

History Happenings

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
MEMPHIS
Dreamers. Thinkers. Doers.

In This Issue . . .

Perhaps no professor in the Department of History at the University of Memphis has earned as much admiration as Dr. Marcus Orr. He was more than a historian of Renaissance-era Europe. He was the kind of person who asked students to broaden their horizons, the kind who pushed them to think critically, the kind who invited them into his home. He was a mentor in the classic sense. As he reinforced through so many professional and personal interactions, history shaped a world beyond the classroom.

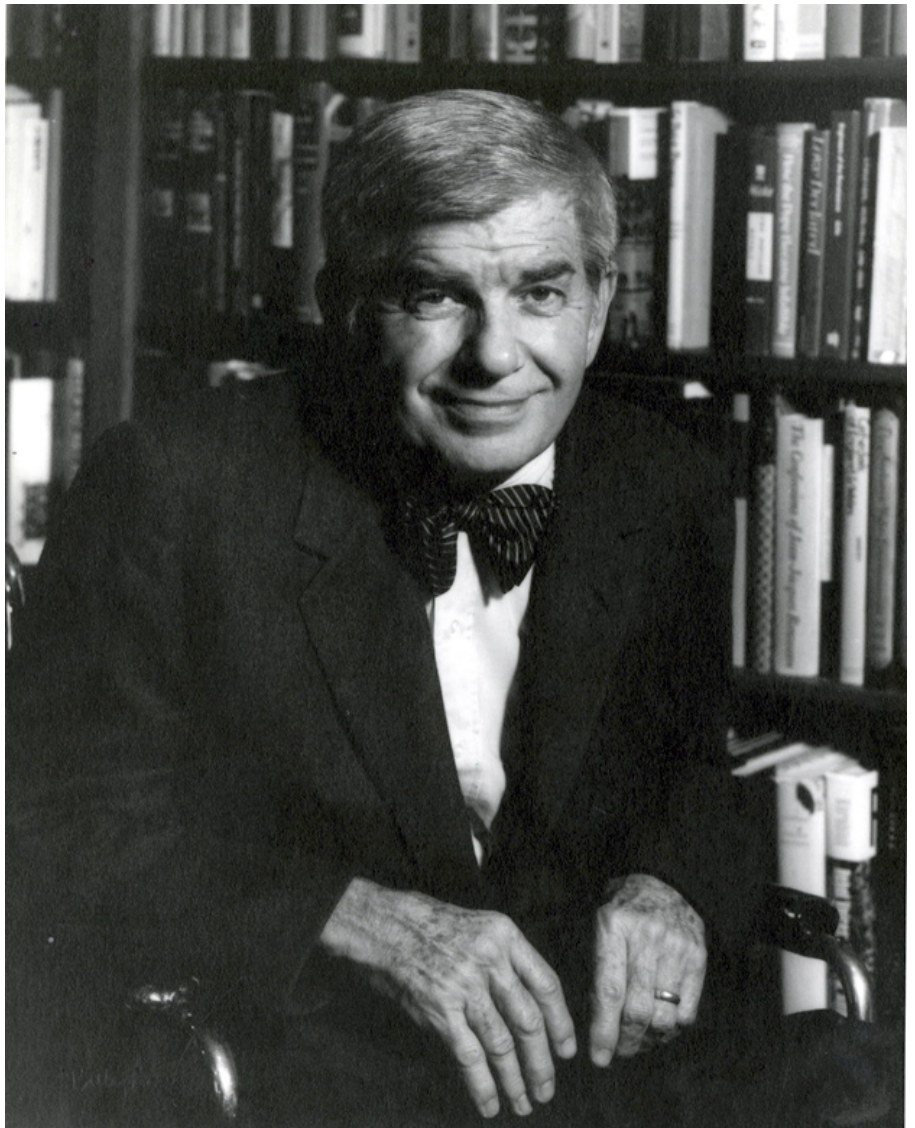
Dr. Orr was a veteran of World War II, serving with the 42nd "Rainbow" Division in Europe. He was among the original liberators of the concentration camp at Dachau. Shortly thereafter, shrapnel from a strafing raid by the Germans injured his spine and made him a paraplegic.

After the war, Orr spent two years in a veterans hospital. He then received his B.A. from Southwestern (now Rhodes) College and his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois. He had dreamed of becoming a neurosurgeon, but his handicap prevented that possibility. So he pursued his passion in history. In Memphis, he became a great teacher, a tireless advocate for the rights of the disabled, and a role model. He was more than a Renaissance scholar; he was a Renaissance Man.

The Marcus Orr Center for the Humanities honors the legacy of this great professor. As its director, Department of History professor Jonathan Judaken, writes, "we seek to create an institutional space where the original mandate of the humanities can thrive. The humanities concern all areas of human inquiry that speak to the human condition in its intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual dimensions."

This issue speaks to how history and historians stand at the crossroads between academia and the wider world. It highlights three events sponsored by the Marcus Orr Center that opened a broad dialogue about our history and society. It describes the 12th Annual Graduate Conference in African American History, which connects our vibrant program to not only scholars from around the world, but also to the Memphis community. It chronicles a journey to South Africa by three of our department's professors, who explore the links between their study of the American past with the historical experience of South Africans. Finally, the newsletter reaches to two of our alumni, Dr. Earl Wright II and Dr. John Harkins, to suggest how a grounding in historical inquiry can open new doors, ask new questions, and stoke new passions.

Enjoy!



Dr. Marcus W. Orr

War and Freedom



Leon Bass as a young soldier

“Not good enough.” Here was the message Leon Bass heard again and again during World War II, when the African American man from Philadelphia first volunteered for military service. At southern training bases, Jim Crow slapped him in the face. He got assigned to an engineer battalion, went to Europe, and helped build a critical bridge during the Battle of the Bulge. But the Army segregated black soldiers, and the young man kept asking himself what this struggle was all about. Why was he risking life and limb for a nation that treated him like a second-class citizen? It was telling him that he was “not good enough.”

While in the Army, however, he received the shock of his life. As part of a mission to the newly liberated concentration camp at Buchenwald, he encountered what he called “the walking dead.” He saw people whom the Nazis had regarded and abused to the utmost degree – because they were “not good enough.”



Dr. Leon Bass speaking at the Orr commemoration

Leon Bass has fought all his life against the idea of “not good enough,” whether battling for equal treatment at predominantly white colleges, participating in the 1963 March on Washington, earning his doctorate in education, or teaching and supervising at some of Philadelphia’s most challenging high schools. In 1968, he saw a survivor of a concentration camp speaking to a rude, unruly class. He interrupted, insisting that they to listen to her story. And once he did that, he started telling his own story, inspiring and educating people in all walks of life.

Dr. Bass’s remarkable story began an extraordinary evening sponsored by the Marcus Orr Center of the Humanities, exploring the legacy of World War II. After a brief tribute to Dr. Marcus Orr, journalist and historian Rick Atkinson delivered the Belle McWilliams Lecture in American History.

Atkinson has won two Pulitzer Prizes for journalism and a third for history, for the first book in his “liberation trilogy”: *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942-1943*. His other books include *The Long Gray Line*, about the West Point class of 1966; *Crusade*, about the Persian Gulf War; *In the Company of Soldiers*, about the 101st Airborne Division in Iraq; and the second volume in the liberation trilogy, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943-1944*. He is

working on a final volume about the Normandy Invasion and war in Western Europe.



Rick Atkinson at Arlington National Cemetery

Atkinson gave a sharp, lively talk revolving around ten major points to consider about the United States and World War II. He described the U.S. Army of 1939 as “a puny weakling,” ranking 17th in strength among nations of the world, just behind Rumania. He described the “total war” aspect of the struggle, which demanded enormous resources, manpower, and sacrifice. He further placed the American military effort in worldwide context, explaining the brunt of the Allies’ fighting in the European theater by the Soviet

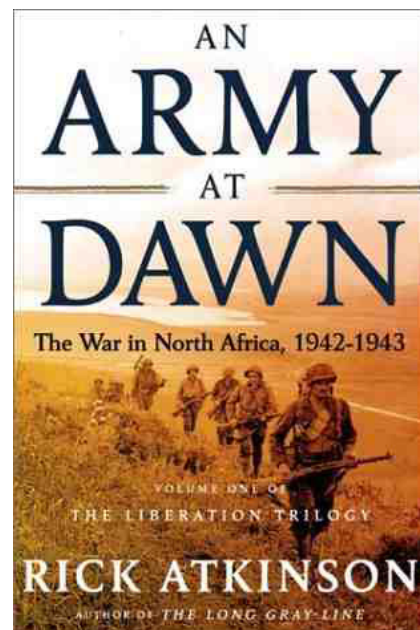


Rick Atkinson delivering the Belle McWilliams Lecture

Union, as well as the overlooked Allied struggles in North Africa and Italy.

Systems win wars, Atkinson emphasized: the German system could not muster the resources to cross the English Channel, but the American system could. In time, the United States produced so much industrial innovation and so many airplanes, tanks, and trucks that it overwhelmed the forces of fascism.

Atkinson paid further attention to the social impact of the war, particularly regarding race. In the 1920s an Army War College study had called blacks unfitted in all ways for effective military service, but by 1944 approximately 750,000 blacks had served and demonstrated that they were good soldiers. He cited in particular the Tuskegee Airmen.



The first volume in Atkinson’s “liberation trilogy”

“They died for you,” Atkinson concluded. The story of the U.S. Army during World War II has become an important myth about our national greatness, but it also deserves attention for the stories of the soldiers themselves. In a stirring, intelligent way, he reminded his audience of the cost of war, the overarching components that determine victory, and its human dimensions. Combined with the sobering and inspiring words of Leon Bass, Atkinson’s talk showcased history at its finest.

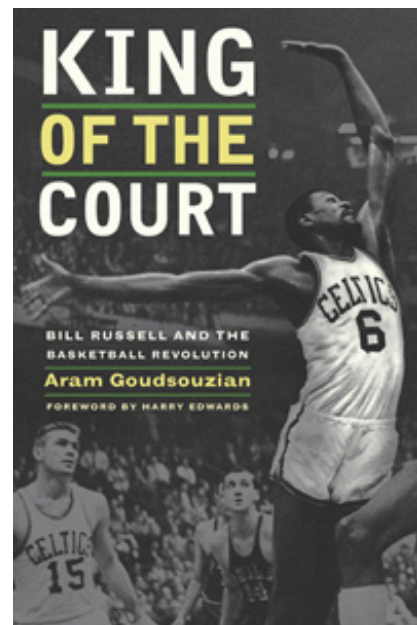
Hoops and History

This past July, Lorenzen Wright was found dead in a wooded area on the outskirts of Memphis. A former basketball star for the University of Memphis Tigers and the Memphis Grizzlies, Wright made his name on the basketball court. His death, however, compelled a reaction that pervaded the city. Hundreds visited the site where his body was discovered. Thousands attended a long memorial service at FedExForum. Most Memphians may not have personally known Lorenzen Wright, but they felt bound to him, because basketball provides a common currency for the citizens of Memphis.



Memphis Tigers coach Josh Pastner

On October 14, the Marcus Orr Center for the Humanities hosted an event inspired by the reaction to Wright's passing; it explored the meaning of basketball in a community. Revolving around a new book by Aram Goudsouzian, Associate Professor in the Department of History, called *King of the Court: Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution*, the evening featured an array of speakers whose words ranged from the celebratory to the condemnatory, the political to the personal, and the historical to the here and now.



Dr. Goudsouzian's book on Bill Russell

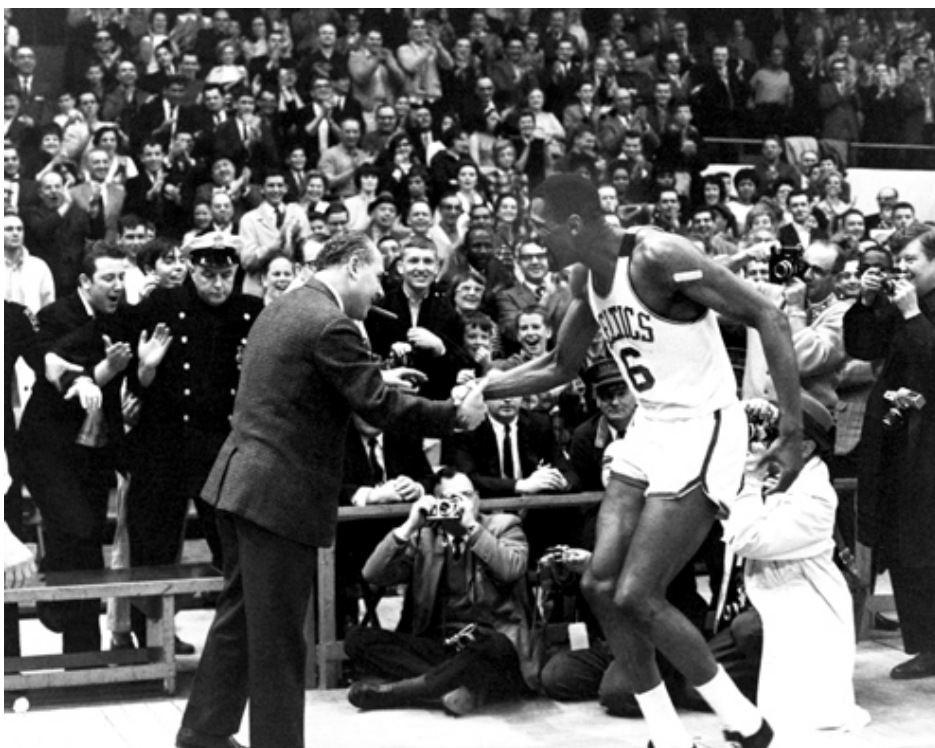
Memphis Tigers coach Josh Pastner delivered the opening remarks. He recalled the ceremony at FedExForum honoring Wright, noting that few talked about his accomplishments in basketball, focusing instead on his generosity and spirit as a man. Coach Pastner emphasized that he tries to teach his own players these same values. His remarks reinforced the notion that in a city like Memphis, which often divides along lines of politics and race, basketball can unify the entire community.

In describing the life journey of Bill Russell, Goudsouzian lent a counterpoint to Pastner's remarks. Goudsouzian's *King of the Court*, published by the University of California Press, is a biography of Russell but also an examination of the larger transformations of his era. The noted scholar Gerald Early has written that "not only is *King of the Court* one of the most impressive and important sports biographies to come along in many a season, it is also one of the truly incisive books on the intersection of race, civil rights, and popular culture."

Goudsouzian recalled how at the end of Russell's playing days, the retired basketball hero began an article for *Sports Illustrated* with the sentence, "I should embody the American Dream." He was wealthy, famous, and successful. But he believed that sport served to mask inequalities in American society, especially those of race. In a pungent critique of the popular notion just outlined by coach Pastner, Russell once said that sports bring people together, but it also brings together their prejudices, serving the same result as "a public hanging."



Dr. Goudsouzian lecturing



Red Auerbach and Bill Russell

Goudsouzian explored how Russell arrived at such an ideology. Basketball had given the introverted, sensitive, intelligent young man a means of expression, a way to overcome the hardships of a childhood in segregated Louisiana and destitute West Oakland, which included the death of his mother. Goudsouzian identified Russell as the key symbol of the “basketball revolution,” a term he coined to describe the sport’s commercial emergence from its “bush league” roots, its establishment of a benchmark dynasty in the Boston Celtics of the 1960s, its transformation into a high-flying and dynamic spectacle, and its association with African American stars.

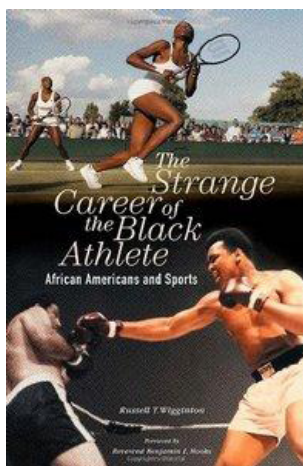
Russell led the University of San Francisco Dons to two NCAA titles and then won eleven NBA championships in thirteen seasons with the Boston Celtics, but by the mid-1960s, he was also undergoing a personal crisis wrought by the civil rights movement. He fretted about his

contribution to society, and he advocated a political approach that blended the radical ideas of Malcolm X with the more liberal analysis of Martin Luther King. Despite his provocative stance, sports fans could not demonize Russell: he was the ultimate team player, the greatest winner of his era, and the hero in repeated battles against his nemesis Wilt Chamberlain.

Goudsouzian concluded his talk about Russell by noting that in his retirement from basketball, the great athlete/intellectual came to realize that sport – like politics, art, or entertainment – united people across history, and that it dramatized the human condition in all its forms. He came to a more measured understanding of sport’s role in society.



Dr. Russ Wigginton making the concluding remarks



Dr. Wigginton’s book on the black athlete

The evening was capped off by Russ Wigginton, Vice President for College Relations at Rhodes College. A historian and author of *The Strange Career of the Black Athlete*, Wigginton began with a searing personal story of a beloved youth basketball coach who used a racial epithet against him, suggesting the complex ways that sport could both reflect and mold attitudes across the racial divide. He brought Russell’s ideas into the contemporary realm, asking how sports fans would react to Russell’s critique in the present day.

Taken together, the entertaining and incisive talks showcased the complex role of sport in society. A force for neither good nor evil, basketball can reveal the common ground that we all share as Memphians, but it can also reflect what drives us apart. It is important to recognize both sides of that coin.

Horror With a Side of Salsa



Dr. Adelman delivering the Memphis Sesquicentennial Lecture

To commemorate the bicentennial of Latin American independence, Dr. Jeremy Adelman, Walter Samuel Carpenter II Professor of Spanish Civilization and Culture at Princeton University, delivered the Memphis Sesquicentennial Lecture, in an event sponsored by the Marcus W. Orr Center for the Humanities.

It made for a surreal evening. Dr. Adelman's lecture, "Violence and Freedom in Latin America, 1789-1822," detailed the little-known but horrendous episodes of civil violence that occurred before independence was asserted. Then came dancing.

Dr Adelman painted a dark portrait of the continent's independence movements. He described how feuding

within revolutionary groups ultimately demonstrated that attempts at home rule had failed badly, leading the authorities to launch a new round of violence, in which mass killings, impaling, and raping of women were common. Public executions and torture started out as shaming rituals but evolved into mass killings. Bloody efforts by the Spanish to re-establish control ultimately spilled into mutiny by the Spanish armies. Jumping from nation to nation, independence movement to independence movement, Dr. Adelman documented a gruesome sequence of death, brutality, rape, and inhumanity.



Marcela Pinilla singing with the Southern Comfort Jazz Orchestra, led by Jack Cooper



Salsa Memphis dancers performing

In a wacky twist, a series of musical and dance performances followed the somber, sobering lecture. Professor Jack Cooper led the Southern Comfort Jazz Orchestra in several compositions that were either Latin American in origin or influenced by Latin American music, including the Duke Ellington arrangement of "Moon Over Cuba," which has recently been transcribed from a rare 1941 recording.

The charismatic Marcela Pinilla sang several songs, including a bolero, and with the Southern Comfort Jazz Orchestra still on stage, the troupe from Salsa Memphis performed two lively numbers. Enough with the death, they seemed to suggest. Let's dance!

The evening ended with a question-and-answer period, in which Dr. Adelman reinforced his earlier emphasis on death and brutality in Latin American history.

Making History

On November 11 and 12, the Graduate Association of African American History (GAAAH) hosted its twelfth annual graduate student conference in African American History. By all accounts, it was the best one ever. “I have been involved in a variety of capacities in organizing the conference for the past five years,” remarked Shirletta Kinchen, one of the founding members of GAAAH. “One thing I enjoyed about this conference so much was that I could see the growth of the conference. It was like seeing the torch passed.”

The conference was held at the gleaming new University Center, an ideal venue. Over fifty graduate students presented original research in eighteen separate panels. Participants hailed from such institutions as Yale University, the University of Chicago, the University of Delaware, the University of Wisconsin, the University of Illinois, the University of Colorado, and Columbia University. One panelist came from Delta State University – in Nigeria.



GAAAH President Michael Blum at the podium

The event entails a year of planning, and it consumes the attention of GAAAH, a thriving student organization that

has attracted new members and energy in recent years. Much of it is due to the irrepressible president of GAAAH this past year, Michael Blum. “The conference went well,” he said, with relief and pride. “Everyone involved did a great job. It was a great opportunity to showcase cutting-edge African American history. I am really impressed with the way the GAAAH members pulled together to make the conference run smoothly.”



Some of the workers at the conference

“It was a well attended, wonderfully organized, and immensely informative event,” added Armanthia Duncan, a longtime GAAAH member. “I would encourage anyone that is a graduate student in history, if you are not already a member, to please become a member of this wonderful organization and be a part of the legacy of a truly wonderful and successful graduate student conference.” GAAAH members and other graduate students in the Department of History served as panel chairs and manned the registration table throughout the conference.

Many panelists and commentators remarked that this year’s conference featured a deep pool of outstanding papers. It made the task of awarding the Memphis State Eight Paper Prize exceptionally difficult. The winner was Sarah Levine-Gronningsater for her paper, “Breaking the Law, Embracing the Law: Black Children and the Shaping of Freedom in New York.” Second place went to Joanna Dee for “The Radical Humanist at Work: Katherine Dunham’s Performing Arts Training Center in East St. Louis, 1965-1972.” Jeffrey

Gonda won third place for “A Different Home Front: Black Women’s Role in Housing Desegregation, 1945-1948.”



Winners of the Memphis State Eight Prize, from left to right: Joanna Dee, Columbia University (second), Jeffery Gonda, Yale University (third), Sarah Levin-Gronnigsater, University of Chicago (first)

One highlight of this year’s conference was a keynote address by Dr. Leon Litwack, professor emeritus at the University of California-Berkeley and author of such landmark works in African American History as *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (which won the Pulitzer Prize in History and the National Book Award) and *Trouble in*



Dr. Leon Litwack delivering the keynote address

Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow. Dr. Litwack’s address, “Stormy Monday: African Americans and Race Reflections from the Civil War to the Present,” was based on ideas explored in his most recent book, *How Free is Free?: The Long Death of Jim Crow*, which explores the continued barriers to genuine racial equality. With a dramatic, gravelly delivery, Dr. Litwack painted a grim picture of American race relations, while also displaying perceptive African American critiques, especially through musical lyrics that ranged from Robert Johnson to Chuck D.

Another high point was a lively, well-attended roundtable on navigating graduate school and the job market. Among GAAAH’s initiatives this year was to bring in more specialists in African American history from area institutions to serve as commentators on panels. During a pizza lunch, these young professors enlightened and entertained the audience with advice and anecdotes. The participants included Deirdre Cooper Owens (University of Mississippi), Cherisse Jones-Branch (Arkansas State University), Peter James Hudson (Vanderbilt University), Robert Luckett (Jackson State University), Maurice Hobson (University of Mississippi), and Charles McKinney (Rhodes College).



One of the many presentations made at the conference

The conference was sponsored by the Department of History, the program in African and African American Studies, the Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change, and the Marcus W. Orr Center for the Humanities. It also depended on the generosity of Student Event Allocation.

Historians Abroad: To South Africa and Back

By Susan O'Donovan

Earlier this fall, I joined my colleagues in the Department of History, Janann Sherman and Beverly Bond, as part of a delegation of American scholars on a trip to South Africa. Led by Elaine Tyler May, past president of the Organization of American Historians, and sponsored by the People to People Citizen Ambassador Program, we spent nine days meeting with our South African counterparts, touring museums, and building what we hope will become lasting scholarly relationships with a country, that like ours, continues to struggle with its racialized past.

Our odyssey began in Johannesburg, where we arrived Tuesday evening, October 26. After a much appreciated night's rest, we hit the ground running on Wednesday morning, setting a pace that would not relent until we boarded our return flight a week later. After an orientation led by Drs. Greg Cuthbertson (University of South Africa) and David Thelen (emeritus, Indiana University, who is in South Africa collecting oral histories), we boarded what became our second home – a pair of large buses – and headed for the black township of Soweto.

Described by many as the geographic center of the freedom struggle, Soweto (the acronym for Southwest Western Township) is one of the largest towns in South Africa. Home to two Nobel Prize winners (Archbishop Desmond Tutu and



Vendors in front of Winnie Mandela's Soweto home

Nelson Mandela), Soweto was the site of the 1976 Student Uprising in which 13-year-old Hector Pieterse lost his life. It is also the town where, twenty-two years earlier, 3,000 anti-*apartheid* activists came together to sign the Freedom Charter, a document that enshrined a shared vision for a united, non-racial, and democratic South Africa.

Shrouded in dust from the mountains of tailings – about all that remain of the mines that made Johannesburg an industrial city – Soweto is also a place of grinding poverty. Sixteen years after the end of *apartheid*, black families continue to live in the “hostels” that had been built for mine workers, while a steady stream of new migrants crowd into fast-expanding shanty camps like the one shown here. National unemployment, we would learn the next day, currently ranges from 25 to 40 percent, depending on who is counting and how. Jet lag by itself could not account for the silence that filled the buses as we returned to our hotel late on that first day.

South Africa faces staggering problems. Yet at the same time, we were struck by a pervasive optimism. From the uniformed school children of Soweto to political leaders, there remains a prevailing sense that these obstacles can be overcome. Ahmed Kathrada was particularly insistent that the principles encoded in the Freedom Charter remain



Looking down on Kliptown, one of the many shanty camps located inside Soweto



Solitary confinement at the Old Fort Prison Complex, Johannesburg

salient and within reach. Addressing us at Constitution Hill, Kathrada spoke at length about his work with the African National Congress, his arrest in 1963 along with Nelson Mandela and several others, and the twenty-some years he subsequently spent in *apartheid* prisons. None of those experiences have blunted his commitment to what he regards as “non racialism.” South Africa, Kathrada insists, must belong “to all who live in it, black and white,” and that the “rights of the people shall be the same, regardless of race, colour or sex.” It was a sentiment that resonated oddly with our surroundings. Constitution Hill is also the location of the Old Fort Prison complex, an institution that under *apartheid* had practiced a perversion of Kathrada’s philosophy by swallowing up thousands of political prisoners: women and men, young and old, black and white.

After a luncheon meeting with faculty at Witwatersrand University, during which the delegates learned about the kind of research currently engaging our South African colleagues, we visited the Origins Centre, also at “Wits.” A new museum (it was opened in 2006), the Origins Centre is devoted to the study of indigenous art, and it boasts one of the largest collections of San rock painting. Mixing contemporary with ancient art, the Origins Centre is energetically and systematically recovering an African past, one that returns indigenous people to national, continental, and global stories. In many respects, what the Origins Centre is doing – and what many of the historians we met with are also doing – is similar to the scholarly work undertaken in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, when released from the strictures of Jim Crow, American historians began systematically to recover an African American past.

Friday morning we re-packed our bags, checked our passports, and boarded the buses for Tambo airport and our

flight south to Cape Town. First, however, we detoured to tour the magnificent Apartheid Museum. Opened in 2001 and funded with revenue generated by a casino located next door, the Apartheid Museum tells the story of a century-long freedom struggle. Though comparable to the Origins Centre in its reluctance to engage with current and still-contentious issues, the Apartheid Museum relies on an extensive collection of government records, photographs, personal testimony, police reports, television footage, maps, and workers’ employment documents to tell the story of *apartheid*’s rise and eventual demise. Judging by the crowds of visitors we saw in the museum, South Africans are hungry for a more inclusive history – a history that helps them understand where they have come from and where they might be going.

It is a relatively short trip by air from Johannesburg to Cape Town. Driving would have been a different matter. Fourteen thousand kilometers separate the two cities, most of them across a relatively treeless plain known as the Highveld. It was not until our plane was on the approach to Cape Town that mountains suddenly came into view. They are magnificent, especially Table Mountain, which towers over the south side of the city and which, to the delegates’ delight, provides grazing for a resident herd of zebra.



Table Mountain from our Cape Town hotel; the cloud formation draping over it is known locally as the “table cloth”

The delegates had no professional events on Saturday’s agenda, but our pace did not let up. First thing that morning, we embarked on a driving tour of the Cape Peninsula. Our route took us down a rocky and windswept coast to the Cape of Good Hope, and then back via Boulders Beach, where we stopped to admire a flock of African penguin, and then to Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens, which is dedicated to the cultivation of native plants. That indigenous fauna,

along with the sightings of ostrich, ibex, and a small troop of baboons, reminded us that we were in South Africa, and not on the similarly rugged coasts of Oregon or Maine.



A peaceful note: Nelson Mandela's garden, Robben Island Prison

Sunday was our one free day, and many of us took the opportunity to visit Robben Island, South Africa's version of Alcatraz. Located in Table Bay, Robben Island has played a number of roles in South African history. Under different regimes and in different centuries, it has served variously as a leper colony, a military training facility, a hospital for the mentally and chronically ill, and a maximum security prison. Officials of the Dutch West Indian Company sent its political enemies there, as did the *apartheid* government. The inmates included Nelson Mandela, Ahmed Kathrada, and Robert Sobukwe, who was the founding leader of the Pan Africanist Congress. In 1999, Robben Island was designated a World Heritage Site and former inmates now conduct tours of what had once been their prison. Thulani Mabaso, who had been sentenced as a nineteen-year-old to eighteen years behind bars for detonating a bomb at a military facility, led our group. As he guided us through the facility, Mabaso also guided us through his personal past, relating, for example, the physical toll imprisonment had taken not only on him, but on his father as well. It was clear from the stories Mabaso shared, that prisons had been weapons that the *apartheid* government had wielded with savage effect. One did not have to have been an inmate to have suffered from the violence they represented. Yet at the same time, South Africa's prisons helped to give rise to and shape the anti-*apartheid* movement. Just as Stokely Carmichael remembered the prisons of Mississippi as universities of social change, so too did Mabaso remember those of South Africa. Indeed, the pedagogical potential of South Africa's prisons was among the first things new inmates learned.

Within the walls at Robben Island, Mabaso explained to us, the phrase "each one, teach one" was as much a blueprint for revolution as it was a strategy for survival.

South Africans confront a host of daunting obstacles: poverty on a scale few American communities have ever endured, breathtakingly high unemployment rates, and an HIV epidemic so vast that nearly thirty percent of the country's people are infected. Yet the prevailing sentiment is that all things are possible, that current troubles can and will be resolved. We heard this message in Mabaso's reflections on "each one, teach one." We saw it in the faces of shanty camp residents, many of whom fled to South Africa from much more dire situations. An artistic replication of Archbishop Tutu at play brings smiles of delight from visitors to the Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa, the location of our final meeting on Tuesday. A faith in democracy and its promises continue to animate a people for whom *apartheid* has never been an abstraction or faint memory. South Africans do know the alternative, and perhaps that alone accounts for the optimism we encountered at every turn.



Artist's representation of a joyful Archbishop Tutu at the Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa, Cape Town, South Africa

We left South Africa with a lot to think about, and with our own dreams to nurture. First among them is a widely shared desire to strengthen the scholarly and institutional contacts we made during our brief visit. Historians of the African American past have long understood the value of "thinking through" South Africa, and our libraries are rich with comparative histories. But having witnessed the country first-hand, it is clear to us that United States historians have only scratched at the surface. We and our students still have much to learn from South Africa. The challenge facing us now is how best to make that happen.

A Memphian and His Mentors

By Dr. Earl Wright II



Dr. Earl Wright II

Since 1997 I have been engaged in research on the contributions of W. E. B. Du Bois and the scholars at Atlanta University to the discipline of sociology. This research agenda has led to the debunking of multiple long-held beliefs in the discipline. Foremost among my findings are the uncovering of the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory as the first American school of sociology and that school's status as the first sociological unit to institutionalize practices such as method triangulation, the public acknowledgement of one's research, and utilization of the insider researcher. While I am now an Associate Professor of Africana Studies at the University of Cincinnati, it was as an undergraduate and graduate student at the University of Memphis that my interest in this topic was nurtured.

Although I am a native Memphian and a graduate of Trezevant High School, my first two years of college were experienced at Kentucky State University, where I accomplished a less-than-stellar academic record. Upon my entry into the University of Memphis in the spring of 1991, I was in need of academic direction and mentoring. As a history major I was fortunate to receive both from two faculty members who, circuitously, helped me discover that my professional goal was to engage in scholarly research on the contributions of Black academics to the social sciences.

In a course with Dr. Gerald Smith, now an Associate Professor at the University of Kentucky, I was initially exposed to African American history and the contributions of Blacks in America. I was finishing my B.A. in History in 1994, and having decided that graduate school was in my future, I decided to visit Dr. Smith during his office hours to discuss the graduate school experience. He was very generous with his time and carefully explained the application process and what I should expect at that level. Although I decided not to pursue graduate work in history, I did use the information Dr. Smith provided to obtain an assistantship in the Department of Sociology, where I believed career opportunities were more plentiful.

In graduate school I became aware of a professor in the Department of History whose research agenda fascinated me: Dr. Kenneth Goings, now a Professor of African American Studies at Ohio State University. I attended multiple campus lectures where Dr. Goings discussed his work on Black collectible art and its relevance to contemporary popular culture. I earned my M.A. in Sociology in 1997. While I was not impacted by Dr. Goings on a personal level as I had been by Dr. Smith some years earlier, hearing about his scholarship and research interests convinced me that there was a space in academia for my work on the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory.

I went on to finish my Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of Nebraska in 2000 and taught at Fisk University, University of Central Florida, and Texas Southern University before accepting my position at the University of Cincinnati. I have been fortunate to not only publish a number of academic articles in sociological journals, but also get featured in mainstream newspapers as a public intellectual. Even more rewarding, I have been honored to win recognition for teaching and mentoring.

The combined influence of Dr. Gerald Smith and Dr. Kenneth Goings on me at the University of Memphis cannot be understated, as they represented living examples of who I could be if I worked hard enough. They also showed me that research from a non-mainstream perspective was as invaluable as anything produced by mainstream scholars. I trust that the Department of History at the University of Memphis is continuing its tradition of not only bringing in faculty of high academic quality, but also encouraging faculty to positively impact students in ways similar to my experiences.

GO TIGERS GO!

Historian on the American Nile

By John E. Harkins

I am a fifth-generation Memphian, the fourth of five sons of Charles J. and Helen Fay Harkins. I grew up near Memphis State College, attended Blessed Sacrament and St. Anne parochial schools, and graduated from Christian Brothers' High School in 1956. A lack-luster (and dyslexic) student, I hated going to school and intended to forgo college altogether. I did, however, have a passion for history and a voracious appetite for recreational reading. As soon as I had "blown" my graduation money, I enlisted in the U.S. Navy. I served for seven of the next nine years working in machine shops aboard various repair facilities. I spent my last year of military service in southwestern Spain, where I acquired an appreciation for Hispanic culture and otherwise broadened my intellectual and cultural horizons.

Upon discharge in 1965, I entered Memphis State University (MSU), married Georgia S. Strain (who has edited all my writing), completed my bachelor's work, and studied Latin American history for a year in the master's program at Louisiana State University. Upon finishing my M.A. course work, I taught college-level history courses at Memphis University School (MUS), a highly regarded boys' prep school. As much as I loved the classroom and interacting with my students, I had almost no time to work on my M.A. thesis.



Dr. John E. Harkins

As I neared the end of my second year at MUS, three financial circumstances altered my life. First, Georgia had become a tenured teacher in the Memphis City School system with a reliable income. Second, Memphis State established its doctoral program in history and offered me a teaching assistantship. Third, Congress passed the Vietnam-era G.I. Bill, which included educational benefits to veterans who had not previously been eligible for such financial aid. Counting remission of tuition and fees, my take-home pay was about the same at MSU as it was at MUS.

Consequently, I entered the Ph.D. program at Memphis State. Unfortunately, American universities had begun credentialing many more "history doctors" than the market could absorb, rendering college teaching prospects almost nil. I also learned that there was a good deal of mean-spirited academic politics in the ivory tower! That I had to take my general examination during the summer of 1974, when one of my professors was out of the country, is another story for another time. . . .

Finishing my course work and passing my Spanish and French language exams, I filled a one-year leave-of-absence teaching slot at Memphis University School. At that point, I would have very gladly stayed at MUS, but a mid-1970s economic recession precluded that possibility. The following year, teaching part-time at Memphis State, I finished my dissertation. My doctorate was conferred in 1976.

With no college or prep school teaching positions available in the Mid-South, I signed on with the Memphis Public Library system, working in two branch facilities before being promoted to the in-house position of Memphis/Shelby County Archivist. The grand-sounding title belied that the job paid even less than teaching and that a lone clerk-typist and I ran the entire operation. A saving grace of the position lay in the necessity of giving myself a crash course in Memphis-area history in order to function as archivist. I also joined the West Tennessee Historical Society (WTHS) and was immediately snookered into becoming the organization's newsletter editor and the chairman of a book-signing reception to launch Paul R. Coppock's *Memphis Memoirs*.

Not long after Paul's party, I received a very welcome phone call. Memphis State historian Berkeley Kalin blurted "John—Berkeley here! How would you like to make \$2,500?" My flippant response was "Do I have to get rid of the body?" Kalin was casting about desperately to save a local history book project. He had written the business profiles for a coffee table book's

“Partners in Progress” section, but, due to a number of complications, the publisher had no historical text. Kalin connected me with the project’s editors, who ultimately contracted with me to research and write the text and furnish images and captions.



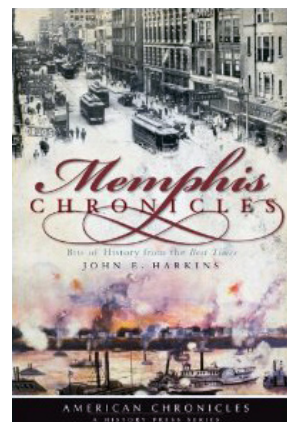
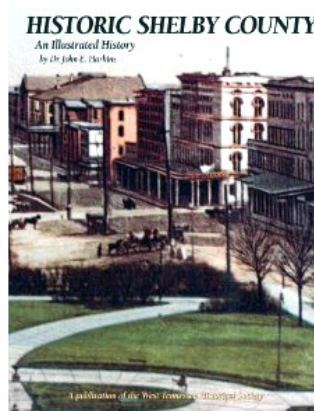
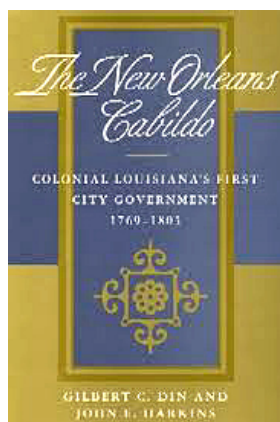
John Phillips’ 1975 sketch of Dr. Harkins

Thus was born *Metropolis of the American Nile*, probably the most popular general history of Memphis and environs yet published. (For a number of years, it was the most stolen and replaced title circulating in the public library system.) Promoting *Metropolis* garnered me a modicum of television exposure, which led to a three-year gig in which I produced and hosted *Historically Speaking*, a cable TV talk show focusing on Mid-South history.

In *Metropolis* also lay the genesis of a schism within WTHS. After the book’s referee insisted on significant changes and/or deletions, the publishers printed the book as written. The local history community took sides and several contested WTHS elections sent its membership rolls soaring in the mid-1980s. In the late 1980s, a pro-Harkins faction prevailed and the society’s by-laws were revised to end its contested elections. I have been elected WTHS president five times over the last 20 years. WTHS has held its monthly meetings at MUS for nearly all of that time.

In the meantime, I was invited to return to MUS and joyfully taught there from 1986 to 2008. In those intervening years, I produced a second edition of *Metropolis* and wrote the *MUS Century Book*, *Historic Shelby County*, and *Memphis Chronicles*. In partnership with Gilbert C. Din, my revised dissertation on the *New Orleans Cabildo* was published by LSU Press in 1996. I have also written a monthly local history column for *The Best Times* since 2004. I am currently at work on a history of our city’s

Lausanne Collegiate School and I remain the MUS institutional archivist and historian. Despite a number of problems, I have had a very productive and satisfying career grow out of my education at the University of Memphis.



Books by Dr. John E. Harkins