

Selective Amnesia: Alabama's George Wallace in Spaces of Public Memory

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May 29, 2017

Introduction

NOBODY MORE POLITICALLY POWERFUL or famous has emerged from Alabama than Governor George C. Wallace, and nobody of such importance has been more forgotten in public memory. The only four-term governor in state history and one of the most successful third-party candidates for president in American history, George Wallace was, according to historian Dan Carter, “the most influential loser in twentieth-century American politics.”¹ Loser, however, is a subjective term. A man born in 1919 into extreme poverty who had fought his way to the governorship by 1963, Wallace cultivated a strong political sixth sense for gauging public opinion in his state. After losing his first gubernatorial bid in 1958 to John Patterson—a man who, unlike Wallace, sought the endorsement of the Ku Klux Klan and made segregation a central platform of his campaign—Wallace promised to embrace the white-power body politic the next time he ran. Vowing never to be “out-niggered again,” when he finally did become governor he did so as a staunch segregationist.²

Just because he was one to speak clearly on his racial beliefs (what could be clearer than his inaugural promise of “segregation forever?”), those beliefs were never static or even all that obvious.³ As a judge appointed by the New Deal-minded Governor Jim Folsom, Wallace made prosecutors treat black defendants with respect during his 1953-59 tenure on the bench.⁴ Attorney J. L. Chestnut—a black lawyer who began his career in Alabama and would later become active in the Civil Rights Movement in Selma—referred to Wallace as “the most liberal judge that [he] had ever practiced law in front of.”⁵ But just as Wallace initially embraced the moderate progressivism (even liberalism, as Chestnut says) of the “Folsom gospel,” he later took the lead in voicing Alabamians’ more extreme racial politics.⁶ As governor he opposed court orders to integrate Alabama schools, even standing in the doorway of the University of Alabama’s Foster Hall to block the admittance of black students. Historians have charged him with protecting Klansmen, spying on Civil Rights protesters, and a wide assortment of underhanded police tactics.

Yet this is not the complete picture of Wallace—if there ever can be such a thing. Paralyzed by an attempted assassination in 1972, Wallace became a born-again Christian and renounced his racist ways, declaring, “I’ve learned what pain is and I’m sorry if I’ve caused anybody else pain.”⁷ Newly reformed and apologetic, Wallace won the governorship for the last time in 1982

¹Dan Carter, *The Politics of Rage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 468.

²Russ Rhymer, “The George Wallace We Forgot,” *New York Times*, October 24, 2008; Maggie Riechers, “Racism to Redemption,” *The Magazine for the National Endowment of the Humanities* 21, no. 2 (2000): accessed February 3, 2017, <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2000/marchapril/feature/racism-redemption>.

³George Wallace, “*The Inaugural address of Governor George C. Wallace*” (speech, Montgomery, Alabama, January 14, 1963), *Alabama Department of Archives and History*, <http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/cdm/singleitem/collection/voices/id/2952/rec/1>.

⁴E. Culpepper Clark, *The Schoolhouse Door* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 176.

⁵“The American Experience: George Wallace,” *TPT Television*, accessed February 3, 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/wallace/sfeature/quotes.html>.

⁶Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 81.

⁷Alice Yeager, *George C. Wallace: Alabama Political Power* (Birmingham: Seacoast Publishing, 2003), 95.

with the support of the many black voters who judged his transformation genuine. Even with his newfound religion, however, Wallace was still a mystery. An *Eyes on the Prize* interview conducted four years after his last electoral victory shows Wallace in his most elemental form, answering questions with “mixed boasts and smoke screens, honesty and insincerity, pretense and insight.”⁸ His trustworthiness as a historical figure is impossible to measure. Was he of “the old generation of race-mongering politicians [that] saw the light”?⁹ Scholarship is mixed and indecisive in answering this question; there is no clear consensus in Wallace literature as to what his tangible motives were for making so public a transformation. On the one hand, Wallace succeeded during his final term (post-assassination attempt) in appointing black citizens to state positions, arguably diversifying Alabama’s government more than any other administration since Reconstruction.¹⁰ Yet it should be noted that despite the good Wallace did during his last term, his once segregationist heart changed at the exact moment in history when segregationists realized they were badly losing. Personal reformation is one thing, but shrewd political timing is completely different.

Whatever his motive in life, Wallace died in 1998 at the age of 79. With his passing came the problem of remembering a man burdened by an intensely convoluted past. Indeed, Wallace seems so confusing to historians and museum curators that many simply leave him alone or make use of whichever part of his politics fit their own stories. Most exert little effort to comprehensively understand Wallace as a man, although all have their differing reasons for neglecting to do so. Some are ashamed, some are angry, some are focused on other aspects of the era in which he was active. But most, it seems, are simply baffled at the task of filling their comparatively tiny museum spaces with his huge past and personality.. Questions raised regarding his trustworthiness, his moral character, and his legacy can easily overshadow any museum exhibit. A man who never (ever) stopped being a politician makes for a fascinating narrative, but Wallace’s personality also makes his genuineness impossible to gauge. Remembering George Wallace often comes down to the issue of forgetting much of his story.

The primary problem museums face when presenting George Wallace (if they choose to do so at all) is overcoming the plethora of conflicting emotions and opinions orbiting his public memory. If George Wallace fancied himself a politician for ordinary folks, then it makes the historian or curator’s job all the more complicated knowing that Wallace’s former constituents still have an incoherent opinion of their old governor. Perhaps because his legacy is riddled with so many sharp and unexpected turns, Wallace has made an interesting impression on the Alabamians who once lived in his world.

For some of the everyday Alabamians who outlived him, George Wallace is too important a figure in history to not remember. Ask these people, white or black, well-off or getting by, what they think of their hard-talking former governor and you receive a myriad of answers. Some approve of him at least to a degree—his signed photograph hangs for all to see in Chris’ Hot Dogs in Montgomery. White Alabamians like the Fitts family have memories of meeting a wonderfully polite Wallace (a man they describe as a “real gentleman”) that despite his faults knew how to provide for his state by building roads, creating jobs, and providing students with free textbooks.¹¹

Some opinions have changed over time. Ed Bridges, director emeritus of Alabama’s historical apparatus, worked with “the later” Wallace who was in constant pain from his would-be assassin’s bullets. Those bullets, according to Bridges, humbled the man immeasurably. He tells the story of an office worker in the Capitol Building once overhearing Wallace pray with such emotion and

⁸Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 251.

⁹Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), 221.

¹⁰Edwin Bridges (historian) in discussion with the author, January 18, 2017; Eric Foner and John Arthur Garraty, *The Reader’s Companion to American History* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: 1991), 1127.

¹¹Alston Fitts (retired teacher) in discussion with the author, January 2017.

vigor that Bridges has no doubt Wallace was a man of not just new opinion, but renewed soul.¹² Yvonne Williams, a black retired teacher of many years, remembers meeting a crippled Wallace in his last days as governor. Wheeled into the same room as Yvonne by a young black man, Wallace grabbed the hand of his caretaker and declared, “this right here is my best friend in the world today!” Yvonne thought Wallace genuine, but the man never stopped staring straight ahead past the governor, maybe because he was one of the many blacks who never forgave Wallace.¹³ Bruce Benson, a northern white exchange student in the 1960’s at Talladega College, noted how the segregationist beliefs articulated by Wallace ensured that black people “lived afraid” because they could not change the Wallace-centric power structure of their state.¹⁴

The cacophony of Wallace experiences, recollection, and opinion present in Alabama’s public memory represents similar interpretive problems within the scholarly and museum community, albeit of a more casual nature. Unlike the first-hand memories of locals and older Alabamians (which are prone to change from person to person and time to time), the official remembrance of Governor Wallace is relatively stable. This type of memoriam reflects a purposeful attempt to interpret the past, rather than simply remember it. Buildings, after all, are not easily renamed, nor are monuments and other state-sanctioned *memoria* often changed. The main display cases of Alabama’s history—the Department of Archives and History (which features its own museum) and the State Capitol grounds—are therefore carefully curated. This is not to say, however, that these institutions are exempt from interpreting history or making changes to their presentation over time. They offer insights not just into Alabama’s political past, but also into the politics alive within the academic communities that study that past.

Walk through the State Capitol, now the governor’s office, and it will become apparent that the governor’s staff are not the only ones under the dome with a political agenda. The same interpretive sin often befalls the historians and citizens tasked with presenting their state’s history. The capitol building is arranged in a cross connected by a central rotunda. One wing is the old Senate chamber, another the old House, with the former home to the judiciary and the governor’s office occupying the remaining space. In the rotunda are portraits of the current and two most recent governors. Along the building’s marble walls are paintings of all the state’s former governors. They seem like decently flattering portraits, until you round the corner and crane your neck upward at the dominating rendition of Governor Wallace that puts the others to shame.

The painting, bigger than the other governors’ portraits, is one of the only acknowledgments of George Wallace on the capitol grounds. For a man who was elected governor more than any other Alabamian in history, and who did not (it seems) seek humility under most circumstances, this is strange. The portrait, as boldly colorful as its subject’s character, is impressive. It features an Alabama flag and an American one hanging next to its Confederate rival, making absolutely clear Wallace’s stance on states’ rights. A miniature Statue of Liberty (an odd accoutrement considering its Yankee/immigrant symbolism) hides behind “the Guv’s” official desk placard, which is emblazoned with an outline of his state. Wallace’s pens and papers are at attention on his desk, ready for him to start signing laws for the people. A bookmarked, well-read Bible sits near the center of the portrait. Completed in 1966, the last year of his first term, the painting shows Wallace as he would most likely want to be remembered: a states’ rights man, a hard worker, and a down-to-earth leader with conviction.

The painting is the only noticeable commemoration of Wallace in the entire building, although this is not to say that as commemoration it should be taken lightly. Perhaps because it is the only nod to Wallace on the capitol grounds (more on that later), the painting was given center stage in the rotunda by a 1983 resolution of the legislature. By 2015, however, most of the mandate’s magic

¹²Edwin Bridges (historian) in discussion with the author, January 2017.

¹³Yvonne Williams (retired teacher) in discussion with the author, January 20, 2017.

¹⁴Bruce Benson (retired pastor) in discussion with the author, January 27, 2017.

had dissipated, and state historians felt comfortable removing Wallace's and his wife, Lurleen's, neighboring portrait from the rotunda for display in an off-branching hallway. They succeeded in doing so, but not without being shelled with political shrapnel. Wallace's son, George Wallace Jr., complained that the relocation was "an effort to diminish the contributions of his parents to Alabama" and a "slight" against his family.¹⁵ The mere fact that the legislature had asserted how the portraits were to be displayed, and the Wallace family's anger at the paintings being moved, indicates the importance of not just the painting but the man—so why is there so little commemoration of Governor Wallace in Alabama?

George Jr. could provide an answer. The most interesting aspect of the painting incident is not that George Jr. complained, but that he hadn't complained before. After all, his father, Caesar of Alabama for almost two decades and one of the most well-known Alabamians of the 20th century, had been given no more than a nod by those at the capitol tasked with memorializing him. Rather, they devoted far more attention, and paid far greater respect, to the memory of his wife, Lurleen Wallace, elected governor after her husband. Note that George served most of his life in state government, most significantly as governor for sixteen years. He gets a painting and, as it happens, the inestimable honor of being the namesake for what could reasonably be called the most ugly highway tunnel in Alabama.¹⁶ Lurleen served as governor for one year, from 1967 to 1968. She gets a portrait rivaling her husband's, a monument unavoidably placed in the center of the capitol building, and the Lurleen B. Wallace State Office Building across the street.

To explain the disparity between the public knowledge of the husband and the public acknowledgement of the wife, we should look at the public role of this power couple. For many Alabamians, Mrs. George C. Wallace was simply a woman-proxy for her husband. State law prohibited governors serving more than two consecutive terms, meaning then two-term Governor Wallace needed a political ally to serve in his stead. When she announced her candidacy for governor on February 24, 1966, she did so declaring, "my election will enable my husband to carry on his programs for the people of Alabama."¹⁷ She also enabled her husband to keep on campaigning in the state. At stump speech events, supposedly held for Lurleen, it was her husband who did most of the talking, often-times speaking for an hour while the candidate herself was given five minutes.¹⁸ Once elected, on several occasions she forgot altogether that she and not her husband was governor of Alabama—in fact, both Wallaces were called "Governor" by the staff during her yearlong gubernatorial experience.¹⁹ As historian and children's author Alice Yeager puts it, the good folks of Alabama "knew [George] intended to keep running things."²⁰

Of course, Lurleen Wallace was independent from her husband to some degree. She worked hard on mental health issues (which, as Alabama historian Alston Fitts chimes in, "she would have to since she was married to George Wallace"), and she developed a large following who admired her personality. But her accomplishments are altogether unremarkable, and even more so when compared to those of her power-boss husband.²¹ Herein lies the key to understanding the tendency of Alabamians to honor Lurleen: for all her husband's accomplishments, the history of George

¹⁵Drew Taylor, "Wallace Portraits Relocated Outside Capitol Rotunda," *Montgomery Advertiser* (Montgomery, Alabama), February 3, 2015.

¹⁶"George C. Wallace Tunnel," *Bridgehunter.com*, accessed January 27, 2017, <https://bridgehunter.com/al/mobile/10851/>; it should also be noted that the Wallace State Junior College is named after George Wallace as well, but that between the school and the bridge there are few if any other places bearing his name.

¹⁷Alice Yeager, *Lurleen B. Wallace: Alabama's First Woman Governor* (Birmingham: Seacoast Publishing, 2003), 55.

¹⁸Yeager, *Lurleen B. Wallace*, 62.

¹⁹Yeager, *Lurleen B. Wallace*, 76.

²⁰Yeager, *Lurleen B. Wallace*, 63.

²¹Glenn T. Eskew, *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, "Lurleen B. Wallace (1967-1968)," accessed February 3, 2017, <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1662>.

Wallace is one littered with racism, anger, and hate rhetoric. Lurleen was an altogether different animal with a different temperament. She was as segregationist as her husband, and yet her most famous lines are not calls to forever segregate the South, but rather (as is inscribed on her monument in the capitol) speeches inciting “[pride] to be called an Alabamian, for you have nurtured the flame of liberty when it needed your courage.”²² She was an easy person to understand—easier than her husband at any rate. Lurleen was a good woman and wife, a proper Southern lady, and a victim of cancer. George, on the other hand, is himself seen as a cancer of Alabama history. He was a man who provably abused power and whose rhetoric was so severe that he apologized later in life for his beliefs.²³ She is so immortalized because although the work of her husband continued through her, people can look at her story and—unlike with her husband—they can say, “I like this Alabamian.” Despite the fact that “her administration is not remembered for any particular legislation” and that she continued to defy federally ordered desegregation, Lurleen has a special place not just in the hearts of Alabamians, but also in the halls of state-run museums.²⁴ Once again, it seems that the politics of historical imagery and remembrance are at play.

Unlike at the capitol building, a place where the controversies of commemorated public figures can be ignored or bypassed, the Department of Archives and History cannot take such liberties, although the institution nonetheless heavily moderates the George Wallace narrative. For one thing, the department’s main interpretive museum, the “Alabama Voices” exhibit, does not show Wallace as the primary obstructionist to Civil Rights Leaders. Remember that Wallace ordered the state troopers to block the Edmund Pettus Bridge at Selma; he stood in the doorway at the University of Alabama; and he protected Klan members while courting the White Citizens’ Council vote. But the state’s museum fails to draw these connections for museum-goers, at least not obviously.

Depictions of Wallace as a segregationist are sparse in the museum. The infamous “segregation forever” line from his 1963 inaugural appears as a small plaque of text—a quote Wallace hated in later years because it was too much of a landmark speech to exclude from museums and too clear in its meaning to dilute.²⁵ The other mention of Alabama’s “fighting little judge” is a portion of small print describing how “George Wallace rose to national prominence fighting the Civil Rights Movement” and that “His stance against federal activism drew widespread support when he ran for president in 1968 and 1972.”²⁶ Although subtle, the wording of this label is particularly revealing of a general theme of the State Museum’s coverage of Wallace. Rather than present Wallace as just a raving racist, the museum adds to that image with a depiction of Wallace as a defender of states’ rights. This is precisely how Wallace wanted to be seen by Americans when he performed such stunts as personally blocking the entrance of the University of Alabama from federally-escorted black students and when he ran for president in 1968. When Wallace’s unquestionably racist beliefs and actions are interpreted through the states’ rights lens of him “opposing federal activism” rather than “proposing racial division,” his politics are lent not only the legitimacy of classical conservatism, but cleansed of the racism that ensured his popularity with white Alabamians.

To the credit of Alabama voices, the exhibit does include how “In 1963, Governor Wallace had proclaimed ‘Segregation Forever’” in a portion of text describing the oppression of blacks. But they limit the exposure of the audience to the concrete steps Wallace took to ensure the separation of

²²In an impromptu performance by singer/songwriter Nina Simone of her song “Mississippi Goddamn,” Simone supplements her usual lyrics about how “Alabama’s gotten me so upset, Tennessee made me lose my rest” with the lines “Alabama’s gotten me so upset, Lurleen Wallace has made me lose my rest”—one of the rare public mentions of Lurleen Wallace’s enforcement of segregationist policies during her short gubernatorial tenure. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aez81GyVt3M>, accessed March 3, 2017; Monument to Lurleen Wallace, Alabama Capitol Building.

²³Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 234-235.

²⁴Eskew, *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, accessed May 5, 2017.

²⁵George Wallace, interviewed by Michael Riley, *Time Magazine*, March 2, 1992.

²⁶Wall text, *Alabama Voices*, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery.

whites and blacks, or his reliance on that platform to win elections. The exhibit quickly moves past the subject, presenting a new section of text stating that “by the mid-1970s, it was clear that segregation had no future. In constant pain from wounds suffered in an assassination attempt, Wallace softened in his stance on race. He began meeting with black Alabamians, asking them for forgiveness. In his last run for governor in 1982, Wallace won the election in part because of substantial black support.” The hate speech, Klan-backing, defiance of just court orders, and the plethora of other wrongs (all of which compose the guts of Wallace’s governorship) are strikingly absent, and if they are mentioned they are only casually dwelt upon. This is not to say that Alabama Voices whitewashes history by any means, but the exhibit presents a sense of oversimplified history that places equal if not greater emphasis on Wallace’s forgiveness by, rather than his oppression of, blacks. Titled “From Resistance to Cooperation,” the Wallace exhibit impresses upon the museum-goer a positive arc to the history of Alabama’s most boisterously segregationist politician.

The notion that Wallace’s specific acts are mitigated by the state museum repeats itself throughout the exhibit. It is present in every medium in which Wallace is discussed, be it the text mentioned above, campaign artifacts and memorabilia, or video. On display are the shoes Wallace was shot in (an interesting artifact considering that his attempted murder drove him to end the hate speech that brought him such fame). There is also a photo of Wallace at the University of Alabama and an assortment of campaign buttons. The buttons are, as expected, tokens of “Luv for the Guv” and pledges to “vote Wallace,” except for one. The largest button, featuring a picture of Wallace as he appeared for his first presidential run in 1964, proudly proclaims, “Michigan for Wallace!” In a museum specializing in Alabama history, this seems like an outlier artifact, one meant to show Wallace’s popularity across the US and not just south of the Mason-Dixon. Although the inclusion of this artifact illustrates the historical fact that Wallace was a national figure by the mid-1960’s, in effect the button asserts, “Alabama Wasn’t the Only One for Wallace!” as much as it does “Michigan for Wallace!” Alabamians’ blame and shame is thus deflected northward. The button also paints Wallace with a less racist, more populist slant. Ed Bridges, who was involved in the creation of the exhibit, acknowledges that, “The inclusion of the 1968 presidential campaign material [shows] that Alabamians were not the only people who fell for Wallace’s demagoguery,” a valid historical point.²⁷ The buttons remind us that Wallace was a national, not simply an Alabamian, phenomenon, but in doing so they quietly assert that Wallace focused not just on race, but the working class. While this is true (Wallace was a poor white’s Democrat), in the context of the rest of the exhibit the effect of these artifacts is to diminish Wallace’s race-based power rampages of the 50’s and 60’s.

Video provided by the museum has the same minimizing effect on the racism of the Wallace years. One film in particular that is shown in a section of Alabama Voices covers the progression of Civil Rights. But despite Wallace’s historical role as the center-stage actor in the defiance of Dr. King and company (who Wallace once called violent “agitators [of] the Communist Party”²⁸), there is almost no footage of Wallace in the film. His only appearance, near the end of the movie in a section about the progress of black politicians being elected to office, is a second-long clip of him shaking hands with a recently elected black official. Think about that: no Wallace speeches anywhere in the movie, no appearance of the governor who presided over (and would have bulldozed over) the Civil Rights Era except for a few seconds of reconciliation between the racist-turned-righteous governor and a black man. In the film alone, too much emphasis is placed on Wallace apologizing for his deeds rather than the deeds themselves.

All things considered, the museum might not tell a completely comprehensive story of Wallace, but for understandable reasons. As Ed Bridges explains, the exhibit shows Wallace’s far-reaching fight for civil rights as “mostly political pandering which, in the limited space we had, was less

²⁷Edwin Bridges, email to the author, January 28, 2017.

²⁸Time Magazine, September 27, 1963.

important than the more admirable efforts of the protestors.”²⁹ But Wallace still had a tangible effect on Civil Rights and took impactful action against protesters. While he was certainly a man of rhetoric (rhetoric that the state museum takes time to elucidate), he was also a man of action who reflected the emotions of whites in his state. Perhaps my field of focus is narrower than the Civil Rights’ portion of the state museum (it is easy to become swept up in understanding the force of nature that was George Wallace), and as Mr. Bridges makes clear, due to the spatial confines of the museum, “when choosing between a focus on [Wallace’s] ignoble pandering and the many admirable elements of the civil rights movement, it seemed much better to concentrate on the latter.”³⁰ Wallace’s story, in other words, is too vile, too sad, and too confusing.³¹ Everybody likes a happy ending, but the question of balance surrounding the presence of George Wallace in museums is one that asks: *how much of Wallace’s story should be left out or minimized?*

There is little in the exhibit evidencing Wallace’s, and therefore Alabama’s, complicity in the racist politics of segregation, even if the exhibit does not shy away from segregation and similar motifs of Civil Rights history. The Wallace factor is not pursued as aggressively or covered as extensively as it should be. Remember that he was the most powerful man in 20th-century Alabama. Everybody likes campaign buttons—they make good museum pieces—but there are incriminating artifacts absent from the exhibit. When the Wallace campaign was also responsible for distributing leaflets with photographs of black men crowded around a white girl with slogans like “Wake Up Alabama,”³² when *Time Magazine* prints a front page cover with Wallace’s picture superimposed upon a photo of the dynamited 16th St. Baptist Church, when Martin Luther King Jr. declares that “the blood of our little children is on [Wallace’s] hands,”³³ and when no such evidence can be found anywhere in the museum, lack of coverage of this darker side of history could raise questions and eyebrows.

In defense of organizations like the state archives, the point may be granted that theirs is not solely a Civil Rights Era focus; they have a lot on their academic and scholarly plates. The goal of Alabama Voices in general is to generate the image of a progressing, modernizing Alabama. George Wallace (being someone who refused to modernize his racial ideology) reflects his state poorly from a progressive’s perspective. This does not mean, however, that in museums with a more specific scope no problems exist with the historical portrayal of George Wallace. Take, for example, the Civil Rights Institute in Birmingham. For a museum whose published goal is to explore the past “by facilitating an atmosphere of dialogue and understanding,”³⁴ there is little effort put into understanding the three-dimensional reality of Alabama’s 45th governor. While the state museum placed too much pride on Wallace’s reconciliation with blacks, the Civil Rights Institute gives this important turning point in Wallace’s history nearly no recognition.

Mentions of Wallace anywhere throughout the museum are minimal and poorly balanced. His name appears only on small plaques (no bigger than 10 square inches) that serve as blurbs on the large timelines introducing different periods of Civil Rights history. Coverage of his career is easily missed. Wallace’s first real mention is a mundane nod to him winning the race for governor on May 1, 1962. In this moment, Wallace stands next to his wife studying the ballot returns coming into Montgomery (it should be noted that this is one of the only times his wife is mentioned in a museum setting, a fact starkly contrasting the lauding over Lurleen evident at the capitol grounds). His last mention is of the time when a gunman paralyzed him and he ran for governor

²⁹Edwin Bridges, email to the author, January 28, 2017.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Edwin Bridges (historian), in discussion with the author, January 18, 2017.

³²Sokol, *There Goes My Everything*, 250.

³³Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and Museum, 16th Street Baptist Church exhibit, accessed January 2017.

³⁴“About BCRI,” *Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and Museum*, published 2015, accessed January 2017
<http://www.bcri.org/Information/AboutBCRI.html>.

after reforming his racist ways, this time winning a sizeable amount of black votes. The plaque describing this information fails to explain why blacks might have voted for him, or the divide that existed between Civil Rights old timers (who understandably never wanted to call George Wallace governor again) and those who forgave their born-again, wheelchair-bound chief executive. In these footnote-style displays Wallace gets no analysis, no explanation, and no spotlight. The question, *why did this history happen?* is never satisfactorily answered. The lack of information, explanation, and general presence regarding Wallace must have been intentional, considering that the museum directors deliberated about every part of the museum, even the lighting and floor incline.³⁵

Wallace is given only one moment of genuine attention from the curators at the Civil Rights Institute. In the 16th St. Baptist Church bombing room, which covers the horrible murder of four black children in Birmingham, Wallace is a visible part of the exhibit. The *Time* cover on display shows Wallace sneering at the broken stained glass of the church. A telegram from Dr. King blaming the governor for the violence is centered just below. Although not directly connected with the bombings (which were conducted by Klansmen), the exhibit makes clear the governor's part in emboldening hate violence. It should be noted that the bombing was not a state-sponsored act of violence against blacks, and that there were such incidents—including Gov. Wallace's order to prevent Martin Luther King Jr. and company from completing their Selma to Montgomery march—that are never examined by the museum. The church bombing, an emotive and evil stain on the tapestry of Civil Rights, is where the museum displays its most poignant hatred toward Wallace even though he was never directly involved. In other words, there exist acts of bigotry far more directly related to Wallace, but the museum sees those acts as tertiary to the church bombing. Like other museums with similar concerns, the Civil Rights Institute strips George Wallace of the more positive aspects of his legacy in order to benefit their cause—no matter how comprehensive that cause might be. If the state capitol wants a *forgotten* Wallace, and the state archives wants a *reformed* Wallace, the Civil Rights Institute is dedicated to the idea of an *evil* Wallace.

"Evil Wallace" is subject to a different display in every museum, sometimes absent from museum space entirely, while other times given ample attention. Martin Luther King's Dexter Avenue Church in Montgomery, for example—the headquarters of the Civil Rights cause—made almost no mention anywhere in their museum of George Wallace. This despite Wallace once speaking to its congregants from his wheelchair, pleading for (and receiving) the forgiveness of many in that church. To those at Dexter Avenue, George Wallace is a distraction from the mission of their organization and is therefore justifiably ignored. Likewise, the 2004 monuments dedicated to the integration of the University of Alabama, which Wallace tried to halt by standing in the schoolhouse door, are understandably dedicated to the students who first broke the color code. In that context, Wallace is mentioned simply as a means to further the heroism and bravery of those first black students. For better or worse, not exploring the Wallace narrative in these contexts means that Wallace is once again forgotten.

The National Voting Rights Museum and Institute in Selma, on the other hand, is doing everything possible to preserve the hateful memory of George Wallace and the widespread white endorsement he received in the South. Founded in 1991 by Civil Rights veterans, the museum "serves as a living reminder" (according to its mission statement) of the voting rights struggles in Selma. Pursuant to its mission statement, the institute keeps the memory of Civil Rights Era figures alive as much as possible.³⁶ George Wallace is one of those men they want remembered. One exhibit features a collection of Wallace clothing, banners, pamphlets, buttons, and bumper stickers. As a collection it is larger than anything on display at the state museum, holding the largest percentage of Wallace material than any other Civil Rights museum exhibit. Clearly those

³⁵Dr. Ahmad Ward (Birmingham Civil Rights Institute Director) in discussion with the author, January 2017.

³⁶"Mission," *National Voting Rights Museum and Institute*, accessed February 4, 2017, http://nvrmi.com/?page_id=45.

at the Voting Rights Institute desire to keep the memory of Wallace alive, although perhaps not alive *and well*. They neglect the later electoral victories of Wallace, when he won the black vote and was forgiven by many African American communities. Sam Walker, tour guide at the institute, gives insight into his organization's thought process. Mr. Walker says that since Wallace was "the consummate politician," he was not to be trusted every time he changed his heart about African Americans.³⁷ A self-described activist who works for a mission-focused group, Mr. Walker believes that little good came out of Wallace, no matter what he espoused from the campaign stump.

The competing versions of Wallace, some optimistic and positive, others angry and negative, reflect the common problem with his presence in any historical account; nobody seems to know what to do with him. He could be tucked under the proverbial rug like an unpleasant stain (as is the case at the capitol building), or his transformation could be taken at face value (*à la* Alabama state archives). Some may ignore him until he proves useful, some might never find him usable, and others may construct his story to embody the evils of segregation. Wallace is a "trail-mix" figure of history—everybody whose past he touches reaches into his story to take back only what they want from him. Some go right to the sweet moments, while others grab at the raisins. Nobody, it seems, is interested in getting a bite of everything.

As far as is discernible, efforts to explore Wallace's comprehensive story in museums are nonexistent. Wallace is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. The power trip he embarked on (in both senses of the phrase) lasted too long and was too far reaching for him not to affect the most distant annals of Civil Rights history, but because of the complexity and toxicity of his legacy, there is no clear interpretation of the man. Perhaps because he fought so relentlessly for whatever it was he believed in, Wallace is someone you can only make an argument out of. Nobody can accurately answer the question *why did he do what he did?* His motives are only vaguely raised and never fully explained. Was it because he was afraid of losing law and order to Civil Rights "agitators?" Was it because he believed separate but equal was truly equal? Did he hate black people or did he "[care] whether blacks suffered"?³⁸ Did he truly, as he maintained, "never [say] a word against black people in [his] heart"?³⁹ Was he a calculating politician, a passionate populist, or both? The problem with museums is that people go to them seeking answers to their history. But these questions regarding Wallace rarely yield convincing responses. He is a man of many memories, interpretations, and no right answers. His museum presence is so biased and shifting because he is an enigma that, try as we might, we will never understand.

So why care about his history and legacy? For Alabamians the answer to this question might be a hard one to stomach. There is a certain reckoning required for them to accept the implications of having George Wallace as their most historically important governor. Wallace holds the third longest tenure of any state governor in history, although black Alabamians note that he spent most of his gubernatorial time enforcing segregation.⁴⁰ For many, Wallace remains *the* symbol of segregation. Former Alabama Supreme Court Justice John England Jr. still remembers hearing a Wallace stump speech while in college, an incident he says he will never forget. After Wallace finished talking, Judge England (who says he was either very brave or very foolish at the time) asked the Governor, "aside from race, what's the difference between white folks and black folks?" to which Wallace un-philosophically replied, "well, one is black and one is white."⁴¹ No doubt this straight talk won Wallace more white votes that day, but the bluntness that made Wallace so popular as a politician makes him incredibly polarizing as a historical figure. It seems that Alabamians would

³⁷Sam Walker (National Voting Rights Museum and Institute II) in discussion with the author, January 2017.

³⁸Clark, *The Schoolhouse Door*, 185.

³⁹George Wallace, interviewed by Michael Riley, *Time Magazine*, March 2, 1992.

⁴⁰Eric Ostermeier, "The Top 50 Longest-Serving Governors of All Time," *Smart Politics*, April 10, 2013, <http://editions.lib.umn.edu/smartpolitics/2013/04/10/the-top-50-longest-serving-gov/>.

⁴¹John H. England Jr. (Judge) in discussion with the author, May 2017.

rather forget about the man that nearly 93% of (primarily white) voting Alabamians approved of in 1962—his first successful bid for governor.⁴²

Wallace is an embarrassment nowadays. As former dean of the Tuskegee Institute Bertram Phillips noted, “His words created animosity and conflict throughout the state. . . He added to [violence] with actions and words.”⁴³ From a racial perspective, white Alabamians are not interested in publicly airing their dirty historical laundry. This is the reason black-run museums like the National Voting Rights Institute include Wallace so aggressively in their exhibit space while places like the capitol building have almost no mention of the man. Whatever good Wallace did, whatever importance he holds, he is still too toxic for Alabamians to confront head-on. Dean Phillips describes Wallace as “pulling the state back at a time when it could have gone forward,” and making an “easier transition to integration and justice” impossible.⁴⁴ Different museums deal with Wallace to fit their needs, some by dismissing him as unnecessary to studying Alabama history (forgotten Wallace), others by offering one dimensional coverage of Wallace without exploring his holistic character (evil Wallace). As diametrically opposed as these two representations of George Wallace are, neither is completely wrong or completely right.

The struggle for Alabamians to define their remembrance of this controversial figure is not unique to that state. Their vexations are shared across the country by historians and citizens confronting old histories that conflict with our modern morals. The Wallace problem shows itself every time a “Lake Calhoun,” a “Calhoun College,” or a “Tillman Hall” receive new names, or when a Confederate flag is removed from the grounds of some state capitol (as has happened in South Carolina and Alabama).⁴⁵ How do we live with these historical controversies, and what can Alabama teach us? The state has already done with George Wallace what those who want to rename buildings or public areas are trying to do—replace negative legacies or at least forget them. With only a few exceptions, there is no George Wallace Office Building, no George C. Wallace Street, and no George Wallace Memorial Park in Alabama or anywhere. Without paging through a history book or visiting a museum there is no trace of the longest tenured governor in Alabama history.

In a century, we might very well find that George Wallace has disappeared altogether. Whether this is a deliberate suppression of Alabama history or the natural reaction of embarrassed Alabamians is hard to tell and beside the point. What is of central concern is that the public memory has forgotten Wallace, and in so doing has forgotten the many lessons to humanity that Wallace teaches. How else is society to learn from its past mistakes, of our historic susceptibility to demagoguery and nativism, if our historical memory does not extend coverage to the Wallaces of our time? Already the negative effects of our amnesia are showing themselves. Trusted Wallace aid Charlie Snider first made the observation that Donald Trump was a “modern-day George Wallace,” a statement that is as alarming as it is accurate.⁴⁶ Although many factors contributed to Trump’s election victories, there is credence to say that he was elected because our past was forgotten or misremembered. The slogan “Make America Great Again,” for example, illustrates a severe misunderstanding of our past and a misleading “rosy retrospective” of our national history. But if we remember the controversial segments of history, the times and places of men like George Wallace, we present to ourselves an

⁴²“AL Governor,” Our Campaigns, accessed May 7, 2017, <http://www.ourcampaigns.com/RaceDetail.html?RaceID=79513>.

⁴³Bertram Phillips (retired educator) in discussion with the author, May 2017.

⁴⁴Bertram Phillips (retired educator) in discussion with the author, May 2017.

⁴⁵“Yale to Change Calhoun College’s Name to Honor Grace Murray Hopper,” Yale News, February 11, 2017, <http://news.yale.edu/2017/02/11/yale-change-calhoun-college-s-name-honor-grace-murray-hopper-0>; Ian Miles Cheong, “Clemson Students Urge Renaming of ‘Racist’ Building, Following Yale’s Lead,” *Heatstreet*, February 13, 2017, <https://heatst.com/culture-wars/clemson-students-urge-renaming-of-racist-building-following-yales-lead/>; “Confederate Flag Removed From South Carolina Capitol Grounds,” *Huffington Post*, July 10, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/07/10/confederate-flag-removal_n_7769300.html.

⁴⁶Debbie Elliott, “Is Donald Trump a Modern-Day George Wallace?” *National Public Radio*, April 22, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2016/04/22/475172438/donald-trump-and-george-wallace-riding-the-rage>.

honest picture of who we are as a society and who we should be. Every time we look at a building whose namesake we have learned to despise, we do ourselves a service in remembrance. Renaming buildings or otherwise airbrushing controversial figures from the public memory, as has been done to some extent in Alabama, is counterproductive. It is as if society, in erasing unlikeable people from the public memory banks, is routinely hitting itself on the head to forget things—maybe we have dazed ourselves into forgetting unpleasant histories in the short term, but long term damage is unmistakably imminent.

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