

2020 AND THE FUTURE OF ALABAMA HISTORY

ABOUT

2020 and the Future of Alabama History: A Conversation with Frye Gaillard was held on Thursday, September 24. Frye Gaillard, writer in residence at the University of South Alabama, has written extensively on southern race relations, politics and culture. He is the author of more than twenty-five works of nonfiction and winner of multiple literary prizes, including the Lillian Smith Book Award, the F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald Literary Prize, the Clarence Cason Award, the Alabama Governor's Award for the Arts, the Jefferson Cup Honor Book, the Gustavus Myers Award, and NPR Great Read of 2018.

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Visit aub.ie/2020alabamahistory to view a video recording of the program.

TRANSCRIPT

Mark Wilson:

Welcome. I am Mark Wilson, Director of the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities and Secretary of the Alabama Historical Association. We began this series several weeks ago as a way to reflect with members of the Alabama historical community on the past in light of the present, for the purpose of the future. We begin today's conversation with a welcome from AHA President, Frazine Taylor.

Frazine Taylor:

Welcome to our 2020 and the Future of Alabama History. This is our fifth series, and we will have today a conversation with Frye Gaillard. Thank you.

Mark Wilson:

Thanks, Frazine. Historians will say a lot about 2020, and an important part of that history will be the protests related to racial injustice, however those injustices are defined or described, and hopefully the positive actions that individuals, communities, and institutions take as a result of renewed commitments to form a more perfect union.

Mark Wilson:

Our guest today is Frye Gaillard. Frye is a writer in residence at the University of South Alabama and former Southern Editor at *The Charlotte Observer*, and he is the author of more than 30 books including the award winning titles *A Hard Rain: America in the 1960s*, *Cradle of Freedom: Alabama and the Movement that Changed America*, *Watermelon Wine*, *The Spirit of Country Music*, *The Dream Long Deferred: the Landmark Struggle for Desegregation in Charlotte, North Carolina*, and *Go South to Freedom*, a historical novel for middle grade readers. His byline has appeared in such publications as *The Bitter Southerner*, *The Oxford American*, *The Washington Post*, *The*

Journal of American History, *Sojourners*, *Outside Magazine*, and *Parade*. You can see why we are delighted to have Frye today. You can learn more about Frye at his website, fryegaillard.com.

Mark Wilson:

Today we've asked Frye to reflect on the future of Alabama history from the perspective of three of his books, *The Slave Who Went to Congress*, *Journey to the Wilderness*, and *Cradle of Freedom*. The first two books are published by NewSouth Books based in Montgomery, and the last one is published by the University of Alabama Press. And because I know our audience and I know you will want to purchase and read these books, we are going to put links to the publisher's websites in the comments section so that you can order copies of the books. In the comments section is where you can put a question for Frye, and we will turn to those questions later in our program. Welcome, Frye. We look forward to hearing your thoughts on the future of Alabama history.

Frye Gaillard:

Thank you, Mark. It's really good to be here, and I always like doing stuff with The Caroline Marshall Draughon Center and Alabama Historical Association, and good to get to catch a glimpse of Frazine Taylor. So thanks for having me. Before I get to the future of Alabama history, I'd like to reflect a little bit on that history itself as I have encountered it myself and along with members of my family, and as I've written about it over the years.

Frye Gaillard:

Earlier this year, NewSouth Books as you said, published a children's book that I wrote with my friend Marti Rosner, who is a long time educator in Marietta, Georgia. It's a book called *The Slave Who Went to Congress*. It's the story of Benjamin Sterling Turner, who in 1870 became the first African American member of Congress from the state of Alabama. This was during the time of Reconstruction, and he served a district that stretched from Selma to Mobile. Benjamin Turner had spent the first 40 years of his life enslaved, but he was one of those people who somehow summoned the faith, the hope, the determination, the courage, to believe that this condition would not be permanent, that he would one day be a free man and he wanted to be prepared for when that day came. Somehow instinctively, it occurred to him that one of the things he had to do was to learn how to read.

Frye Gaillard:

Now he did this, he taught himself to read with the help of one of his master's children and a young slave girl so his family's story, his own family's oral history indicates, and he did it at great risk to himself. I mean, it was illegal for a slave in those days, a person enslaved to be literate. A lot of slave owners after the Nat Turner Rebellion in which Turner, a literate slave, led an uprising that led to a bloody spasm of death in Virginia, a lot of slave owners concluded that literacy was the thing that led Nat Turner astray and so they didn't want it repeated by enslaved people anywhere else in the South, and so laws against this became commonplace. Benjamin Turner defied those laws and taught himself to read.

Frye Gaillard:

When the Civil War came along he was living in Selma and his owner, his master, the white man whose property Benjamin Turner was at that time, went off to fight in the war. This man Major Gee, owned the St. James Hotel which still exists in Selma. We hope it'll reopen one day, I've actually stayed there. But it operated off and on from the 1830s on into the 21st century, and it was the biggest hotel in Selma at the time that the Civil War began. When Mr. Gee went off to fight in the war, he left Benjamin Turner his literate slave, to run the St. James Hotel, which Turner did profitably for his owner. He also ran his own livery stable business on the side, and he became by the standards of his time a relatively wealthy man during the course of the war. When the war ended he had \$10,000 in property and money that he was somehow able to convert,

and he decided to use some of that money once he became free, to build the first school for black children in Selma.

Frye Gaillard:

Then he entered the civic life of that city, was elected to the city council, but resigned that seat in principled protest because his fellow council members wanted to be paid \$20 a month for their services. The city of Selma was broke. Benjamin Turner thought they should serve for free for the honor of it and for the responsibility of it, for the duty and the opportunity that it afforded them to help rebuild the city that had been devastated by Union troops in 1865 toward the end of the war. So when his fellow council members said, "No, we want to be paid," Turner resigned in protest. That was the kind of person he apparently was.

Frye Gaillard:

In 1870 he ran for Congress, and his platform was universal suffrage, universal amnesty. What it turned out that he meant by this was universal suffrage, the right to vote for former slaves, people who had been enslaved for all of their lives but were now free, he wanted them to have equal rights as citizens with all of the humanity that equal rights in the political realm would imply. But the other part of his platform was universal amnesty, and what he meant by that was no punishment for people who had fought for the Confederacy. Benjamin Turner was a person who believed that all Southerners had suffered great loss and great devastation in this bloody war. 622,000 American soldiers had died on American soil, some fighting for the Union and some fighting for the Confederacy, and the losses among men in the South were disproportionate. Turner was the kind of person who even though he had been enslaved, instinctively understood the suffering of other people, and thought that it was time to bind up the wounds and move forward together as one people.

Frye Gaillard:

As a member of Congress, and he only served for one term, for two years and when he ran for reelection, white politicians encouraged another African American to run against him, split the black vote and a white man was elected instead. But during his two years as a member of Congress, Benjamin Turner prepared a couple of very eloquent speeches that he intended to deliver on the floor of Congress. His white colleagues in Congress would not let him do this, but his speeches then were entered into the Congressional Globe, which was the equivalent of the Congressional Record at that time. So we know what his thoughts were, and we know what he said and the kind of leader that he intended to be. He said it was time to bind up the wounds of this great and glorious Republic. His language was lofty and soaring, and contained an idealistic hope that Southerners, Alabamians black and white, could find a way to move forward together.

Frye Gaillard:

It turns out that this kind of vision for the possibilities of racial equality but racial reconciliation which foreshadowed Martin Luther King and John Lewis and others in the Civil Rights era, foreshadowed the perspective of Nelson Mandela in South Africa. It turns out that this kind of vision that was at once revolutionary and also healing, was not just Benjamin Turner's. There were other African American members of Congress from other parts of the South who said the same thing. Robert Smalls from South Carolina, Hiram Revels who served as a U.S. Senator from Mississippi, all believed in this kind of possibility of citizenship, of humanity for people who had been slaves, who had been enslaved against their will, but also believed that that equality in the eyes of the law need not diminish the standing of their white neighbors, and that it really was possible to pull together and rebuild, reconstruct as they said, at the time a South in which opportunities would be there for any hard working Southerner no matter what their background was.

Frye Gaillard:

It was an amazing vision and as we know, sadly, tragically, it did not carry the day. There was at that time in Alabama and other parts of the South too much hurt, too much anger, too much loss, and too much racism. So our lesser angels prevailed historically, and Reconstruction became I think we could argue, one of the great

missed opportunities for the country, for the South and for Alabama. So what happened during that period of time became a kind of cradle I think, for some of the worst instincts that any of us shared, our ancestors shared at that time.

Frye Gaillard:

The story of my own family deals with some of this, and I wrote about it in a book called *Journey to the Wilderness: War, Memory, and a Southern Family's Civil War Letters*. During the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, I pulled together all the letters that cousins around the South had saved either as originals or copies, that members of my family had written to relatives back on the home front while they were fighting in the war. All of these family ancestors fought for the Confederacy. What these letters revealed to me was a kind of real-time chronicle of the tragedy of that war. There was in this chronicle no hint of a glorious lost cause. There were letters about suffering and death and loss, loss of life and loss of close friends within the ranks, and losses sustained back on the home front when diseases hit and people died and so forth.

Frye Gaillard:

I remembered as I read these letters a conversation that I had as a small boy with my grandfather in Mobile where I grew up. My grandfather it turns out, was kind of an amazing guy. He was born in 1856, he died in 1959. So what that meant was that he remembered with the memory of a child, the final days of the Civil War, and he remembered as a young man the experience of Reconstruction, but he also lived until the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement. So he was 44 years old when my father was born, and my father was 45 when I was born so in two generations, my family goes back 99 years essentially from the time I was born. So when my grandfather was 100 years old I was nine, and he was still sharp as a tack. We sat down on the porch of what we called the big house, literally an antebellum house that he lived in in Mobile. And he said, "I want to tell you a story that happened when I was your age."

Frye Gaillard:

When he was nine years old it was 1865 and the Civil War was almost over. He lived in Monroe County, not far from where Harper Lee would be born some years later. He remembered the fear in his family, all the men were off fighting and his mother was there and he was there as a child, and he remembered their fear because they heard the Yankee soldiers were on their way, and they didn't know what would happen. They heard the clatter of hoof beats coming down the dirt road outside of their house and they went to the porch to see who it was, and it wasn't the Union soldiers this time, it was a ragtag band of Confederates running for their lives.

Frye Gaillard:

My grandfather shared this memory, and it was a memory of defeat. It was a moment of a bitter sense of loss that he said became the prevalent feeling that he grew up with as he came of age during the years of Reconstruction. His own father who was a Confederate surgeon was captured in the Battle of Blakeley, which occurred outside of Mobile on the same day that Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox. My great grandfather was captured and was taken to Ship Island off the coast of Mississippi, and while he was imprisoned there the Union troops who guarded him were African American. In the telling of this story in my family, the African American soldiers were cruel and abusive to their Confederate captives. Now I've read historical accounts from Ship Island that questioned this, that say in fact that the behavior of these African American troops toward their captives was in fact impeccable.

Frye Gaillard:

I don't know which is true. What I do know is that in my family, the sense of African American opportunity and progress became defined in the minds of many of the Gaillards back in those days, as a measure of their own loss, their own diminished status. So black progress meant white defeat, and that was a mindset that tragically came to prevail I think, during those times. And when Reconstruction ended, it was replaced by

deliberate, cruel, often sometimes violent and bloody obstacles to African American progress. These took the form of Jim Crow laws in the 1901 Constitution that disenfranchised as many black citizens as it could quite deliberately, and the grisly pattern of lynching documented so powerfully by the Equal Justice Initiative museums in Montgomery. These became the realities that African Americans in Alabama lived with.

Frye Gaillard:

There were always people who pushed back against this. Booker T. Washington came to Alabama in 1881 and started Tuskegee Institute holding the first classes at a black church in Tuskegee where the Klansmen had literally attacked the church and shot at some of its members because there were rumors of political organizing taking place in the church. Booker T. Washington chose that as the symbolic and practical place to hold the first classes at Tuskegee Institute as he tried to lay the groundwork of educational progress for African American citizens.

Frye Gaillard:

In the early 20th century a philanthropist from Chicago, the CEO of Sears Roebuck, his name was Julius Rosenwald, read Booker T. Washington's autobiography *Up From Slavery* and came to Tuskegee and asked Washington, "What can I do to help?" And Washington said, "Black children in the South in many cases don't have any schools at all. We need schools." So Rosenwald provided the seed money to build schools for African American children, starting in Alabama and radiating out across the South and the border states, and between 1913 and the early 1930s over about a 20 year period, they built 5,000 schools in the South.

Frye Gaillard:

Around Tuskegee, an African American middle class grew up with aspirations to vote. It turns out that by the 1940s, Governor Jim Folsom in Alabama had appointed a registrar, a white man in Macon County named Herman Bentley, who was actually willing to register African American voters. So 500 or more people around Tuskegee who were African American registered to vote, and they became a political force. The same thing happened in Mobile, where a civil rights leader named John LeFlore was pushing for the right to vote. And where another Folsom appointee as a registrar, a white man named Gunny Gonzales, was willing to register black voters. So black voting rights became something that was a measure of progress in Alabama by the middle years of the 20th century.

Frye Gaillard:

My grandfather who had started his life in a slave owning family, pondered all of this as he grew older. He was a member of a church called Central Presbyterian Church in Mobile, and the minister at that church was a man named John Krull who in the 1950s, a white man, preached on the value of integration and the evil of segregation from a biblical perspective. And when this became controversial in the church, my grandfather as an elder in the church defended the minister, and said publicly that the minister was saying things that they ought to consider very carefully. In private the two of them argued, and my grandfather insisted privately that segregation was the right way to go, was the right way to organize society.

Frye Gaillard:

But he had his doubts. And on his deathbed, his minister recalls my grandfather looked at him and said, "Pastor Krull, I see now that you were right." Now some people might say big deal, this guy was a racist and white supremacist all his life and was sorry in the last few seconds of his life, and that's one interpretation that certainly fits the facts. But I chose to think that maybe my grandfather embodied personally in a sort of metaphorical and personal way, the trajectory that I hoped would define the South. And as time went by, we saw the Civil Rights Movement take hold, and as I tried to say in my book *Cradle of Freedom*, Alabama was ground zero for this in many ways.

Frye Gaillard:

The Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Freedom Rides, the Birmingham Movement, the church bombings, the Selma to Montgomery March, the work of John Lewis and Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks and Fred Shuttlesworth, these became the defining qualities of Alabama history in many ways. I think the groundwork for progress was made and as a result of things that happened in Alabama, landmark civil rights legislation was passed in Washington, the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As time went by and you looked around, it seemed to me for a long time that we were reaping the benefits of this time when African Americans raised the most basic questions about who we were and what kind of people we wanted to be, and what kind of society we wanted to live in. Our answers to those questions, do we really believe in equal justice before the law, do we really believe that we are all children of God and therefore brothers and sisters of one another, I think for a time our answers got better.

Frye Gaillard:

We saw this manifested in the politics of the South. We saw governors like Jimmy Carter in Georgia and Linwood Holton, a Republican in Virginia and Reuben Askew, a Democrat in Florida. New South governors who said that the time for racial prejudice was past and that we needed to put that time behind us and move forward in ways that were more fair and more promising and that made us all more free. Even in Alabama, George Wallace who had been such an impediment, in some ways a deadly impediment to African American progress in the 1960s, actually won the black vote in Alabama the last time he ran for governor in the 1980s, and after that appointed more African American members to state government than any governor ever had.

Frye Gaillard:

So there were these measures of progress that offered hope. Nothing lasts forever, and we've teetered back and forth, I think. The Voting Rights Act which I think was so important, was gutted by the John Roberts Supreme Court by what I thought was a very short sighted conclusion by Chief Justice Roberts that the law was no longer needed. And as soon as it was effectively gutted, you saw voter suppression become an issue not just in the South, but all over the country. So we are headed to what could be a kind of crisis in democracy with people not sure who should be allowed to vote and who shouldn't, and controversy about that that I think in many ways could have been avoided.

Frye Gaillard:

We also live in what some people have called a Black Lives Matter moment. When the death of George Floyd and the courage, and this is something I think we don't think about enough, the courage of a young teenager, 17 years old named Darnella Frazier, she had her cellphone when the life was being choked out of Mr. Floyd after he had been handcuffed and subdued by a policeman who had his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck. Darnella Frazier, despite the stares and implied threats of other police officers, recorded this on the video on her phone. So all of us saw what happened, and we had to reckon with what it looked like. And the more we thought about it, the more we had to reckon with the fact that this happens far too often in America, and that the basic message of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery was essentially true, that we live in a society where systemic racism taints the justice system in our country in ways that are sometimes deadly for our African American brothers and sisters, and this should not be so.

Frye Gaillard:

In the reckoning that followed this realization, encouraging things, sometimes symbolic, happened around the South. In Mississippi they changed their state flag and got rid of the Confederate battle flag, which George Wallace in the 1960s had hoisted over the Alabama State Capitol in open defiance of the rights of African Americans. They took that battle flag out of the state flag of Mississippi as a kind of symbolic gesture toward reconciliation and equality, and recognizing that all of us are in it together as the first African American members of Congress had tried to say 150 years earlier.

Frye Gaillard:

In Alabama, we saw sort of culturally significant things, I think. The football coach at the University of Alabama and his players leading a march from the campus to the building where George Wallace had stood in the schoolhouse door to affirm as they said that all lives can't matter until black lives matter. This is not a political statement in my view, or I think in those players' view, it's a human rights statement. So we I think are at a time where once again, the questions are being called and we're asked to think about who we are as a people and what we believe in.

Frye Gaillard:

Now I want to say that as I talk about police misconduct toward black citizens, I don't mean to paint with too broad a brush or say that this is typical of all police officers in the country, most certainly it is not. But it does happen too often, and it is a symbol I think of some of the structural issues of inequality that still beset us. So we still have a lot of work to do on this front. I think it's work that we can do. I think history proves that. I think it's work that it makes sense for us to do because we are no matter what we want to think about this, we are a diverse country, and the only way I think that we can make that work is to try to understand each other across these walls and chasms that in the past have too often divided us.

Frye Gaillard:

So I throw all that out as food for thought, and welcome any kind of questions or comments that anybody else might have. Mark, I don't know if you guys, or Maiben, have any folks that want to ask questions or if you do, to continue the conversation, but maybe that'll get us started.

Mark Wilson:

Absolutely. It certainly will get us started, and we love to have any comments or questions on Facebook, and we will ask those of Frye. I think what you've given us, you've given us a lot to think about, but I think you've also suggested that the sources for which we understand history are broad and can be even broader. Stories in the depths that you've told that folks have never heard before, family history that illuminates and helps us sort of frame how we understand the past, and then a sense in which we are living in a distinct moment in time, in a particular place in time.

Mark Wilson:

I do think it's interesting and important to note the Benjamin Turner book and another book that you've written, and maybe more of your 30 books is designed for young audiences, and so you obviously have the next generation in mind for some of these important stories. So I'm wondering what you hope school children in Alabama will understand about Alabama history in the future, this cradle that you talk about?

Frye Gaillard:

That's really a good point, and thanks for picking up on that, Mark. When Marti Rosner, my coauthor on *The Slave Who Went to Congress* and I, went around before COVID stopped in-person appearances early this year to schools in Alabama, one of the things that struck me was that we could go to Selma and visit a school that was all black, all the kids in the fourth grade in the school that we visited in Selma were African American children, many of them coming from a housing project right near Brown's Chapel Church where the Selma to Montgomery March began. These kids, and Congresswoman Terri Sewell was there with us that day, and she read to them from our book, and the rapt fascination with which they received the story of this hero that some of them had never heard of who came from their very town, and they could identify I think easily with his courage, Benjamin Turner's courage and his determination that enabled him to become the first African American Congressman in Alabama.

Frye Gaillard:

But I think some of them also seemed to have questions and admire Mr. Turner's spirit of generosity and forgiveness, and a sense of inclusiveness that his point of view kind of embodied. So we talked about all of those things to this class of African American children. Then Marti and I went down to Daphne, Alabama, on Mobile Bay, and we went to a private school there where almost all of the children in the class were white. And they were just as fascinated, these white fourth graders, with the story from Alabama history. While I'm sure they understood that Mr. Turner was African American and that he had been enslaved, what they were intrigued by were his qualities of character, of his humanity, his determination, his bravery, his refusal to be deterred by obstacles that society threw up in his life and once again, his generosity and forgiveness and broad mindedness and inclusiveness, and the belief that all of us were in it together. And the very fine teachers at this school led a conversation in those classrooms about those qualities of character.

Frye Gaillard:

So history if you think of it as a story, becomes a story about people. And when you make it a story about people, then we're moved to think more easily I think about who we are and what history tells us about humanity and about our place. I think it's never too early to start with these kind of discussions with school children. The other book for young readers that I wrote was called *Go South to Freedom* aimed more at middle graders, it was like a 70-page historical novel. But it was based on an oral history that an African American friend of mine had told me about his family and how they came to Mobile, his ancestors had. They were runaway slaves having been enslaved on a rice plantation in south Georgia, and they ran away in a thunderstorm according to the oral history that my friend told me, and they didn't have the stars to guide by, to navigate by, the North star that they hoped would guide them to freedom in the North. It was blotted out by the clouds.

Frye Gaillard:

So they ran and they ran and they ran all night in this thunderstorm, and realized the next day that they had been running south instead of north, and they felt despair. And they found that in his remarkable oral history, my friend told me they found a cave that they wanted to hide out in and decide what to do, on a cave on a riverbank. It turned out that a runaway slave already lived in this cave, and somehow he knew that runaways could find sanctuary sometimes either among the community of free blacks who lived in Mobile and New Orleans and some other coastal cities in the South, or he said with the Seminole Indians and what is now Florida. My friend who told me this story said his family did both, that they spent some time with the Seminoles and then came to Mobile and entered the community of free blacks in Mobile. What an amazing story, right?

Frye Gaillard:

I wanted to know how common that was. Did other people run away and go South? And it turned out they did. It turned out that hundreds of enslaved people found sanctuary in Florida and became part of a group of people known as the Black Seminoles, who lived contiguously with the American Indian Seminoles and fought alongside them in the Seminole Wars of the 1820s and the 1830s, to protect their own freedom and the freedom of Indian people as well. I didn't know this history. But when I told it to middle grade students really all across the South, they listened in rapt attention, and I think what they took away from it was the depth of the human yearning to be free. SO again, young people can see these things and understand these things, and maybe grow up with a more tolerant and broad minded understanding of both the tragedy and the heroism of the history that all of us share.

Mark Wilson:

Thanks for that, I appreciate that. It sounds like that illustrates too, that you don't find the books, the books find you.

Frye Gaillard:

Well, I think that's right. It's like how some people say, "How do you decide what to write?" I usually say there are so many good stories out there that I write the ones that won't go away, the ones that sort of nibble at my mind to the point that I can't push them aside and so finally I say, "Okay, okay." I sit down and write the story. One of the things about being a nonfiction writer is that truth really is as interesting as fiction, I think. It really does have the depth that even the literary possibilities that you find in great novels and in wonderful poetry, I couldn't write a poem with a gun to my head and I'm not very good at trying to write fiction ordinarily except in this one case, historical fiction for young readers. But the truth, the literal truth sometimes reveals our humanity in powerful and nuanced ways, and so I just love it. It's just, making a living by telling stories is for me, I can't imagine a better gig.

Mark Wilson:

So it begs another question because there also are parameters on the work that you do set by your publishers, you can't write thousand page books always, you can sometimes. So when you think about *Cradle of Freedom* and Alabama and the Civil Rights Movement, my guess is that there are stories that you would love to have put in that book but that you couldn't have. So I'd love for a comment on that, but it occurs to me that if we are in a moment where everyone's history is valued even more, and that the expectations of the public and of ourselves are that everyone's history will be included and understood and analyzed, is there a lot more for us to discover?

Frye Gaillard:

I think there is, Mark. I think certainly in *Cradle of Freedom* as soon as it was published, I encountered people with stories that I wished I had known. That book does talk about the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama in ways that I hope and intend to go beyond just the stories of the famous people that you've heard of. I mean, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King and Fred Shuttlesworth and John Lewis and all those people were as important I think as history has said they are. But for every Dr. King, there were hundreds of people whose names we probably don't know, ordinary people who did extraordinary things, people like Claudette Colvin, a teenager in Montgomery who refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus before Rosa Parks did. But it just so happened that a movement, a boycott did not coalesce around her act of principled defiance but it did with Mrs. Parks, who was so universally respected in the African American community of Montgomery that her arrest simply could not be ignored.

Frye Gaillard:

I met people that I had never heard of like Thomas Gilmore, who became the first African American sheriff in Greene County, Alabama just south of Tuscaloosa. But because he was a devoted follower of Martin Luther King and had seen up close King's commitment to non-violence, Tom Gilmore as a sheriff was committed to non-violence, and therefore refused for 13 years as sheriff in a pretty tough rural county, he refused to carry a gun, and had to deescalate some pretty tough and dicey situations, some with African American people, some with white people in which they had guns but he didn't. Sheriff Gilmore who became a minister later and is no longer with us but was one of the people that I really just admired and was happy to call a friend before he died, he was a gentle soul but he was strong, and he used that gentleness and strength to his advantage as a kind of colorblind sheriff in this part of rural Alabama.

Frye Gaillard:

I think of his example sometimes when we hear stories of police officers who perhaps have not been trained in the tactics and understanding of how to deescalate a tense situation and so instead it escalates, sometimes in deadly directions. I wish Tom Gilmore were around to talk to some of these people because I feel certain that some of the policemen who've been involved in deadly encounters would rather they had not ended up that way, and if they had known and understood how to guide things in a different direction, maybe they would have.

Frye Gaillard:

When I was in Charlotte, North Carolina working for *The Charlotte Observer* and then later freelancing, I had the opportunity and really I thought the privilege, to write about community policemen in that city whose philosophy was to get to know the people in their neighborhoods on the theory that even the most crime riddled neighborhood, that 90% or more of the people there were good people who didn't like crime any more than the policemen did, and that they could be allies in making the neighborhood safer. I saw these policemen, police officers because some were women, some white some black, it didn't seem to matter, form extraordinary relationships of trust with people in communities that historically had not trusted police. And I saw what could be done, and I admired their work and wrote about it, admired the people in the communities who worked with them to make those communities a better place.

Frye Gaillard:

So I not only believe, I'm sure in my own mind that some of these tragic occurrences like things that happened to George Floyd and Rayshard Brooks and maybe Breonna Taylor and Tamir Rice and others, that this did not have to happen, and that we don't diminish our police any more than we diminish our African American brothers and sisters by saying that we have to create a climate of political will in which we make the necessary systemic reforms to reduce if not eliminate, the times when things escalate in a deadly way so that it really isn't more dangerous to be a person of color in America than it is to be a white person, and if you can be understood by African American people in the South but elsewhere too, that you could run afoul of a white person for even the most trivial reasons and it can turn deadly. And I thought after the Civil Rights years that those days were behind us. I think even people like John Lewis thought we were moving toward a time when those days were behind us. But now we know they're not.

Frye Gaillard:

And African American, our brothers and sisters know that much better than white guys like me because I don't face that in a personal way, but they do and they know it, and the least we can do is listen and realize that it's in all our interests, theirs, ours, police officers, to understand each other across these barriers because inevitably, we have to live together in this space. I think we can, but I think we have a long way to go before the place that we say we want to live in becomes the place that we do live in.

Mark Wilson:

Thanks for that, and I think that also illustrates the role that stories in the humanities have for helping to bridge those divides. Last question. So it's 2020, we're in a moment of reflection, I think everyone can agree on that for all of the reasons that we are experiencing and more. If this moment does affect the future understanding of history and the future of Alabama history, how in your mind are we going to measure our progress? How will we know that we have achieved the future of Alabama history, historical study, historical understanding, understanding of the human experience that you talk about, how are we going to know that we've done that justice?

Frye Gaillard:

Well, that's a really good question, Mark, and I think there are various measures of that. I think we'll know it in some ways by how we interact with each other on a daily basis. I think we will know it if the headlines of tragedy become fewer and more far between, if in fact we can't eliminate them altogether. I think we'll know it by the rhetoric of our politicians. I think we'll know it by looking at our culture, by seeing the kinds of stories that our storytellers, whether they write fiction or whether they write nonfiction or whether they write country songs or whether they write poems, by the kinds of reflections on humanity that we find there.

Frye Gaillard:

I've always thought that history sometimes is too political, that we look at political measures of historical progress when sometimes cultural measures, what we hear in our songs, what we read in our books, what we see in our movies, may tell us a lot as well about who we are. So I think we'll know in our hearts and in our bones by just kind of looking around. There may be other people who have better answers to that. Maybe there's a more precise way of knowing. But I'm kind of a humanities guy, and so a little ...

Mark Wilson:

I think we've lost Frye's connection online. We'll see if he's able to pop back in in just a second. I will let you know that this video will remain on Facebook so that you can share it with friends, and the links you will see to the books that Frye has written that he discussed today and others. You can go to his website fryegaillard.com to learn more about Frye and his contributions. So it looks like we've lost Frye for this program, but we appreciate all of you being with us today, and we look forward to future conversations on the future of Alabama history. Thanks.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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