



The Birmingham Civil Rights Heritage Trail Advisory Group included a number of residents from a broad range of groups. They are: (back row, from left) GIS/geographer Michael Wade; Birmingham Director of Traffic Engineering Gregory Dawkins; Birmingham Public Library Associate Director Angela Hall; Mrs. Fred L. Shuttlesworth; community activist Kamua Afrika; Shirley Floyd, business manager, Civil Rights Activist Committee; Renee Kemp-Rotan, director of capital projects, Heritage Trail manager/designer and advisory chair; Avant Media CEO Vicki Howell, heritage trail research and text; BIG Communications Senior Account Executive Satina Richardson; Ellen Meadows, GIS; The Travel Scene CEO JD Appling; Brad Ward, The Sign Shop, fabricator; (front row) Robert McKenna, council liaison, mayor's office; Birmingham Civil Rights Institute President and CEO Dr. Lawrence Pijeaux; Col. Stone Johnson, foot soldier and Rev. Shuttlesworth's personal body guard; Urban Impact, Inc. Executive Director Nathan Hicks; Odessa Woolfolk, founding president chair emerita of the BCRI; Southern Christian Leadership Conference Birmingham Area Chapter President Bishop Calvin Woods; Rev. Gwen Webb Appling, student foot soldier; (not pictured) Fountain Heights Neighborhood Association President Doris Powell; Victor Blackledge, deputy director planning, student foot soldier.

COMMON GROUND

The Birmingham Civil Rights Heritage Trail brought civic groups together while adding another dimension to local tourism.

BY LANIER SCOTT ISOM PHOTOS BY JASON WALLIS

The cohesive effort that created the Birmingham Civil Rights Heritage Trail mirrors the city that Birmingham is becoming.

Dr. Frank Adams, founder and director of education for the Alabama Jazz Hall of Fame, was born in Birmingham in 1928. He offers a picture of how much the city has changed over the course of his lifetime: "If you were born when I was, today is like going from Earth to Mars as far as life experiences are concerned."

To find out what he's talking about, all you have to do is visit the Birmingham Civil Rights Heritage Trail.

A civic partnership

The trail has been years in the making and reflects the culmination of a concept which began as an integral part of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute's initial vision. Beginning as far back as the 1980s, Marjorie White, president of the Birmingham Historical Society, pulled together a team of local and national historians, researchers and Civil Rights Movement foot soldiers to complete the painstaking job of documenting the places and stories of the movement. "No one can underestimate the work of Marjorie White and her team," BCRI Founding President Odessa Woolfolk says. "It formed the background for this type of project." This research resulted in many sites being added to the National Register of Historic Places and provided a template for the narrative structure of the trail.

Throughout the years, Woolfolk and other civic leaders, including Operation New Birmingham President Neal Berte, continued the conversation about implementing this extension of the institute.

Ultimately, Renee Kemp-Rotan, Birmingham's director of capital projects, directed and implemented the design concept.

The project's advisory board united leaders throughout the city: Woolfolk, White, BCRI President and CEO Dr. Lawrence Pijeaux, BCRI's Oral History Project Director Dr. Horace Huntley, Deputy Director of City Planning Victor Blackledge, Preservationist Karla Calvert, Fountain Heights President Doris Powell, community activist Kamua Afrika, Urban Impact's Nathan Hicks, The Travel Scene's J.D. Appling, and Shirley Floyd and Tommy Wrenn of the Foot Soldiers. Together, they gathered and approved many historical resources.

Kemp-Rotan developed signage prototypes, then went on to engage Corbin Design, the city's GIS Department, Journalist Vicki Howell of Avant Media and Big Communications' Chief Creative Officer Ford Wiles and Account Supervisor Satina Richardson. The *Birmingham News* donated photographs from its archives of 6,000 photographs, and images from The Birmingham Public Library, AP Wire Service and Corbis Images are also included. The result is an exhibit that marks Birmingham's march from its past into a brighter future, concluding with an uplifting quotation, large enough for drivers to read.

Driving tourism

Some 4.2 million people visited Birmingham in 2007, and 150,000 visit the BCRI annually. Kemp-Rotan believes the Birmingham Civil Rights Heritage Trail will "reinforce this city as an interactive cultural tourist destination that propels people to return."

Even before the outdoor phase was installed, the Civil Rights



The Details

Birmingham Civil Rights Heritage Trail

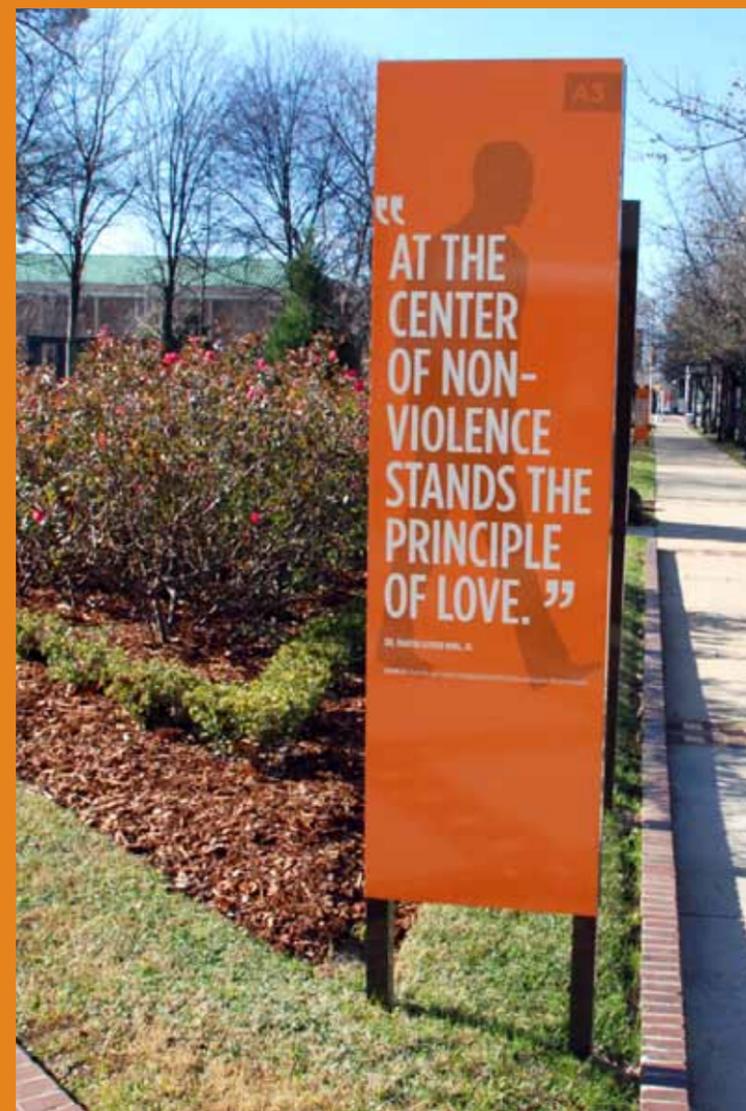
Begins in Kelly Ingram Park, at the front entrance of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute

520 16th St. N.

Today visitors and residents can also refer to Frye Gaillard's new book, *Alabama Civil Rights Trail: An Illustrated Guide to the Cradle of Freedom* (University of Alabama Press), a comprehensive resource. A history and English professor and writer-in-residence at the University of South Alabama, Gaillard includes more than 80 different sites in this illustrated geographical and historical guide to Civil Rights history in Alabama. Defining Civil Rights in the broadest sense and referring to it as a movement to greater freedom, he includes little known facts and places such as Oakwood University in Huntsville, located on the plantation where Dred Scott was a slave, and Selma's Old Live Oak Cemetery, the burial site of Benjamin S. Turner, who became Alabama's first black congressman in 1870.



Opposite: New signage is already installed in the downtown Civil Rights District, marking first route of the Civil Rights Heritage Trail. Additional routes will be marked in the coming months and years. Above: A map depicts the paths of the trail's routes.



Heritage Tour was the No. 1 tour for tour operators in the city. As a result, over the last 15 years historically black colleges in Detroit and Chicago have brought students to the state to see museums. And even though Alabama was the first state in the country to publish a Black Heritage Guide, it was the students in these groups who started referring to the Alabama Civil Rights Trail.

Sara Hamlin, vice president of the Greater Birmingham Convention Center and Visitor's Bureau, says the outdoor component will only increase the number of these visitors. Kemp-Rotan's goal all along has been to encourage critical thinking and create curiosity, drawing a link from cultural tourism to economic development as people pay for the experience and spend money by staying in hotels and eating out as they visit the five districts.

By telling the world how Birmingham sees itself, the city connects its story to the larger Alabama Civil Rights Trail. "[People] who come to Alabama are a little surprised to see the emphasis on Civil Rights history. They don't expect Alabama to be as honest and open about what happened," says Lee Sentell, Alabama's tourism director. "But this is not just the state's history. It's international. What happened here helped inspire people from South Africa to Poland to stand up for their rights." Now those countries are progressing, just as Birmingham is.

More to come

Route A, called "The March to Government," opens this month. The route chronologically traces the footsteps of marchers protesting Birmingham's segregated city code, whose efforts ultimately led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the end of legal segregation throughout the country.

By March, the trail will include 22 signs along Route B, "The March to Retail." That route chronicles blacks gaining access to restaurants, department stores, buses and other places of business. Route C, which will be installed later this spring, commemorates 35 sites downtown, including the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, Sardis Baptist Church, the Gaston Motel, Phillips High School, City Hall and the Masonic Temple, important places where strategic planning for the movement occurred.

Future plans involve incorporating a multimedia component to deepen the experience: words from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" projected onto the outside of the jail building with an interactive light show; headphones to listen to the narration of the Civil Rights story; specialty action glasses to turn photographs into videos; a website providing material to download; and DVDs for self-guided and guided tours, alike.

Eventually, seating designed as public art will be included with rest stops and informative kiosks along the way, while nearby highway off ramps will post signs directing drivers to the trail. Over the next two years, four more districts will be rolled out: The Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport, Bethel Church in Collegeville, the Birmingham Jail District and Dynamite Hill.

Although the Civil Rights Trail documents the events of the past, the effort is really about the future and serves as an example of how people can come together around an idea that will benefit the larger community. Kemp-Rotan says, "The beauty of the trail is that it has taken the long-term commitment and perseverance of several generations to first, make history; second, record it on the National Register; and third, brand it for best consumption in the public realm." ●