

2020 AND THE FUTURE OF ALABAMA HISTORY

ABOUT

2020 and the Future of Alabama History: The Avalon Plantation Marker Story was held on Tuesday, November 10. The panel featured Christine Sears ([University of Alabama in Huntsville History Department](#)), Drew Adan ([M. Louis Salmon Library Archives & Special Collections](#)), Vaughn Bocchino (UAH History graduate), and Scotty Kirkland (Chair, Alabama Historical Association Markers Committee). [Learn more about the project here.](#)

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

TRANSCRIPT

Mark Wilson:

Hello and welcome. I'm Mark Wilson, Secretary of the Alabama Historical Association and Director of the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts and Humanities in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University. We are happy to convene another conversation on the topic of 2020 and the future of Alabama history.

Mark Wilson:

AHA President Frazine Taylor has a word of welcome.

Frazine Taylor:

Good afternoon. I bring you greetings from the Alabama Historical Association. National and global events all happen somewhere, and historical markers mark the place where many occurred. But the richness of history is in its local details that can be insignificant on the global stage. For example, the home of an individual who made a difference in the community or state, a natural feature, a building, a byway, or just something interesting that happened nearby. Historical markers can tell stories and point out facts.

Frazine Taylor:

Now let us enjoy our program today. Thank you.

Mark Wilson:

Thanks, President Taylor. 2020, for professional and vocational historians or anyone who is a student of history, living in such a momentous time as the year 2020 can be a little mind-boggling. We're wondering at this time what the future will look like, and part of our wondering includes the study and the writing and the teaching of history since our understanding of the past informs our future.

Mark Wilson:

Historians, defined as anyone who writes about the past, are by definition revisionist since they are building on the work of others, asking new questions, rendering a more perfect history as a civic enterprise for building a more perfect union.

Mark Wilson:

Today's conversation, as President Taylor mentioned, is related to historic markers and their texts, and our guests are from Huntsville, Alabama. Christine Sears, Dr. Christine Sears, is University of Alabama Huntsville associate Professor of History. Drew Adan is archivist with the UAH Department of Archives and Special Collections. Vaughn Bocchino is a public historian. And then later in the program we'll be joined from Montgomery by Scotty Kirkland, chair of the Alabama Historical Associations Historic Markers Committee. Welcome, folks.

Vaughn Bocchino:

Hello.

Christine Sears:

Hello.

Christine Sears:

I'm going to start, and then Drew and then Vaughn will talk a little bit. None of us are going to talk very long, but we thought we'd set up our story.

Christine Sears:

So good afternoon. It's really nice to be here with all of you. I want to thank Mark Wilson and the AHA for having us and having this discussion with us and Maiben Beard for setting up all the technology. That's really helpful.

Christine Sears:

Drew and Vaughn and I started working in 2019 together on research related to the Avalon Plantation that's taken us on a wild ride, and we've learned so much that we didn't know, which is really good because we had big plans, and what we've learned can help us with those plans going forward.

Christine Sears:

When we started that work on Avalon Plantation, there were two things that really spurred us on.

Christine Sears:

Avalon Plantation, by the way, was a plantation that was most of the land that UAH now occupies. Now, UAH wasn't founded until 1959, so there wasn't a direct connection between the plantation and UAH, but it's the landscape that was that plantation there.

Christine Sears:

When we started in 2019, there were two immediate things that really spurred our work. One was that there's always been interest in the very small cemetery that's behind one of the buildings at UAH, Morton Hall, where Lewellen Jones, who fought in the Revolutionary War and in 1820 very briefly owned Avalon Plantation, was buried. There are a few other grave sites there as well. We wanted to know both more about that and maybe put up some sort of marker to address the issue that the community has always been very interested in that. The archives gets tons of questions about that, so make that something that was part of the landscape to have a historic marker there.

Christine Sears:

At the same time, an archeological class taught at UAH had just uncovered what would have been the base of Avalon's big house, so where the masters would have lived, that was behind the history department or between the history department and nursing building, which was interesting. It seemed increasingly clear to us that learning about Avalon Plantation and making that learning part of a community conversation was really important.

Christine Sears:

We also wanted to tell an inclusive story about that land and the way the land was experienced by those who lived and worked on the land to tell a complete story.

Christine Sears:

When we started in 2019, Drew and Vaughn were doing a research project for a class, and they uncovered some surprising information about post-Civil-War owners, the Drakes, and the Jones School, both of which Drew is going to talk about a little bit more, but just let me mention that the Drakes were post-Civil-War owners of Avalon. They're from Indiana, and they were suffragists. Of course, 2019, the 19th Amendment was really important in conversation, so they ended up focusing their research around that as being a really timely topic for that period.

Christine Sears:

But we also saw our work as just the beginning. From the very beginning, we envisioned at least three historic markers that would put together a marker trail that we hoped would also have a self-guided component that people could walk around UAH and see how this Avalon Plantation made a difference.

Christine Sears:

The first marker, and, Maiben, if you don't mind showing that marker ... The first marker is done, and we want to thank especially the Huntsville Madison County Historical Society's marker committee. Alex Lutrell worked with us tirelessly to get the wording right and martial us through this process, which was new to all of us. I also want to thank the Alabama Historical Association's marker committee, which was obviously invaluable helpful. And I want to especially thank Donald Christian Jr. and the Order of the First Families of the Alabama Territory who largely funded this beautiful marker that we were able to get with the bicentennial seal up at the top.

Christine Sears:

Now, if you're reading over this, you'll note that the marker is largely about the cemetery, and though it mentions the enslaved people, and I don't know, Maiben, if you have a back side if you want to show whenever you're ready, it really is more about the master class.

Christine Sears:

When we had this first marker done this spring, everything changed twice. It changed first with COVID, which obviously stopped our work and moved UAH to all hands on deck to how we were going to adjust to teaching in this COVID world. That summer things changed again with George Floyd and the other related events that made us question putting this marker that was largely focused on the master class as opposed to the enslaved people or the African-Americans in Reconstruction who had great success here on this property. It seemed to make that problematic without the larger context of those other markers that would indicate that rich African-American history that was enacted on this landscape.

Christine Sears:

Because of all those things, COVID particularly and the summer events, we put the marker project on hold, and we've just started picking that work up again. One of the things that we've learned is how important involvement is and having wide involvement. We're working hard to get UAH community involvement, to talk to student groups about our work, to get their input, their insights. We are starting that outreach in a broader way that I think both Vaughn and Drew are going to talk about, because, again, what we learned is that this marker process is really a community history experience. It's about learning about that history and sharing that history and including everybody in that rich history that we have.

Christine Sears:

We envisioned two other markers that we've just begun work on, but I think Drew is going to describe those more, and I'm going to leave this to him to take over.

Drew Adan:

Sure. Thank you, Dr. Sears.

Drew Adan:

As Mark mentioned, my name is Drew Adan. I'm an archivist with UAH Archives and Special Collections and also a graduate student in the history department, and I've prepared a couple of slides and images that I'd like to share with you to give a background and showcase some of the research that we've done on Avalon and the background of the property.

Drew Adan:

Okay. The early history of Avalon: from 1809 to 1820 various land speculators owned that property until Lewellen Jones purchased it in 1820. Dr. Sears mentioned Lewellen Jones was a Revolutionary War veteran. He owned lands in Georgia, in Limestone County and purchased Avalon early in 1820. Actually, just three weeks later, he died under quite mysterious circumstances. Newspaper reports at the time said that he was found hanging by his handkerchief in scaffolding of a newly constructed building on the property.

Drew Adan:

His estate is divided among his two sons, and Alexander Jones inherits Avalon along with half of his father's 20 slaves, or half of 40 slaves, in 1820.

Drew Adan:

As you can see here, the enslaved population of Avalon increased drastically under Alexander, going from those initial 20 enslaved persons that he inherited in 1820 all the way up to 139 according to the 1850 census. This large population of enslaved persons at Avalon leads us to believe that there was a burial site on campus as opposed to smaller plantations might share communal slave cemeteries. We would like to know more about those that were interred here and that lived at Avalon beyond just their age, name, and sex and that data that's reported on the census data that we looked at. So part of our project moving forward will include further genealogical study to identify who was buried here and learn more about their lives and their descendants as well.

Drew Adan:

Shortly after the war, Dr. Sears mentioned the Drakes. Avalon was purchased by Priscilla and James Drake. These were well-known social reformers and women suffragists. This was an exciting discovery for us. We can point to Priscilla Holmes Drake as Avalon's first known active suffragist, as she was an officer in the National Women's Suffrage Association.

Drew Adan:

Vaughn and I authored a paper on the Drakes and have given various presentations about their story. While it is fascinating, it doesn't necessarily directly relate to the project that we're speaking about today, as they only owned Avalon very briefly from about 1868 to 1871.

Drew Adan:

When the Drakes sell off the property, they sell the main chunk of it and the house to the Crawfords, but they also portioned up smaller areas of the land and sold those off to descendants of the enslaved population that was at Avalon, including Shandy and Reuben Jones.

Drew Adan:

Back in 1820 with the death of Lewellen Jones, a slave named Eliza Jones and her three biracial children were manumitted. Some have speculated that their father was either Alexander Jones or his father, Lewellen Jones. But Shandy Jones went on to grow up a free man of color in Alabama, learning to read and write. He was one of only 500 freemen in the state in 1850. He went on to become the first black state representative from Tuscaloosa County.

Drew Adan:

His half-brother, Reuben Jones, was also active in politics and born on Avalon Plantation. During the war, he changed his name and fought for the Union and became one of the first state representatives from Madison County.

Drew Adan:

Reuben Jones was also involved in one of our most exciting findings, the Jones School. According to an 1870 census, we know that Reuben Jones was neighbors with William Hooper Council, who's a huge figure in Alabama education. The two of them were neighbors and lived together about a mile west of campus. William Hooper Council would go on to be the first president of Alabama A&M and one of the founders of that university. According to on the right side there, the teachers' monthly school report, this was registered with the Freedmen's Bureau, we know that Council taught at a school called the Jones School at a building owned by Reuben Jones from at least 1869 to 1870. This schoolhouse was on Avalon Plantation, UAH campus. We suspect that the schoolhouse was located within the former slave village in the southwest portion of campus.

Drew Adan:

This is an exciting discovery. One of the first schools for black students, if not the first school, in Madison County was located here on UAH campus.

Drew Adan:

As Dr. Sears mentioned, we think the best way to tell this inclusive and complete story of Avalon is a series of three historical markers and an interpretive historical marker trail that visits these sites.

Drew Adan:

The first one here, the one that you've already seen the textbook of, this is to be placed at the Jones Cemetery, which is behind Morton Hall, as we mentioned to give the general overview of the Jones family, the ownership history of the property. It mentions the plantation house, which stood about a couple hundred yards away.

Drew Adan:

The next marker would be down in the lower left-hand portion of the screen. This would be where the slave village was located. It would give information on the Jones School and also mention that this was the birth place of both Shandy and Reuben Jones.

Drew Adan:

Then the final marker would be, if we were able to definitively identify the location of the slave cemetery. Back in 2018, an archeology class conducted a survey with ground-penetrating radar on campus and identified some anomalies that could be consistent with grave sites on campus. Part of our project moving forward is to do additional archeological fieldwork and studies to identify the boundaries of that cemetery and direct a marker there.

Drew Adan:

At this point in the project, we're trying to speak to as many student organizations, organizations in the community to make people aware of the project and elicit some feedback from the university and the community at large as to the best way to tell this story. Our goal is to tell the story in a way that's respectful to all, aligned with UAH's core values, but we can't do it alone. There was a recent Chronicle of Higher Education article that says, "A university may occupy only one seat at the table. Descendants must be identified as early as possible and included in deliberations. So too must representatives of the local community." So this really big push going forward is identify descendants and include them in this project. We have two graduate students starting next semester that we're going to involve them in doing this genealogical research to help us track down those descendants.

Drew Adan:

With that, I'll turn it over to Vaughn, who's going to tell you a bit more about our research and process.

Vaughn Bocchino:

Hello. I'm Vaughn Bocchino. I'm a public historian here in Huntsville. I work with a couple organizations like the Scottsboro Boy's Museum and the Goldsmith-Schiffman family. But with this project in particular, the Avalon, I want to give you guys a brief history of how we started with this project and where we hope it will go and where we are right now.

Vaughn Bocchino:

In the spring of 2019, Drew Adan and I did an independent study in a graduate class for Dr. Sears, and we knew that we wanted to focus somehow on the Avalon Plantation. It was a class, so we had a whole semester to put together a 25-page graduate-level paper and hopefully start the process of a historical marker with the idea that we will in the future get more.

Vaughn Bocchino:

We focused in on the Drakes pretty early because it was an early story of Alabama suffrage and there just wasn't a lot of stuff written about that. We knew about the plantation because of the archeology classes and such that Ben Hoksbergen had done in 2018. As we started pushing, we were doing a lot of presentations about specifically Priscilla Holmes and James Perry Drake.

Vaughn Bocchino:

In the course of that research, Drew came across, when he was doing the research just for the general overview of the land that it was on, he came across really interesting information about the schools with Council and Shandy Jones and all that.

Vaughn Bocchino:

After the class ended and we turned in our paper, got our grade and everything, we decided to move it from that real esoteric topic of these people who only lived in Avalon for about three, four years to the broader picture, more inclusive picture. What we've been trying to do since the spring of 2020 when a lot of stuff has changed is, rather than really get our noses in the weeds at different archives and such, which for a while were closed during the early part of the year, we've been trying to just drum up community support. We've been working with the SGA at UAH. We've been working with the local chapter at UAH of the NAACP. We've been working with a lot of organizations. We've been reaching out to Alabama A&M because there is that really good connection with Council and the project here.

Vaughn Bocchino:

We know that we want to find a way to definitively prove that the enslaved cemetery is where we think it probably is or we think where it probably could be. Again, that goes back to the archeologists, Ben Hoksbergen, who had his class, and he found some telltale signs with the ground-penetrating radar of things that looked suspiciously like graves. Again, we won't know until we actually get out there and so some more work, but the community of volunteers who want to help with that particular thing has been quite positive around town.

Vaughn Bocchino:

But yeah. Really our core thing that we're working on right now is just to get the word out, because a lot of people just don't know. There's people when they're working by they see the small cemetery, and it's such a small part of such a huge picture that we feel is a really important story to tell, from all the enslaved persons who worked there, all the schools, and just the whole story.

Vaughn Bocchino:

That's how it started and where we hope to take it.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. Thank you three for a wonderful overview of this really interesting project. I hope you got a grade in the class that you worked on.

Vaughn Bocchino:

Oh yeah, we did.

Christine Sears:

Of course.

Mark Wilson:

I hope that was the case.

Mark Wilson:

It feels like the story of a university or any institution trying to come to grips with the historical landscape that's around them, and I think you illustrate well that one aspect of research always leads to another aspect of research, and there's still many unanswered questions. But I think you are helping us see what a process like this can look like and should look like, particularly at a university with many different classes, instructors, and students who are participating that are on that same search.

Mark Wilson:

I have some other, bigger questions to ask. I know we'll get some questions from folks on Facebook, as we have already. But first I want to invite Scotty Kirkland to join us from the Montgomery, Alabama Department of Archives and History who has chaired our marker committee for several years now. Scotty works day in and day out with communities who are working on markers and, as you mentioned, working with community member Alex Lutrell in north Alabama, seeking to figure out how to render a story of human lives in a very minute space. Scotty, talk to us a little bit about the marker program. When you hear this story and you understand this story, where does it fit in terms of what communities are seeking to do to be more inclusive with historical markers?

Scotty Kirkland:

Thanks, Mark. I'm happy to join you all today. First let me start by just saying good work to Christine and to Drew and Vaughn. We were very happy to get this marker application. We received it through Alex Lutrell, who not only is on the Huntsville Madison County Historical Society but he is a long-term member. In fact, I think he's the longest serving member of the AHA historical marker committee. We were very happy to get the marker and await the day that it will be installed once the pandemic is behind us.

Scotty Kirkland:

AHA has been putting up markers since the 1950s. We are nearing nearly 1,000 markers, 1,000 places that we, over the course of the last many, many decades and generations, have held up as important.

Scotty Kirkland:

Mark, you said something about the landscape, the historical landscape, and I think a lot of times we forget that that can change, that the stories that we can tell through these markers evolves. I think that's a good thing. I think that the idea of a series of markers on the present-day campus of UAH to look at not only the plantation that was there before but the people that made that plantation go, the enslaved men and women who were there, to call forth their history, I think that's really important. That's because of new historical information that people like Christine and Drew and Vaughn have been able to suss out. I think that a generation ago this is not the marker that our association would likely put in that spot, but, again, I think that's a good thing. I think that one of the ways that the association can help as we enter the future is in telling these small stories, history on a stick as some people call them, in the most inclusive and diverse ways.

Scotty Kirkland:

These are good ways to foster community conversation. The AHA marker committee has for many, many decades adopted this grassroots approach. The markers begin with local people. They come to us and we help them facilitate the creation of the marker. We fact check what they give to us. We put it in our established AHA marker style. But we want those conversations to start in those local communities. We want to be a facilitator of those conversations, but we believe that that is the best way for this program to make a real difference, is to be something that starts these conversations in these communities. I think that's incredibly important, and I think that this marker is a good example. It's a good example of the kind of marker that we want to continue doing.

Scotty Kirkland:

A couple years ago we had the opportunity down in Mobile to do a marker at Memorial Park, which is the World War I memorial in that city. When that memorial was created in the 1920s, the names of many of the African-American soldiers who had served during the Great War were left off. They were either purposely left off or they were left off because their family members could not pay for their inclusion. We placed a marker, I believe in 2018, that talked a little bit about the context of that memorial, but then, on the reverse side, put for the first time the names of all those, I think there were 30, African-American servicemen who were excluded from the original marker.

Scotty Kirkland:

This is another example, this Avalon marker, I think another example of us looking to this marker program to tell a more complete story of these communities and a more complete story of Alabama.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. We appreciate that, Scotty.

Mark Wilson:

Here's an opening question for all of you before we get to some of the questions on Facebook. We do invite anyone that has a comment or question to put that on Facebook. We'll try to get to it. You mentioned this already. Scotty, you work with many communities. But for all of you, as you are thinking about the confines of the marker text, you only have so many words. You only have so many characters. I know you are all credentialed historians, so I know it pains you to have to have a word limit, partly because you don't want any of the details of the story and the contextualization to not be apparent for the persons who are reading the text. So how do you live with that tension, and what do you hope when a person reads a historical marker, if they can't have the entire story, what do you hope they gain from it? Anybody want to be brave enough to jump in on that?

Drew Adan:

I'll start. There's a great program in Madison County. The Madison County Historical Society Dean Dayton put together a system of QR codes that exist under a lot of the historical markers in that area. The benefit of that is not only you can scan those, it'll bring up other markers in the region, but those can link up to additional resources related to that marker that tell you more than the 300 words can ever convey. I think programs like that that are secondary and add a little bit more information and context about the marker, those are really helpful going forward.

Mark Wilson:

Thanks for that. Go ahead, Vaughn.

Vaughn Bocchino:

I was just going to add. You talk about how hard it is to parse it down. Writing that article, Drew, was a lot easier than writing a 300-word marker. You sent it to a lot of people, and everybody works on it trying to get it as clear as possible. Hopefully, you get through a whole bunch of different eyeballs to see what you could leave off, what you should add. By the time it actually gets to y'all, it's hopefully as clear as it could possibly be.

Scotty Kirkland:

Mark, I'm unfortunately sometimes the person who has to break that bad news that we can't put a 25-page research paper in bronze. We can't cast it in bronze and put it on a pole.

Scotty Kirkland:

I think when we talk to communities and local folks that want markers, we always tell them that, if you think about it, you have essentially 300-hundred words. You have 600 if you want to do a different on the front and back like we did here. But you want to make sure that every bit of that is working as hard as it possibly can for you. You have to tell the most succinct version of that story.

Scotty Kirkland:

But we always encourage local people to use the marker as that jumping-off point, as Drew said, either with a QR code or with something that directs them to a website. There are any number of ways that you can take what's on that marker as the opening into a broader history. We really do encourage that.

Scotty Kirkland:

The importance I think of these markers is obviously you commemorate the spot. If they're walking around campus or if you're driving down a highway and you see this marker, the idea there is to encourage you to think about what happened here in the past and to pique that historical curiosity. I think a good marker can do that, and I would hope that a marker would lead somebody to sit down and to do a search or to call an archive or to do some research on their own.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. Thanks. If anyone's out there wanting to work on a marker, Scotty, if they say, "Scotty, can't we just have five-point type? Wouldn't that be okay? Couldn't we just make it" ... the answer is?

Scotty Kirkland:

No, sir.

Mark Wilson:

Okay. Just wanted to get that out there.

Mark Wilson:

I want to bring up this question, but I want to ask it slightly differently. Jane DeNeefe has a question related to, if a history trail existed at UAH commemorating black history, how can UAH ensure that black visitors are safe from harassment by UAH campus police? I want to rephrase that. You can answer that question specifically, although you're in history departments so I'm not sure if you have jurisdiction to assist, but we are all citizens working on history as a civic enterprise. I want to rephrase that just slightly if I may and say what do you hope this kind of work does for relationships among people and the kind of work that we all need to be doing as citizens?

Christine Sears:

We think that type of inclusive history, as we all know, can really make a difference. To say there was a really important Reconstruction-era school for African-Americans at UAH and that indicates the importance of education to all of us. UAH has spoken about that.

Christine Sears:

I agree that more work needs to be done at UAH to put their money where their mouth is, and I think they are doing that. I think that the recent events have been a good learning experience for the administration, and I think they are taking good action. That's obviously beyond our pay grade. But we do hope that uncovering this type of history will really fit with what the administration says they want to accomplish and continue that work of bringing communities together to say, "We're all in this together." Part of the way that we can see that we're all in this together is to uncover this history that we all are aware of that brings us perhaps greater understanding of the past that we all build on.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. I think that's really important to keep in mind, and the support that you receive from outside of the community as well. One of the reasons we wanted to host this conversation is to learn from you, but also to share our support with you and to your administrators to say that we would love to see citizens in the state of

Alabama additional markers along these lines placed, and we'd love for your administrators to know how much that would be appreciated.

Mark Wilson:

Let's go to another topic that you mentioned, and we also hope this is a purpose and outcome of this program, is connection with and finding some of those descendants. Ed Bridges mentioned or asked if descendants of Reuben and Shandy Jones are still around. And Guy Hubbs: have you been able to talk to Guy Hubbs about his work on Shandy Jones? If not, I know Guy would love to talk to you.

Drew Adan:

There's actually a published volume at Alabama A&M. I have yet to consult it, but somebody has put together a genealogical history of Shandy Jones, which we definitely want to consult as we go forward.

Drew Adan:

I think we'd also like to be able to identify the descendants. Shandy Jones was born on Avalon and was manumitted when he was four years old. We'd also like to identify the descendants of the enslaved that worked at Avalon their whole lives, identify people that were interred in that cemetery. The Shandy Jones descendants are an extremely important part of this puzzle going forward, but we want to identify as many descendants as possible.

Christine Sears:

And I don't think that any of us have talked to Guy Hubbs, so thank you, Dr. Bridges, for that comment. I've definitely written that down, and we will follow up on that. I'll have to email you to find out more about that.

Vaughn Bocchino:

To answer about making connections with the Jones descendants who are still around the Huntsville area, there are two graduate students coming up through the graduate program who are interested in working on this project. You'll have to talk to Dr. Sears and what she has them do, but one of the definite, main bits of research that we're hoping to get in outreach are, again, the descendants. That would be a good, semester-long graduate project for more students.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. If you don't know, Mary Jones-Fitts from Marengo County. She is someone to write down and contact, and she would be happy to help you I am sure.

Mark Wilson:

And you probably know about this, but Rebecca Minder reminds us that Guy Hubbs just wrote an article on Shandy Jones for the Alabama Heritage Magazine.

Christine Sears:

Thank you.

Mark Wilson:

Helping to make all kind of connections here.

Christine Sears:

Thank you for those.

Drew Adan:

Yes, thank you.

Mark Wilson:

Hey, this is a helpful community out there.

Scotty Kirkland:

Speaking of community, Mark, Mary Jones-Fitts is also a member of our marker committee, a long-serving member. It's nice to see her on here as well, being helpful as always.

Mark Wilson:

As always, we appreciate her service.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent comments on here. Here's a question that would be interesting for y'all to answer. As a result of this project, could UAH offer education on this diverse history for the public beyond the markers? It seems apparent that Huntsville needs this.

Christine Sears:

I think that that's something that we will definitely work on, but I'm really glad to see ... Sorry. I've forgotten the name already, but I'm really glad to see that raised, because I think ... Oh, Ms. Carmack ... because I feel like that's a really important point for us to keep front and center, that part of our goal of course is to foster community education and community conversations, just conversations back and forth. I definitely can see us doing things like that.

Christine Sears:

I know that we were hoping and we still hope, and we think this will eventually happen, just not sure when, that, when we are able to put the markers up, we can have some community events around that for both education and conversation. That would be part of it, but I'm hoping we can do a broader effort than that as well. I'm not sure what that would look like. We've tossed around a few ideas. I'm not sure what we'll come up with. Thank you for that.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. You're certainly making this history public, and we look forward to seeing what the future will hold for that.

Mark Wilson:

Here's a general question about historical markers. Scotty, may want to go to you first, but would love any thoughts from any of you. Oftentimes we may come across a historic marker that was placed, from the look of the paint, many decades ago, and, from the reading of the text, many decades ago where you might say, "Wow, that represents part of the community but not the entirety of the community." Scotty, are there examples or do you think there will be future examples of communities that'll say, "This marker served a purpose in its time, but it's time to have a new historic marker?"

Scotty Kirkland:

Right, absolutely. Within the last year, we have had more conversations like that with communities where people will come to us and they'll say, "This marker's starting to show its age, but the text, too, could use a

revisit." We encourage that type of community efforts. We really think that the best markers are the ones that reflect these local communities. We would very much welcome when people want to redo those markers.

Scotty Kirkland:

Now, if the text is not a problem and it's just that the marker needs an extra coat of paint, we have a program that helps local communities to do that as well.

Scotty Kirkland:

But we are always mindful of the fact that any group that's been placing markers as long as we have, we will learn new things about these places, we will think about these places in different ways, and we think that is well and good and we encourage those places to contact us and we can work with them on that. We don't want to be corporatist about it. We don't want to do the work for them. But we certainly welcome any effort to look at these markers and see how they can help foster these community conversations.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. Rebecca Minder has a comment related to this. An example of the text not matching the marker's significance is the First African Baptist Church in Tuscaloosa. The marker text does not mention the church's significant role in Bloody Tuesday. Thanks for that example, Rebecca. I'm sure that is representative of many examples, and it illustrates that the work of public history is ongoing and ever present, as this conversation seems to show.

Mark Wilson:

Dr. Sears, you've taught many students, wonderful students like Drew and Vaughn. As you continue to teach students, is there a sense in which there's a greater appetite for the diversity of history? What have you learned from teaching these wonderful students over the years related to this topic?

Christine Sears:

Well, I could say a lot about that, but I'll try to confine myself.

Christine Sears:

I think one of the things that particularly of late, as you can imagine, is that there is an appetite for learning about diversity. Students seem to really want to learn about Black history particularly, but also women's history, Latino history, other diverse groups. I would definitely say that I get more interest in that and more openness to that.

Christine Sears:

Students I think at UAH ... I've been here now for 13 years, and I've been very open to these things, but there is a slight difference in how well they're willing or how much they're willing to embrace those stories. I see them making connections and making connections to the modern world and thinking about the past and how these things happened. I would definitely say there's more of an interest. We used to call it dead white man history. I'm not sure that's the best thing to call it now, but something to go along with that and to complement that. Of course we don't want to get rid of George Washington. He's a great person to study. But we want to add into that other stories of that time period, and I find students hunger for that.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. Drew and Vaughn, since you're closer to the student age than some others of us on this program, have any comment related to that?

Vaughn Bocchino:

I don't have anything really to add.

Drew Adan:

I was just going to say, operating in my dual role as both a student and an archivist with the department of archives and special collections, it's my job to document and disseminate and to interpret the history of the university. As Dr. Sears mentioned, UAH did not own slaves. There is decades separating emancipation from Avalon, 100 years. But doing studies on this land and the history that happened here before it was UH is certainly part of the purview for my job, and it's great to see so many students that are interested in that. We get questions usually at the beginning of the fall semester freshmen asking about that cemetery on campus, and it's been really refreshing as we do more research to be able to give resources to students that are interested in learning more about campus history.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. We have Dr. Bridges, who would love to know more about Avalon's history. Did Avalon continue as a cotton plantation into the 20th Century?

Christine Sears:

I don't think I know the answer to that. Drew or Vaughn, do you? That's a great question, Dr. Bridges.

Vaughn Bocchino:

We know that the house, the big manor house that used to stand by close to the nursing department or the nursing building, was in pretty decrepit shape by the '40s. I don't know how much work they were actually doing on the land, but we haven't actually gotten any pictures. I think there's an aerial photograph of something from the '30s I believe. But we hear memories, just living memory of the house and just the area being in real rough shape. I personally don't know if it was an actual, functioning farm or something in the 20th Century, but it seems like it had a pretty ... It was in pretty rough shape by at least the '30s and '40s.

Mark Wilson:

A future student project. We see a master's happening. This is where good topics for theses and dissertations come from.

Mark Wilson:

Scotty, Rebecca Minder would love for you to give everyone an idea of what the marker process entails. They've been through this process. Can you give the rest of a sense in which how does this process work? Where's the starting point? Where's the end point?

Scotty Kirkland:

Happy to. We tried a couple years ago to streamline the process and also to get some better guidelines in place so that people really have one site to go to where they can get all of the information. If you go to the Alabama Historical Association's website, there's a historical marker tab. When you click on that tab, there is a whole lot of information on new markers requests. What you see there is the community guidelines, and that spells out the process that you would go through. There's sample marker text. There's a copy of our style sheet there. And also there's a marker application, which is just a three-page logistical document. It's not very intimidating at all. It's mostly contact information, places where we can get in touch with the local sponsors, the shipping address where the marker can be sent to, any information on placement or timeframe that we need to have. And there's also a place to drop in there into the document the sample text. In addition to that sample text, we ask for some sources.

Scotty Kirkland:

Once that document is complete, it's emailed to me, and then I start to work on it. If it's in the geographic area or in the subject matter area of one of our committee members, I'll also send it to them. We'll work it over, look at it, see if there are any questions that we have.

Scotty Kirkland:

And then we send that draft text ... We amend that draft text and send it back to the local sponsor. Usually, we take our time with this to the point that we want a final draft of the marker that everybody is proud of, something that the committee and association will be happy to lend their name to but also something that still reflects the wishes of the local community.

Scotty Kirkland:

Once we get to the point that we all are happy with the text, I send that to our marker fabricator, which is up in Ohio. It's the same company, Sewah Studios, who's been doing AHA markers from the very beginning. We send it to them. We get a marker quote for the text. Once we receive payment for the marker, we place the order and we go from there.

Scotty Kirkland:

I want to say here too the markers can cost upwards of about \$2,500, \$2,600, but we don't ever want a community to be turned off to a program to install a new marker by the money. There are plenty of ways to fund these markers. We don't ever want anyone to just say, "Well, I'd love to tell this interesting story, this important story, but I can't write you a check." We can help with that. We can help find other people in your area and in the state that are interested in helping you tell those stories.

Scotty Kirkland:

If everything works right, the process takes between two and a half and three months, and it takes about 10 weeks for the marker within that time period to be fabricated, and then it's shipped to the company. We've tried to do as much as we can on the front end to facilitate a faster version of the marker process.

Mark Wilson:

Excellent. Thanks for that overview. We hope folks will be in touch with you about their marker project.

Mark Wilson:

As further evidence that historic markers is a civic enterprise, John Kelton mentioned that one of his Eagle Scouts in Huntsville refurbished a few markers for his Eagle Scout project, and he continues to refurbish markers. If you need a current Eagle Scout who has experience refurbishing markers, then certainly reach out and we'll put you in touch with John Kelton.

Mark Wilson:

But it is a civic enterprise, and what you are working on is a wonderful story in progress, and we congratulate you for the progress that you've made thus far. We look forward to COVID-19 being behind us so that that marker can get placed and so that the further research can be done so that the story that you want to tell you are able to tell and to do so with historic markers as one of the ways in which you will tell the story.

Mark Wilson:

For everybody who's involved with the Alabama Historical Association, congratulations to the team at the University of Alabama Huntsville. We look forward to future updates.

Christine Sears:

Thank you.

Vaughn Bocchino:

Thank you.

Drew Adan:

Thank you.

Christine Sears:

Thank you for y'all's help with it.

Drew Adan:

Appreciate it.

Mark Wilson:

Thanks.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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