

National Civil Rights Museum

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Motel

of 1984 trying to come up with an approach to developing the Lorraine. "It was back to the drawing board, back to figuring out 'how do we start the next begging campaign?'"

The foundation decided that to keep the motel from standing empty, Walter Bailey would run it without paying rent.

The Memphis Design Center, a program for architectural students, helped with a development plan and architectural model, which were used to make a video presentation. Actors James Earl Jones and Robert Guillaume volunteered to narrate the video. It was shown to city Mayor Dick Hackett and county Mayor Bill Morris in the fall of 1984.

The proposal at the time was for a facility called the "American Civil Rights Center." It called for demolition of the hotel and motel buildings and construction of a museum where the two rooms associated with Dr. King — 306 and 307 — would be reconstructed as an interior exhibit.

The effort received a major boost in early 1985 when Mayor Morris announced the Center City Commission would provide staff and technical support for the civil rights center.

Ann Abernathy, a lawyer, was assigned to the Lorraine project as the Center City Commission's special projects coordinator. She worked with the project from 1985 to 1988, before moving to Washington.

Ms. Abernathy said the foundation seemed to be floundering when the Commission entered the picture. The major problem was that nobody knew what a civil rights center was. They owned a building and they didn't know what they wanted to do with it.

She recalled a meeting in which she suggested some alternative uses for the motel: a school, a shelter for the homeless or a job training center. Foundation members were "furious," she said. "They said these are all fine, but we want to use this facility to educate people."

The foundation decided to have Ms. Abernathy write a request for proposals for a feasibility study of a civil rights

museum. City and county governments agreed to provide \$20,000 each for the study. After the foundation received a proposal from highly regarded former Smithsonian Institution official Benjamin Lawless, The Commercial Appeal and Future Memphis added \$5,000 each for the study.

Ms. Abernathy recalled that the tone for the study was set when foundation member A. W. Willis Jr. "communicated to me that the civil rights movement was not one charismatic leader like Martin Luther King, but the civil rights movement had been building since the 1920s. It didn't just happen in the 1960s."

Lawless, of Fort Washington, Md., proved to be on the same wavelength as foundation officials, agreed D'Army Bailey.

"There was no debate among any of us when we read Lawless's proposal," Bailey said. "He (Lawless) just was succinct, sensitive, creative and we knew this was the one we wanted to work with."

In the spring of 1986, Lawless delivered plans that would serve as the outline of the civil rights museum now nearing completion. He put an \$8.8 million price on the museum and foundation officials went to work trying to find the money.

"A. W. (Willis) was the guy who really moved this project through the state (General Assembly), and he had a lot to do with moving it through the County (Commission)," said Scruggs.

Willis, who died in 1988, was a respected legislator and Tennessee's first black representative since Reconstruction.

After a whirlwind lobbying campaign by Willis, D'Army Bailey and others, the General Assembly approved \$4.4 million for the project. The City Council and County Commission followed with \$2.2 million each.

After four years of struggling with the Lorraine, organizers felt the tide had turned when the General Assembly agreed to pay for half of the museum.



Then-Sheriff Bill Morris escorts Dr. King's killer, James Earl Ray, handcuffed and wearing a bulletproof vest, to his cell early July 19, 1968, after Ray's arrival in Memphis from London. Morris is now mayor of Shelby County.



Walter Lane Bailey created a small shrine in the room at the Lorraine where Dr. King was staying when he was slain.

"I was absolutely astonished that that was accomplished," Scruggs said.

When the city and county considered the funding request, some local residents complained that a museum at the Lorraine would only reopen old wounds of racial discord.

"It was not the most popular project," said Ms. Abernathy.

The problem was the location, and that many people felt the Lorraine was better forgotten and better left alone. It was very politically charged. It had been a black eye for Memphis for years.

As the museum's dedication approaches, foundation officials and others have been discussing how to recognize some of those who played important roles in the struggle to save the Lorraine.

Mayor Morris has suggested that Willis be singled out for special recognition. "If it were not for A. W.'s persistence, his political clout and his relentless cajoling, we would not be having the opportunity to open this exciting project on Independence Day," Morris said.

D'Army Bailey said he hopes the museum can set aside space later to house personal papers and archives of Willis and other local civil rights activists.

Scruggs would like to see Willis and others recognized, but says the project transcends personalities. "This is a people project. It's not about Chuck Scruggs, it's not about D'Army Bailey, it's not about A. W. Willis ... It's not about any of us. We were blessed with an opportunity and we took advantage of it, and thank God today we're about to see something happen today that hopefully will be the opening of the doors to our dreams."

Walter Lane Bailey didn't live to see the opening of the monument to the civil rights movement.

He died July 2, 1988, about four months after he rented his last room and the state put up a fence to safeguard the site during its transformation into the National Civil Rights Museum.

WITNESS: REV. FRANK McRAE

McRae, 60, Memphis Methodist minister and civil rights activist: "I'll never forget an old black man in a white shirt, stained blue tie and scuffed-up shoes carrying a sign saying, 'I AM A MAN.' Why? I wondered. What did it mean? Then I suddenly realized that all his life he'd been called 'Boy.' I was born in this town and I'd heard it, but it didn't seem important back then. Now I realized that here was a grown man with gray hair who for once in his life was saying, 'I AM A MAN.' And when I realized that, it was a very moving experience.

"The other thing I will never

forget is when military vehicles moved down the streets of Memphis and security bars went up on Beale Street. I'd seen that happen in New York, where people needed protection. But when it came to putting grills across windows in this city, I knew it was a new day and my hometown would never again be the same. And it is not."



WITNESS: MINERVA JOHNICAN

Ms. Johnican, 52, Shelby County Criminal Court Clerk and former county commissioner, demonstrated during the 1968 sanitation strike. Ms. Johnican said she has reservations about the scope of the new museum.

"I've had some questions about whether it's really going to be a civil rights museum that will draw scholars from all over the world. I just wonder if enough input from national people has been put into it. It could be another Memphis project that hasn't been dealt with on a national or international level." She said her concerns are based on occasional complaints from museum foundation board members who told her the board was dominated by chairman



D'Army Bailey. "There's a feeling that blacks aren't getting excited about the museum because D'Army and a group of whites out of Nashville put it

together." But, said Ms. Johnican, "Maybe excitement will grow once we see it. The excitement for me comes when I remember the civil rights movement ... I think once people see the museum they will reflect on that period of history and feel more a part of it."

WITNESS: FRANK AHLGREN

Ahlgren, 88, editor of The Commercial Appeal from 1936 through 1968, said blacks have made more progress in the South in the last 50 years than in the 150 years before that. "And there's a great difference between 1968 and 1991 in Memphis. The system of representation, for one thing, has increased the black presence. We're now contemplating a mayoralty race with a Negro candidate having a reservoir of possible votes larger than that of the white candidate. In '68, you wouldn't believe that would be possible." And only a few years earlier Ahlgren wouldn't have expected a black boycott of the newspaper over its *Hambone* comic strip about a black man.

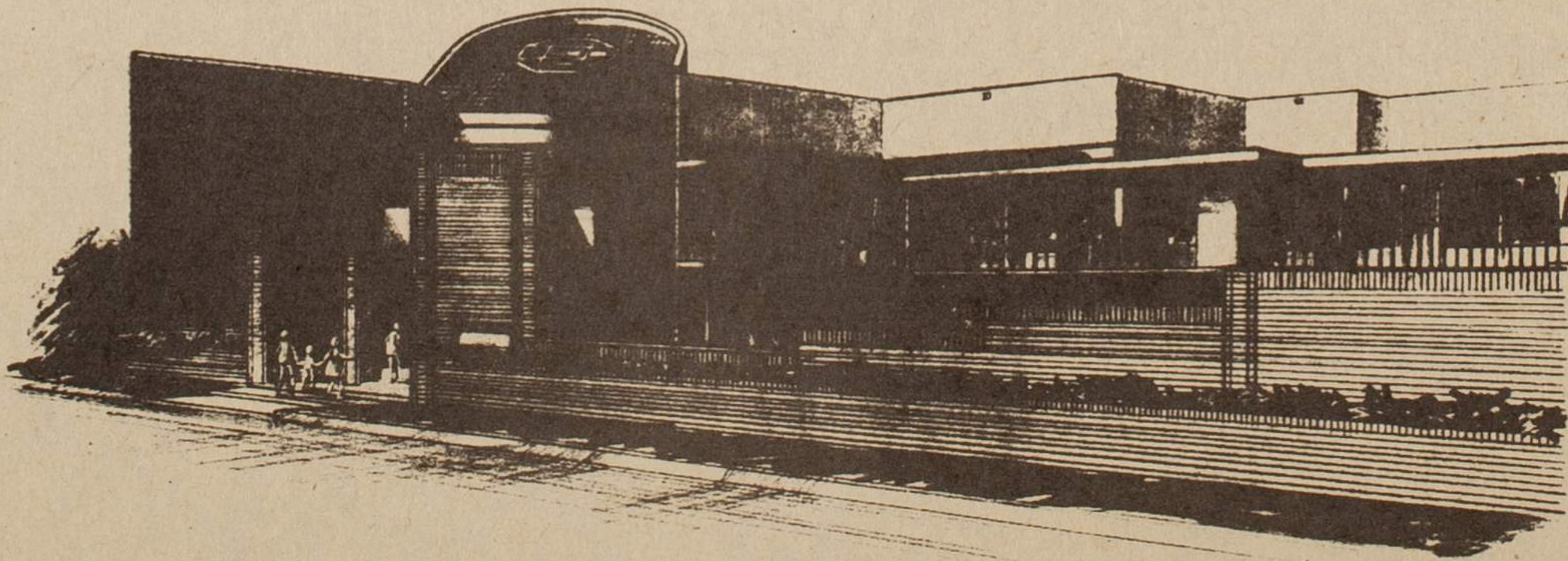
"There was never anything in



Hambone that was inimical to the Negro race. He was a kindly old man who had a philosophy that was gentle and apt. It was never barbed or in any way racial except in

the sense that he was a field hand. He didn't mean any harm to anybody, but a lot of the oncoming intellectuals in the Negro community thought it was a symbol of their days of discomfort and of slavery. It was just the image. And, yes, the boycott was successful in stopping it."

A TRIBUTE TO PROGRESS



On the occasion of this major cultural and historical event, we encourage everyone to visit our new National Civil Rights Museum.

We congratulate the private sponsors, The City of Memphis, and Shelby County for the funding. We also congratulate the National Civil Rights Museum Foundation for their part in making this first comprehensive overview of the American Civil Rights Movement in exhibit form a reality.



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