia goes in more depth about their relationship, Mrs. Parks was a really lovely woman". During the summer of 1955, [Myles Horton](#), a close friend of Durr, asked her to recommend a black person to attend workshops at [Highlander Folk School](#), the purpose of which was to put into effect the recent [Brown v. Board of Education](#) decision. Durr arranged a full scholarship for Rosa Parks to go to the school in Tennessee. It was here where Rosa Parks experienced true equality for the first time in her life. In December 1955, Virginia and Clifford, along with [E.D. Nixon](#), bailed [Rosa Parks](#) out of jail after she was arrested for refusing to give up her bus seat for a white person. Afterwards, the Durrs, along with the NAACP, aided Rosa Parks in bringing her case to the Supreme Court. The Montgomery Bus Boycott that followed is often seen as the beginning of the active, organized civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The Durrs, after supporting the bus boycott, continued to support civil rights activism. The Freedom Riders found accommodations at their home and members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) enjoyed their support.

- **Vernon Johns**

Vernon Johns, a native of Virginia, was the nineteenth pastor of then-Dexter Avenue Baptist Church from 1947 to 1952. Rev. Johns was instrumental in advancing the social and racial transition in Montgomery. According to the church’s history, Johns’ sermons "were relevant to social and contemporary problems but were" supported by a spiritual base. One of them, "It’s Safe to Murder Negroes in Alabama," led to his appearance before a Grand Jury and a KKK cross burning on the day of the sermon. Johns still preached it and continued to advocate for racial equality in Alabama and throughout the nation, and he also published companion sermons (called "Pulpit Opinions") and pamphlets. In Montgomery, Rev. Johns was president of Farm and City Enterprises, an early business association of Blacks which encouraged entrepreneurship. In an era when Jim Crow was an acceptable and touted way of life, Vernon Johns was a significant opposing voice whose advocacy inspired, many believe, the successful leadership of his successor at Dexter, Martin Luther King, Jr.

- **Percy Lavon Julian**

Born in Montgomery on April 11, 1899, Percy Lavon Julian received more than 130 chemical patents in his work as a synthetic organic chemist. Julian specialized in the field of natural products chemistry, the identification of active chemical components of extracts from plants, and the synthesis of those components in the laboratory from smaller molecules. He was the first to synthesize the natural product physostigmine, and a pioneer in the large-scale industrial chemical synthesis of human hormones progesterone and testosterone from plant sterols. This technology proved instrumental in producing medicines, food products, paper, paints, and fire-fighting foams, among other things.

Julian managed to acquire a stellar educational background during the Jim Crow era. He graduated from the Lincoln Normal School in Perry County, was a Phi Beta Kappa and valedictorian in his 1920 graduation from DePauw University, and then attended Harvard University before earning a Ph.D. from the University of Vienna in Europe. Early in his career Julian would teach at both Fisk and Howard Universities.

Julian employed his expertise for corporations interested in developing industrial applications for chemical processes. As the director of research at Glidden's Soya Products Division in Chicago, Illinois, Julian supervised the assembly of a German designed facility erected to facilitate the extraction of vegetable oil from soybeans for paints and other uses. He then designed and supervised the construction of the world's first plant for the production of industrial-grade isolated soy protein from oil-free soybean meal. This allowed industrial applications for coating and sizing paper, glue for making Douglas fir plywood, and in the manufacture of water-based paints.

Percy Julian was able to turn his research activities into his own business opportunities. He first established Julian Laboratories to specialize in forming synthetic cortisone. Julian sold his Laboratories for \$2.3 million, where it became a subsidiary of Smith, Kline and French Laboratories. In 1964, Julian then created Julian Associates, Inc., and also Julian Research Institute, through which he continued to do chemistry experiments and to provide advice to other chemical companies.

Julian was the first African American chemist inducted into the National Academy of Sciences. In 1993, a stamp was issued in his honor by the U.S. Postal Service in its Black Heritage Series.

- **Martin Luther King**

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., who lived in Montgomery between 1954 to 1960, is America's most significant and consequential civil rights leader, and according to *Time Magazine*, he is among the 20 Most Influential Americans of All Time. Rev. King was a minister, philosopher, and social activist, who achieved his most renown and greatest successes while leading a series of highly publicized civil rights campaigns between 1955 and 1965.

- **John Lewis**

John Lewis was born in Pike County, just south of Montgomery. As a young man, he was among the first Freedom Riders attacked by a Klan mob in Montgomery in May 1961. He continued as a major leader through the Civil Rights Movement and was at the front of the first marchers who crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in March 1965. Later elected to the US Congress, Lewis served as not only a political leader but as one of the nation's great moral leaders. From his early Civil Rights activism through until his death in 2020, Lewis exemplified a life devoted to truth and justice, yet tempered by compassion and a generosity of spirit, that stands almost unmatched in the nation's history.

- **Mary Ann Neeley**

A seventh generation Alabamian, Mary Ann Neeley devoted her life to preserving, recording, and sharing the history of Alabama and of Montgomery. She earned an undergraduate degree in history and English from Huntingdon College and a master's degree in history from Auburn and later taught at both educational institutions. After working as a researcher at the Alabama Department of Archives, she served as the executive director of The Landmarks Foundation (and Old Alabama Town) from 1979 until 2003. She also shared her passion for Montgomery's history in her popular walking tours of downtown Montgomery and Oakwood Cemetery, attended by locals and tourists. She was very active in historical programming around the state and the Southeast and created Cultural Crossroads, an annual symposium in Montgomery devoted to a study of historical subjects that attracted scholars, academicians, writers, publishers, and members of the community. She wrote seven books on subjects about Montgomery and Alabama history: *The Way It Was/1850-1930: Photographs of Montgomery and Her Central Alabama Neighbors* (1985); *Old Alabama Town: An Illustrated Guide* (1987); *Montgomery: Capital City Corners* (1997); *Montgomery and the River Region Sketchbook* (2005); *Montgomery and the River Region: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (2007); *The Works of Matthew Blue: Montgomery's First Historian* (2010, with Edwin C. Bridges); *Montgomery in the 20th Century: Tradition & Change, 1880 - 2010* (2013).

In October of 2018, the Montgomery City Council voted unanimously to change the name of College Street Park to Mary Ann Neeley Park.

- **Jo Ann Robinson**

Jo Ann Gibson Robinson was the Alabama State University English professor, who, in many ways, was responsible for the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. On Thursday night, December 1, 1955, after Rosa Parks' arrest for refusing to relinquish her seat on a segregated city bus to a White man, Robinson, with two of her students, duplicated 50,000 flyers notifying Black Montgomery of a boycott of city buses. Professor Robinson, and the three-hundred plus women of the ASU-based, Women's Political Council, had long considered such an action. Parks' arrest presented this opportunity. The Montgomery Bus Boycott solidified the Black community, catapulted

Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. onto the national stage, and ushered in a new and dramatic phase in African American's long struggle for civil rights.

Jo Ann Robinson was the last of twelve children born on a farm just south of Macon in Culloden, Georgia, to Owen Boston Gibson and Dollie Webb. When Jo Ann was six, her father died and the Gibsons decided to sell the family farm and move to Macon. In the city Jo Ann was able to take advantage of educational opportunities not available in rural Georgia; she graduated valedictorian from the segregated ??? high school and then successfully matriculated through all-Black Georgia State College at Fort Valley. Shortly, Robinson began teaching in Macon and married Wilbur Robinson. The marriage suffered after the death of her infant child and ended less than a year later in divorce. The now divorced teacher moved to complete an M.A. Degree at Atlanta University and then took a job at Mary Allen College in Crockett, Texas. Soon, President Dr. Hooper Council Trenholm made a better offer for Jo Ann Gibson Robinson to come to Alabama State College.

Jo Ann Robinson moved to Montgomery in 1949 when she was thirty-three years old. The fair skin, attractive Georgian saw Montgomery as a college town, where the Black middle class took advantage of the proximity of Alabama State, parents worked days and attended school nights while their children could during the day. To Robinson the school impacted Black attitudes; she felt graduates exhibited little in the way of inferiority complexes, "no fear of whitey, great faith in self, in families, and in people." A college town, according to Robinson, "develops attitudes of defiance against discrimination, and people there are less prone to succumb to force."

Robinson, however, was not long in Montgomery before having to face the ugly reality of segregation. On the first leg of a trip to visit relatives in Cleveland she boarded a sparsely occupied city bus on her way to Dannelly Field, the municipal airport. When the driver realized that Black woman was seated in the middle section of the mostly empty bus he stopped the bus and demanded, "with his hand drawn back as if he were going to strike," that she get up immediately; shocked and frightened, the English teacher rushed off of the bus and made her way back to campus.

Montgomery buses proved to be volatile, thrusting Black and White riders into close contact under rules that systematically degraded African Americans. Confrontations, with Blacks usually at the losing end were common. In 1945 Geneva Johnson was arrested for not having correct change and "talking back" to the driver. The complaints about Johnson's treatment lodged by Black leaders yielded little in the way of change. In another incident Miola White and Katie Wingfield were arrested for violating the segregation ordinance. And in yet another incident, ten- and twelve-year-old brother and

sister, accustomed to integrated seating practices, were also arrested while visiting Montgomery from New Jersey. The siblings refused to succumb to demands that they give up their seats when asked by an irate White passenger and then by the bus driver. In 1952 a bus driver called the police because of an argument with ??? Brooks over a fair dispute. The police responded to the altercation by shooting Brooks to death. In another incident a bus driver argued with rider Epsie Worthy over a transfer. The woman tried to end the argument by disembarking but the driver followed her off of the bus and demanded she pay another fare, beating her when the money was not forthcoming. Worthy was then arrested and fined fifty-two dollars for disorderly conduct.

Jo Ann Robinson, who joined the Women's Political Council at the urging of the organization's president, fellow English professor Mary Fair Burks, resolved to focus the WPC's considerable energy on addressing the discriminatory practices of Montgomery's bus system. To her surprise, the appeal resonated among the group as dozens of Black women had their own traumatic bus experiences. This group of some three hundred women, organized into three different chapters in separate sections of town, had their origins in 1946 after Black women were refused membership to the League of Women Voters. Most of the women were professional, many from ASC, and all dedicated to addressing the social ills in Black Montgomery. In 1950, at the behest of Mary Fair Burks, Jo Ann Robinson assumed leadership of the main group. Robinson followed up her appointment by holding a number of meetings with Mayor W.A. Gayle and the two other city commissioners. On 21 May 1954, four days after the Supreme Court struck down segregation in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case, Jo Ann Robinson wrote a letter to Montgomery Mayor W.A. Gayle on behalf of the WPC. In that letter professor Robinson insisted that conditions had to improve for the city's 25,000 Black bus riders, or, if they did not, she threatened a boycott.

One meeting with the Mayor included several ministers including Dr. Martin Luther King and three WPC women, Thelma Glass, Jewell Lewis and Jo Ann Gibson Robinson. So in addition to training high school seniors in government and encouraging voter participation, Montgomery women were able to work through a number of other problems with the city commissioners.

During her tenure as president of the WPC, complaints from Black bus riders continued to pour in. With Blacks making up seventy percent of the ridership, they often had to stand in the crowded back section of the bus while ten White only seats remained empty in the front. Black riders were also required to pay fares, disembark and re-board at the back of the bus to avoid walking past White passengers. The women met with bus officials to address their concerns, but only marginal changes were made. Conditions continued to degenerate. Jo Ann Robinson estimated that three of five Black riders

experienced some mistreatment on city buses. On 2 March 1955, sixteen-year-old NAACP Youth Council member Claudette Clovin was arrested, kicking and screaming, when she refused to relinquish her seat in the section behind the ten “White seats.” Seven months later in October 1955, eighteen-year-old Mary Louise Smith was arrested and fined when she refused to relinquish her seat. In that same year a retarded Black man was beaten by a driver. Women in the WPC discussed the possibility of a boycott, drew up plans and prepared an announcement; all they needed was a date.

- **Solomon Seay**

As the civil rights movement emerged in Alabama during the 1950s, attorney Solomon Snowden Seay Jr. joined a small group of Black attorneys who provided legal representation for movement activists and civil rights organizations.

Solomon Seay was born in Montgomery to activist Rev. Solomon Seay Sr. and Carrie Long Seay on December 2, 1931. Seay graduated from Livingstone College in North Carolina, served in Korea from 1953 to 1954, and then returned to the United States where he earned a law degree from Howard Law School in 1957.

Seay returned to Montgomery where he embarked on a thirty-three year career in a law firm with Fred Gray and Charles Langford. During his tenure with the firm, Seay participated in cases that helped shape the modern civil rights movement. In 1958, after Mark Gilmore was arrested for using the White only Oak Park, Seay petitioned the Montgomery City Council to desegregate all of the city’s public parks. When Seay won the case styled *Gilmore v. City of Montgomery*, rather than open the parks on a desegregated basis, Montgomery officials closed all nine of the city’s parks for nine years.

Attorney Seay was also part of a team of attorneys who represented his father, Solomon Seay Sr. and three other ministers with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The Alabama ministers’ were sued for libel by Montgomery Commissioner of public affairs Lester B. Sullivan, in the *New York Times Co. v Sullivan*. After losing the case in Alabama the case under different counsel was appealed to the Supreme Court and the ministers were exonerated.

Attorney Seay also served as co-counsel in the *Lewis v. Greyhound* case. The case was filed against the Greyhound Bus Company on behalf of John Lewis, Ralph Abernathy, and other 1960 Freedom Ride participants. The company, who refused to serve the plaintiffs at a dining facility in the bus terminal, also had the men arrested for violating an injunction ordering them to leave the city the day before. The plaintiffs were exonerated after the case was heard in the United States Supreme Court.

In 1965, attorney Seay, attorney Gray, along with National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) attorneys, successfully sued Governor George Wallace, forcing the state of Alabama to allow the assemblage of protestors, in

the form of the Selma to Montgomery March, to peacefully draw attention to the denial of voting rights for African Americans in Alabama.

Seay also assisted a team of attorneys including Fred Gray in the *Pollard v. United States* Tuskegee Syphilis Study case. The suit resulted in a \$10 million settlement for the victims and their heirs.

Seay and Gray along with attorneys from the NAACP argued several school desegregation cases in the 1960s. These cases led to the desegregation of public education in Alabama. The most significant of these cases was the landmark 1963 *Lee v. Macon County Board of Education* case.

Seay and Gray along with the NAACP worked together on cases well into the 1990s, including the *Knight v. Alabama* case successfully challenging discriminatory funding practices and the continuation of state sanctioned segregation.

Names to Consider for Removal:

- **Calhoun Road**

John C. Calhoun developed a two-point defense. One was a political theory that the rights of a minority section—in particular, the South—needed special protection in the federal union. The second was an argument that presented slavery as an institution that benefited all involved.

In the 1820s, Calhoun became a leading proponent of state right, limited government, nullification and opposition to high tariffs. Calhoun became known as the "cast-iron man" for his rigid defense of white Southern beliefs and practices, emphasizing approval of slavery and minority states' rights as particularly embodied by the South. To protect minority rights against majority rule, he called for a concurrent majority by which the minority could block some proposals that it felt infringed on their liberties. Calhoun supported states' rights, and nullification through which states could declare null and void federal laws that they viewed as unconstitutional. Nullification is a legal theory that a state has the right to nullify, or invalidate, any federal law it deems unconstitutional. In Calhoun's words, it is "the right of a State to interpose, in the last resort, in order to arrest an unconstitutional act of the General Government, within its limits". Calhoun openly argued for a state's right to secede from the Union, as a last resort to protect its liberty and sovereignty. The Union can only be preserved by respecting the rights of the states, and distributing equally the benefit and burden of the Union. He felt that keeping governmental power as decentralized as possible would allow the planters to maintain power and protect the labor system that made their great wealth and status possible. To do this, Calhoun developed two major ideas that are perhaps his greatest legacy: the concepts of state interposition and concurrent majority.

He suggested a state should first call a convention to consider any federal action in question. If the convention determined that the action violated its understanding of the Constitution, then it could declare the action "null and void," denying the federal government the power to execute the law within that state. The federal government would

then have to either amend the Constitution to legitimize its action or repeal the measure. And if the Constitution was amended in a way the state considered unacceptable, the state had the right to leave the Union. The role of nullification in any future debate over slavery was clear: with the ability to define the terms of their membership in the Union, states would be able to deny the federal government any regulatory power over slavery.

Like his parents, Calhoun owned dozens of slaves. He further believed that slavery instilled in the remaining whites a code of honor that blunted the disruptive potential of private gain and fostered the civic-mindedness that lay near the core of the republican creed. Calhoun asserted that slavery, rather than being a “necessary evil” was a “positive good” that benefited both slaves and owners. From such a standpoint, the expansion of slavery decreased the likelihood for social conflict and postponed the declension when money would become the only measure of self-worth. He rooted this claim on two grounds: white supremacy and paternalism. An elite group that enjoys the fruits of the labor of a less-exceptional group, Calhoun claimed, rules all societies.

During the 1830s and 1840s, the growth of the Northern abolition movement and attempts by Northern politicians to push the federal government to act against slavery confirmed for Calhoun that the North intended to exercise its power as a majority to the detriment of Southern interests. He responded to these attacks with the argument that the Constitution gave Congress no regulatory power over slavery. He warned that the South “cannot remain here in an endless struggle in defense of our character, our property, and institutions.” He said that if abolitionist agitation did not end, “we must become, finally, two peoples.... Abolition and the Union cannot co-exist.” Even compromise was not possible, in his opinion. Calhoun endorsed slavery as “a good -- a great good,” based on his belief in the inequality inherent in the human race. He believed that people were motivated primarily by self-interest and that competition among them was a positive expression of human nature. The results of this competition were displayed for all to see in the social order: those with the greatest talent and ability rose to the top, and the rest fell into place beneath them.

Calhoun believed the African race was inferior. He shared the prevailing prejudices of the day - which black people were mentally, physically, and morally inferior to whites. This inferiority necessitated that they be slaves. “There is no instance of any civilized colored race of any shade being found equal to the establishment and maintenance of free government.” He pointed to the impoverished living conditions of Northern free blacks as proof that black people lacked the ability to exercise their freedom positively.

In Calhoun’s view, slavery benefited black people. “Never before has the black race...from the dawn of history to the present day, attained a condition so civilized and so improved, not only physically, but morally and intellectually,” he asserted in Congress. “It came to us in a low, degraded, and savage condition, and in the course of a few generations it has grown up under the fostering care of our institutions.”

Slavery provided black people with a quality of existence Calhoun believed they were incapable of obtaining for themselves. To his mind, despite all the progress the race had supposedly made in America, to free the slaves and place them in situations where they

would have to compete with white people on an equal basis would only result in catastrophe. In the long run, Calhoun believed, regardless of what happened with slavery, the progress of civilization would in time doom the inferior African race to extinction. Until that time, he asserted, slavery at least gave black people security and made them useful. The South merely institutionalized this into a system that benefited both master and servant. The master got his labor and the slave received a standard of living far above what he could achieve on his own.

- **Clanton Avenue**

James Holt Clanton was a military officer, attorney and political leader before, during, and after the Civil War. He served in the US Army during the Mexican War in the 1840's and in the Confederate army during the Civil War (although he had opposed secession). After the war, Clanton became a leader of the Conservative/Democratic Party's campaign to resist federal reconstruction efforts and to maintain white supremacy in Alabama. He became the head of the State Democratic Party Executive Committee in this effort and is reputed by many sources to have been a leader, and perhaps even the state leader, of the Ku Klux Klan. As a secret, terrorist organization, the KKK worked to ensure that information about both its membership and leadership remained secret. Even if Clanton was not a Klan leader, he clearly cooperated with the Klan, and his political efforts were supported by Klan violence.

- **Cortez Street**

Spanish Conquistador Hernando Cortez (also known as Hernan Cortes) (1485 – 1547) is best known for his expeditions from Spain to Hispaniola, Cuba, Mexico, and Honduras. Modern historians differ on his place in history, ranging from positive to negative. The arguments for a positive interpretation of his contributions to history stress his informative explorations that provided knowledge of the New World and expanded Spain's holdings and romantic narratives of his adventures. The negative side of the historical record cites his massacres, his enslaving of indigenous people, and the destruction of the Aztec Empire. One historian summed up this historical dichotomy: Cortez can be described as "a vicious and ruthless person or a noble and honorable cavalier." Monuments to and statues in memory of Cortez have become controversial in Mexico since the early 1980s.

Regardless of where one falls in an assessment of the history of Cortez, he has no place in the history of Alabama or of Montgomery.

- **De Soto Street**

Hernando de Soto was the first Spanish conquistador to explore/invoke the interior of what would become Alabama. In 1540, his expedition entered Alabama from the northeast and traveled southwest down the valley of the Coosa River through what is now Montgomery before crossing the central part of the state and passing on into present-day Mississippi. His treatment of the native population during this passage was vicious, destructive, and deadly. De Soto and his men often took local chiefs into captivity by

trickery and then forced the chief's subjects to ransom him by providing food, bearers to carry supplies, and women. The invaders brutally killed and injured many of their victims and left a train of death and destruction in their wake.

- **Early Avenue**

Jubal Early was a colonel in the Confederate army, becoming the first commander of the 24th Virginia Infantry Regiment. After the war, Early helped to invent the highly influential theory of the “Lost Cause” –that the Confederate States during the American Civil War was a just and heroic one. This ideology has furthered the belief that slavery was just and moral, because the enslaved were happy, even grateful. His most notable postwar activity was interpreting Confederate history. Founder and president of the Southern Historical Society from 1873 until his death, and a frequent contributor to the *Southern Historical Society Papers*, Early led and influenced many ex-Confederates who contentiously refought the war in addresses, articles, and memoirs. He and others often exaggerated Lee's genuine virtues and, in an attempt to explain away his defeats. Early understood almost immediately after Appomattox that there would be a struggle to control the public memory of the war, working hard to help shape that memory, Early advanced his view of the war in *A Memoir of the Last Year of the War for Independence* (1866), the first such book by a leading general on either side.

- **Jackson Street**

Andrew Jackson was a wealthy slave-owning planter from Tennessee, an Army General and a member of both houses of Congress before he became the seventh President of the United States (1829-1837). Jackson eventually owned up to 300 slaves, and he encouraged cruelty and beatings of the men, women and children he owned. Though Jackson was widely known as a war hero (Creek War, Battle of Horseshoe Bend, Battle of New Orleans), his endorsement and determined enforcement of the Indian Removal Act historically defines his presidency. The legislation caused the forcible removal of the major Indian tribes in the southeast United States to Indian Territory in the West, creating an actual and psychological path known as the Trail of Tears. The removal resulted in many unlawful takings of Indian lands and in widespread death and disease among Native Americans. (e.g., 4000 of 18,000 Creeks died). Although Jackson opposed secession during his presidency and after his retirement, he also opposed abolitionists and movements to free the enslaved.

- **Jefferson Davis Avenue**

Jefferson Davis was the first and only President of the Confederate States of America, the highest ranking official in a country whose armed forces waged war against the United States of America. The death of several hundred thousand United States soldiers at the hands of Jefferson's Confederate military should not be dismissed. Davis also had a vested interest in fighting a war to preserve slavery. He owned a cotton labor camp in Mississippi where he enslaved more than 100 people, justifying their enslavement and exploitation because he believed they “were inferior and fitted expressly for servitude.”

Davis reasoned that slavery was "a form of civil government for those who by their nature are not fit to govern themselves,"¹

In his capacity as President, Davis ordered the summary execution of African American soldiers in November of 1862. Even though the men were in uniform when taken prisoner in South Carolina. Davis was clear about his motivation, calling the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation "the most execrable measure recorded in the history of guilty man." He then proposed White officers of Black troops be "dealt with in accordance with the laws . . . providing for the punishment of criminals engaged in exciting servile insurrection," execution. This was the order of the day under Davis, as Black soldiers captured as prisoners of war were summarily executed at places like Fort Pillow, Tennessee and Poison Spring, Arkansas. In February of 1863, Davis went so far as to call for the enslavement of "all free Negroes in the Southern Confederacy."²

- **Lee Street**

Robert E. Lee was the General in Chief of the Armies of the Confederate States, which seceded from the United States to preserve chattel slavery, an institution in which Lee, as owner of more than 100 slaves whom he treated harshly and for whom he maintained horrible conditions, had a personal stake. Lee argued that "blacks are immeasurably better off here than in Africa, morally, socially & physically" and that "[t]he painful discipline they are undergoing, is necessary for their instruction as a race." He also believed that blacks did not possess the intellectual capacity to vote and participate in politics. Although Lee graduated from West Point and became a Colonel in the United States Army, he deserted that position in 1861 by resigning from the United States Army to become a Confederate officer and lead troops against his former country. Although the Rebel Army lost the Civil War, General Lee's military victory would have perpetuated chattel slavery in the Confederate States in perpetuity.

- **Wallace Drive (N & S)**

George Wallace served as the Governor of Alabama during four-terms between 1963 to 1998. A lawyer by training, Wallace was willing to capitalize on segregationist language and theatrics to win political office. His actions, however, had real and even deadly consequences. As Barbara County Circuit Court Judge, Wallace was belligerent in his response to a request by the U. S. Civil Rights Commission to turn over county voting records. Then Judge Wallace threatened to lock up anyone who attempted to take the records. While announcing to his followers that he stood up to the federal government, Wallace quietly turned the documents over to a grand jury who then gave them to the Department of Justice. Wallace continued to stoke racism as Governor. Upon inauguration, Wallace defined the tenure of his administration when during his inaugural speech he proclaimed "Segregation Today, Segregation Tomorrow, Segregation Forever." To live up to his rhetoric, in June of 1963 Wallace took his famous stand in front of Foster Auditorium at the University of Alabama, where he would "forbid" Black students from attending the school. When confronted by the

¹ ['Where was the Lord?': On Jefferson Davis' birthday, 9 slave testimonies \(montgomeryadvertiser.com\)](#)

² [Celebrate Racism! It's Jefferson Davis's Birthday in Alabama \(nymag.com\)](#)

National Guard Wallace capitulated, allowed the students to enter and then dubiously claimed “we are winning.” In 1965, at the height of the voting rights campaign, Judge Frank Johnson ruled in *Williams vs. Wallace* that State Troopers, deputies and “possemen were” acting under instruction of Governor George Wallace when they attacked “Negroes” at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. And by doing so the Governor infringed on the marcher’s constitutional right to “redress government.”

Between 1963 and 1966, the Governor’s cynical antics helped to stoke a toxic environment where White vigilantes killed Black citizens and their White allies with impunity. In the September 1963 White supremacists killed four girls by bombing Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist Church; several days later a thirteen-year-old Virgil Ware was shot by White teenagers as he was riding a bike along a Birmingham street; during a February 1965 Marion protest, State Trooper James Fowler shot Jimmie Lee Jackson at point blank range; not two weeks later White men in Selma beat Rev. James Reeb to death just after he participated in a street protest; Klansmen also shot to death Detroit housewife Viola Liuzzo as she ferried people along Highway 80 just after the Selma to Montgomery March; in Anniston National States Rights Party members shot Willie Brewster on July 13, 1965. Brewster was on his way home from work when he was gunned down; Johnathan Daniels, who traveled to Alabama to support Black voting rights, was killed by a Sheriff’s Deputy in Hayneville; and in 1966, Sammy Younge, a student at Tuskegee University, was shot by a gas station attendant after the two disagreed on Younge’s right to use the restroom. In all, the Governor’s toxic rhetoric and the state’s refusal to convict the perpetrators certainly emboldened racial vigilantism.

In the meantime, Governor Wallace turned Alabama into a police state. He transformed the State Patrol into the State Troopers, adorned their uniforms with Confederate flags, and then turned them loose to attack student demonstrators in Mobile, Tuskegee, Selma, Tuscaloosa, and Montgomery. He then created the Sovereignty Commission as a governmental agency to spy on Alabamians, and identify and track individuals who supported desegregation.

- **Yancey Avenue**

William Lowndes Yancey was known as a “Fire-Eater ” for his vociferous states rights advocacy and belligerent support for secession from the United States of America. Yancey served in the Alabama legislature, the U.S. Congress, and practiced law in Montgomery. Convicted of manslaughter in 1838, Yancey operated a failed labor camp enslaving thirty-five people acquired through his marriage to heiress Sarah Caroline Earle.

Yancey developed a reputation for pushing the most extreme pro-slavery positions. In 1846, he pushed through the “Alabama Platform” which barred the state from backing a presidential candidate who favored anything but the uninhibited spread of slavery. In 1846, Davis moved to Montgomery, where he practiced law and pursued politics. In 1860, Yancy conceived the Alabama Legislature to hold a convention to consider secession if a Republican candidate were elected. Yancey then took his pro-slavery “Alabama Platform” to the 1860 Democratic National Convention. Unsuccessful,

Yancey walked out taking delegates from six other slave states with him, thereby effectively splintering the Democratic Party. With the election of Republican Abraham Lincoln, Yancey successfully introduced a convention resolution for secession in the Alabama legislature.

Yancey served the Confederate States of America as a Minister to Great Britain, and a Confederate Congressman. Yancey died in 1863 before he could witness the utter devastation brought on by the war.³

³ [William Lowndes Yancey | Encyclopedia of Alabama](#)