

# 2020 FALL COAST MAGAZINE



## Alabama's Historic Civil Rights Trail

The enduring legacy of  
Birmingham, Montgomery,  
and Selma

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# Alabama's Historic **CIVIL RIGHTS TRAIL**

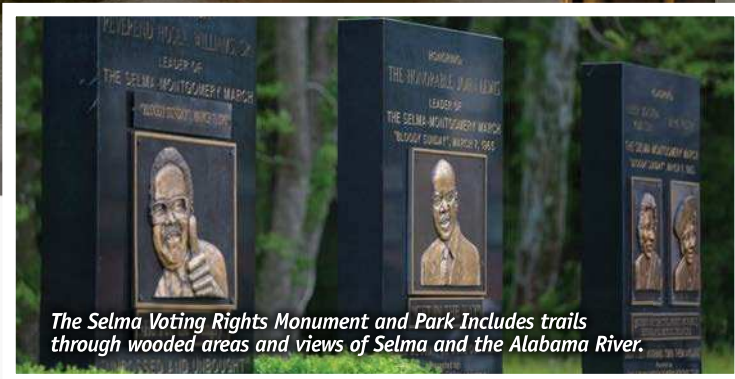
The enduring  
legacy of  
Birmingham,  
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*A statue of Rosa Parks, the African-American civil rights activist.*



The Edmund Pettus Bridge is the site of many famous civil rights marches.



The Selma Voting Rights Monument and Park Includes trails through wooded areas and views of Selma and the Alabama River.

## HISTORIC CIVIL RIGHTS TRAIL

By Richard Varr

Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge, with its single curved arch, stretches over the often-tranquil waters of the Alabama River, not unlike other bridges in America. Yet history tells another story about how what happened on this bridge 55 years ago reverberated throughout the world—a momentous event known as “Bloody Sunday” that changed history.

On March 7, 1965, about 600 peaceful civil rights activists marching from Selma to the capitol in Montgomery for equal voting rights had just crossed the bridge where Alabama State troopers and a deputized posse awaited them on the other side. When marchers refused to leave, troopers fired tear gas, charged them on horses, and clubbed them with nightsticks. Nationally televised images portrayed the horror that very night.

“There was a momentum there, but it would take two more marches to finally make it to Montgomery to

make their demands to Gov. George Wallace,” explains Barry McNealy, the Education Program Consultant for the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, a museum highlighting the continuous struggle by African Americans in Alabama and beyond for equal rights. “And that impetus pushed Pres. Lyndon Johnson to later sign the Voting Rights Act.”

“Those people that were there at that time had to be some of the most courageous people in the movement for what they accomplished,” adds McNealy. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. led the third five-day march, finally reaching Montgomery under the protection of federalized Alabama National Guardsmen and FBI agents.

The bridge is now part of the U.S. Civil Rights Trail and a National Historic Landmark, where memorial plaques pay tribute to the heroes of the three marches, including Martin Luther King Jr. and the late U.S. Rep. John Lewis of Georgia. Today, visitors walk over the bridge to relive these moments in history, and also drive the 54-mile Selma-to-Montgomery National Historic Trail along U.S. Route 80 with two interpretive centers along the way, in Selma and in Lowndes County.

Selma, Montgomery, and Birmingham are home to key historic moments and sites in the struggle for civil



*Sturdivant Hall is also known as the Watts-Parkman-Gillman Home.*



*The statue of Martin Luther King Jr. stands in front of the 16th Street Baptist Church.*

rights—from Selma’s Edmund Pettus Bridge and the bus stop where Rosa Parks defied segregation in Montgomery, to Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist Church where a bombing killed four girls.

Dating back to 1873, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was Birmingham’s first African American church where powerful harmonies of the church’s choir still echo through its spacious nave during Sunday services. The building that stands today, with its cupola and dual towers, was completed in 1911. Since then, it’s been a central meeting place for the city’s black community and thus a key gathering spot during the struggle for civil rights in the early 1960s.

Terror and tragedy though thrust the church into world headlines on September 15, 1963, at 10:22 a.m., when a bomb tore through the building killing four young girls attending Sunday school. “The church has always been a leader in the community and during the Civil Rights Movement,” notes McNealy. “And because of that leadership, the Ku Klux Klan targeted the church for a bombing in retaliation for the City of Birmingham integrating its public-school system under court order.” Today, the church offers tours that showcase this tumultuous event and the church’s role in the struggle against segregation and the ongoing quest for civil

rights.

The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute sits within the heart of the city’s Civil Rights District with permanent and temporary exhibitions that detail past segregation and the fight for equal rights through the most turbulent 1960s. Exhibits include Barriers 1920s - 1950s highlighting how people lived and worked through times of racial divide with examples of segregated lunch counters, high schools, religious sanctuaries, barber shops, and more. Another exhibit is the Movement Gallery with a replica Freedom Riders’ bus. The Freedom Riders included both white and black activists who traveled the South by bus in 1961 to end segregation at bus terminals.

The museum’s other not-to-miss highlights include the restored armored personnel police vehicle used by staunch civil rights opponent Eugene “Bull” Connor, the city’s Commissioner of Public Safety at the time, and the actual door from Martin Luther King Jr.’s jail cell where in 1963 he wrote his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” “In his letter, King spoke to the fact that people lived in a ‘tiptoe’ stance, always on guard, never quite knowing from one day to the next what was going to happen,” explains McNealy.



*The Bethel Baptist Church was bombed three times in 1956, 1958, and 1962.*



*Historic Kelly Ingram Park was the site of civil rights rallies, demonstrations, and confrontations in the 1960s.*



*The Freedom Walk Path in the Historic Kelly Ingram Park.*



*Alabama capitol building in Montgomery.*

Just across the street from both the Civil Rights Institute and the 16th Street Baptist Church, the block-wide Kelly Ingram Park conveniently served as a staging area for racial equality demonstrations. It's from here where images of the park's 1963 mass arrests, and authorities using fire hoses and dogs to quash demonstrators, soon reached a worldwide audience. Today, this now tranquil park brings to light this solemn history with a circular Freedom Walk path and through tributes to those who helped foster change, including statues of Martin Luther King Jr. and Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, a key figure in Birmingham's civil rights struggles.

Also in the park, the Four Spirits sculpture depicts the girls killed in the 16th Street Church bombing with gentle remembrances of the four victims. "You see the girls in preparation for church service—an ordinary moment that was frozen there," says McNealy. "They're symbolically releasing six doves representing the lives lost by children, the four girls and two boys who were also killed in Birmingham due to racial violence on that day." Park audio tours are available through the Civil Rights Institute.

Rev. Shuttlesworth was pastor at the historic Bethel Baptist Church in North Birmingham's Collegeville neighborhood. Shuttlesworth and the church played key

roles in the Civil Rights Movement and thus his church was bombed three times, in 1956, 1958, and 1962, with the reverend and his family narrowly escaping death with the first bombing. Now a National Historic Landmark, Bethel was also a meeting and launching point at times for the 1961 Freedom Riders, with Shuttlesworth advancing the cause with help from the Kennedy Administration. Church tours take place on weekdays.

Known as "the most historical short street in America," central Montgomery's Dexter Avenue leads to the Alabama State Capitol where demonstrators took their final steps on the long march from Selma to Montgomery, and where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "How Long, Not Long" speech on March 25, 1965. Along the street's six short blocks sits the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, its name more recently changed to reflect that King preached there from 1954-1960. The redbrick structure with white window trim and stairwell was completed in 1889 and is a National Historic Landmark.

Opposite the State Capitol and at the other end of Dexter Avenue, a plaque marks the spot along Court Square that sparked the beginning of the modern civil rights movement. A life-size statue of Rosa Parks sporting rounded glasses and clutching her handbag was



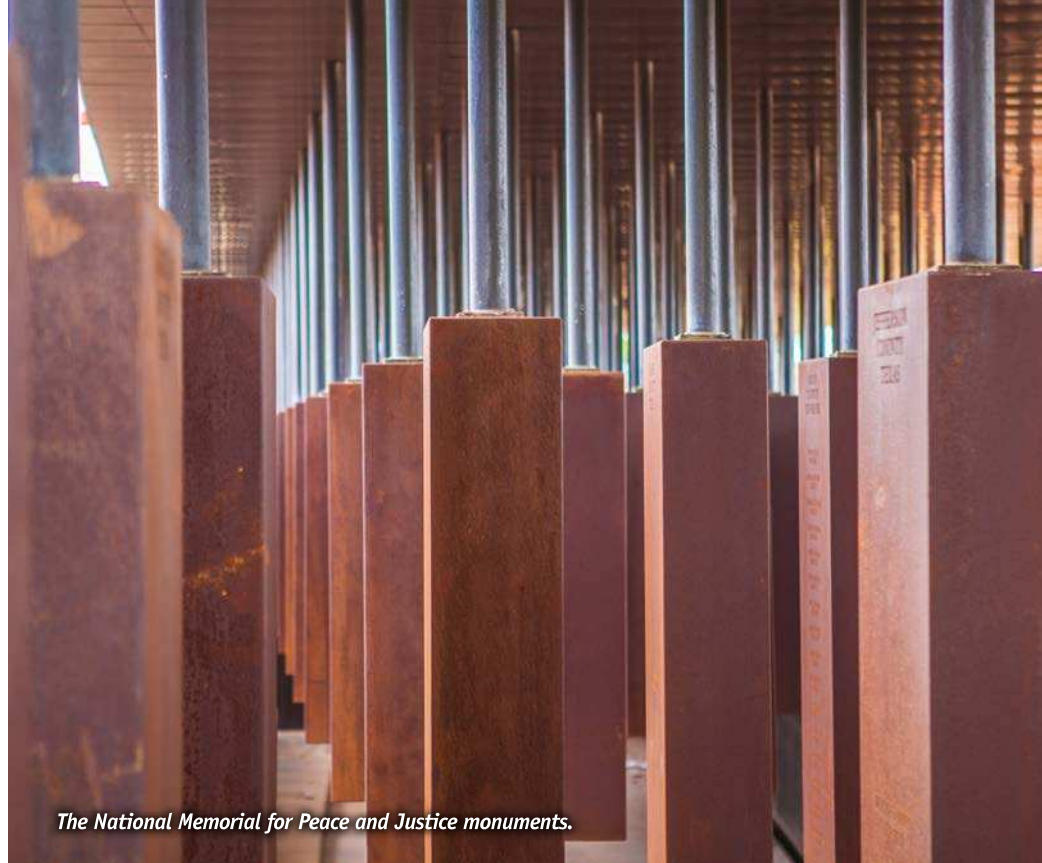
Rosa Parks statue in Montgomery.



Slavery Evolved Wall in the Legacy Museum.



*The Civil Rights Memorial Center in Montgomery.*



*The National Memorial for Peace and Justice monuments.*

unveiled last December. It pays tribute to where she stepped onto a bus on December 1, 1955, and refused to give up her seat for white passengers. After her arrest and trial, Martin Luther King Jr. led the Montgomery Bus Boycott until the Supreme Court desegregated public transportation a year later.

“Court Square is where two pivotal moments in American history happened across the street from each other,” explains Collier Neeley, Executive Director of the Landmark Foundation of Montgomery. “Not only the start of the Civil Rights Movement, but also that’s the corner where the order was given to fire on Fort Sumter that started the Civil War,” he adds, referring to where a telegram was sent from a still existing building off the square.

Just a block away from the bus stop, the Rosa Parks Museum within Troy University showcases Parks’ actual fingerprint arrest record, court documents and police reports, and a 1950s-era city bus similar to the one Parks was riding in on that historic day. Visitors can sit on the bus and also view a restored 1955 station wagon, one of 19 such vehicles known as a “rolling church” used to transport protestors during the Bus Boycott.

Opened in 2018, Montgomery’s Legacy Museum: From

Enslavement to Mass Incarceration was built on the grounds where a warehouse once imprisoned slaves. Exhibits trace the history of lynching, segregation, and racism with rare first-person accounts during the slave trade. On a nearby six-acre site and also opened in 2018, the outdoor National Memorial for Peace and Justice encloses 800 six-foot monuments under a slab-like open roof to symbolize the victims of lynching and racial terror.

“It begins the conversation about racial terror and an unequal justice system in the U.S.,” says Neeley. “As you walk through the memorial with its steel monuments, you walk downward and they rise above you, creating a surreal effect that drives home the injustice that existed and how people were victimized and terrorized by not just individuals, but by a system that wanted to maintain oppression.”

Other Montgomery civil rights points of interest include the Freedom Rides Museum in a former Greyhound station. It’s here that young Freedom Riders stepped off buses to peacefully confront often violent mobs to help end segregation in public transportation. The Dexter Parsonage Museum was the actual home to pastors of the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church from 1920-1992, and has some of the actual furniture used



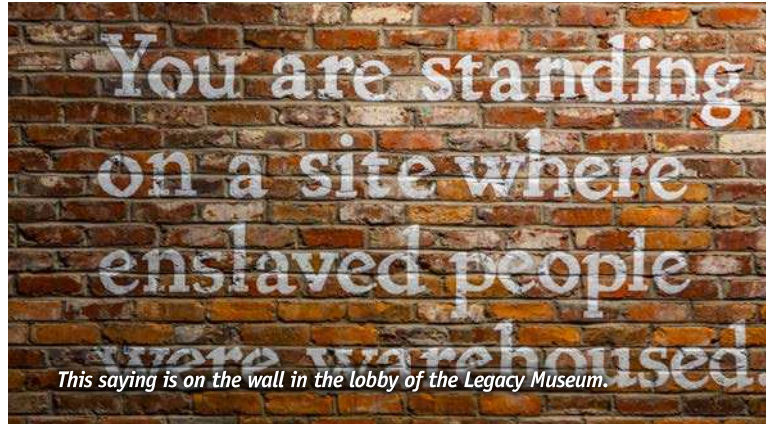
A plaque tells Rosa Parks' history.



Visit the Freedom Riders Museum in Montgomery where Freedom Riders stepped off buses to peacefully confront violent mobs.



The National Memorial for Peace and Justice encloses 800 six-foot monuments.



This saying is on the wall in the lobby of the Legacy Museum.

by Martin Luther King Jr. and his family when he lived there.

Selma's redbrick Brown Chapel AME Church with its dual cupola-topped towers and side stained-glass windows dates back to 1866 and was the starting point for the 1965 voting rights marches. Outside is a bust of Martin Luther King Jr. who held rallies at the church and led the historic Selma to Montgomery March.

Located on the other side of the Pettus Bridge, the National Voting Rights Museum and Institute showcases marchers' testimonials and artifacts including voting records and clothing of those beaten. The "Footprints Hall of Fame" has activists' actual cast footprints. Other exhibits include a jail cell and voting booth, while another highlights women's suffrage. The museum's sister institution, the Ancient Africa, Enslavement and Civil War Museum delves into a historical view of slavery in America.

Away from the Civil Rights Trail, Birmingham's other points of interest include Sloss Furnaces, a former industrial site with its tangle of rusted pipes, smokestacks, and tanks that remain intact today after first producing pig iron in 1882. A National Historic Landmark, Sloss Furnaces is the country's only preserved

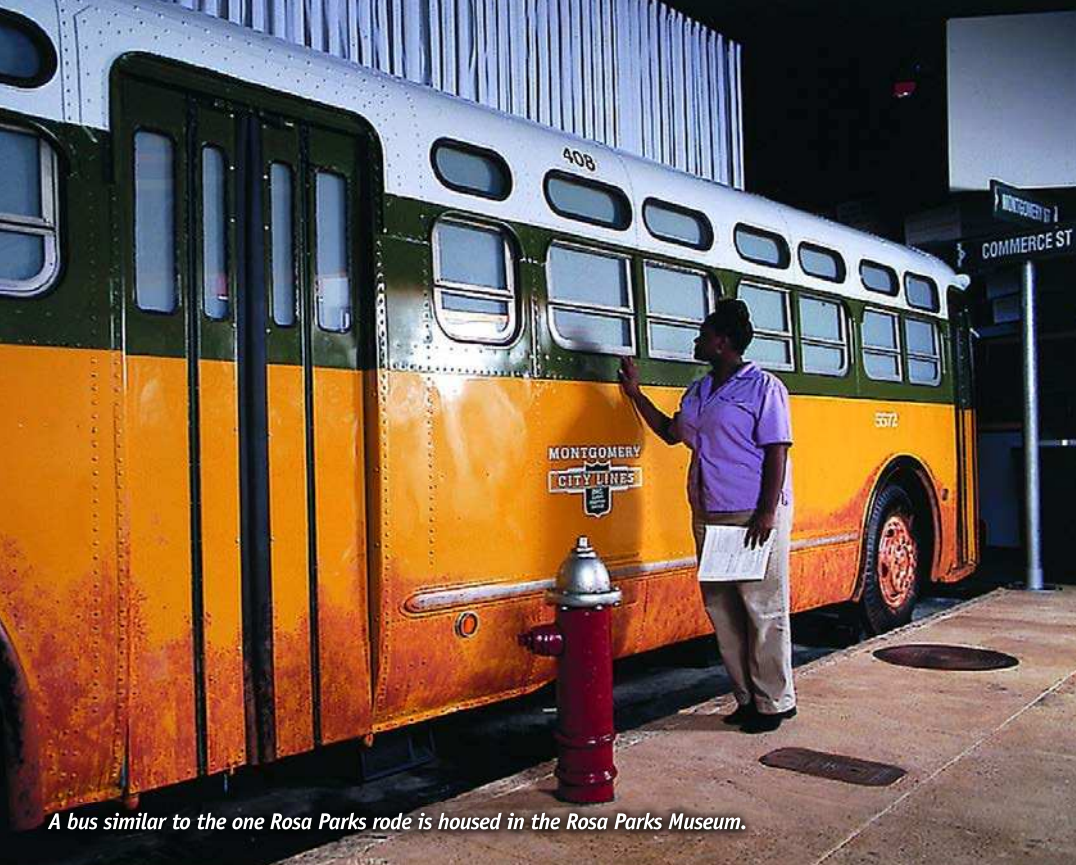
blast furnace that's now a museum.

Birmingham's Negro Southern League Museum has the largest collection of original baseball league artifacts in the country, including players' uniforms, trophies, and the impressive display of 1500 original signed baseballs. And at the Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum, some of the museum's 1600 motorcycle collection stack up several levels high within the central atrium's grid-like display.

Opposite the State Capitol in Montgomery, the two-story First White House of the Confederacy features an ornate roof trim in Italianate architectural design. Jefferson Davis and his family lived in the home in 1861 for less than four months, leaving when the Confederate capital was moved to Richmond. The house contains some original family furniture and Civil War relics.

Fans of F. Scott Fitzgerald novels and short stories might want to visit the Scott & Zelda Fitzgerald Museum in what is the actual Montgomery house where the couple lived in 1931-1932. Zelda Sayre grew up in Montgomery, and the museum's former living areas include original family furnishings, books, and other belongings. While in the home they wrote parts of their novels, respectively—Zelda's *Save Me the Waltz* and F. Scott's *Tender is the*





*A bus similar to the one Rosa Parks rode is housed in the Rosa Parks Museum.*



*Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was pastor here at Dexter Avenue King Memorial Church from 1954 to 1960.*

*Night.*

The Hank Williams Museum showcases the country music legend's short but successful career with his actual guitars, Steinway piano, suits, and hats, sterling and platinum record albums, photographs, and more. Also a Montgomery native, the hard-driving musician died suddenly at 29 years old from a heart attack while traveling to a gig on New Year's Day in the museum's centerpiece, Williams' 1952 Baby Blue Cadillac.

Selma's Sturdivant Hall Museum is a stately antebellum home with Corinthian columns in Greek revival architectural style and includes a balcony with cast iron railings. Tours inside reveal the mansion's high ceilings, grand stairwell, and ornate moldings. The home dates back to 1852, and those interested in the paranormal might be intrigued to hear about its reported ghostly presence.



*The National Memorial for Peace and Justice memorializes victims of lynching and racial terror.*



*The Rosa Parks Museum collects, preserves, and exhibits artifacts relevant to the life and lessons of Rosa Parks.*

FOR MORE INFORMATION  
<https://alabama.travel>