

AN INDELIBLE MARK ON HISTORY

*Katie Blount**

On a bitter cold and overcast day, November 7, 2003, William Winter spoke at the dedication of Mississippi's new archives building in downtown Jackson. The state-of-the art building is one of the finest state archives facilities in the country, befitting an archival program that has earned national distinction for its excellence. The construction was funded by the Mississippi Legislature at Governor Winter's urging, and the legislature paid tribute to him by naming it in his honor.

Here is what Winter said that day:

In a time when there is a tendency in some circles to revise our history to suit current trends, we must continue to be the guardians of the accuracy and integrity of the process by which we preserve the records of our past. We must never let the political intrigues and passions of the moment subvert that purpose. And we must never be afraid to protect the records of the events in our past which we might rather forget.¹

He not only spoke those words, but he lived them. Winter's association with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History ("MDAH") stretched over six decades. A member of the board of trustees from 1957 to 2008, Winter served as president for thirty-nine of those years. Even during his term as governor, Winter remained board president, leading the quarterly meetings and mediating complex issues over the fate of historic structures. He believed this work was important, as important as leading the state.

* Director, Mississippi Department of Archives and History. M.A., University of Mississippi, 1990; B.A., University of Michigan, 1988.

¹ Governor William F. Winter, Speech at the Dedication of the William F. Winter Archives and History Building in Jackson, Mississippi (Nov. 7, 2003), in ANDREW P. MULLINS, JR., *THE MEASURE OF OUR DAYS: WRITINGS OF WILLIAM F. WINTER 157-58* (2006).

MDAH benefited immensely from his vision and his careful attention. Under his leadership, and that of directors Charlotte Capers, R.A. McLemore, Elbert R. Hilliard, and H.T. Holmes, the department's responsibilities expanded, as did its staff and budget. The Old Capitol, Mississippi's most historic building, was meticulously restored and opened in 1961 as the State Historical Museum. Generations of Mississippians remember visiting the Old Capitol to see exhibits on all aspects of our history.

During the 1970s, the Grand Village of the Natchez Indians, Historic Jefferson College, and the Manship House came under the department's administration. The legislature assigned MDAH curatorial responsibilities for the Governor's Mansion in 1980 and the State Capitol in 1999. In 2000, the department took on the management of Winterville Mounds outside Greenville. After Eudora Welty's death in 2001, the Eudora Welty House was transferred to MDAH, joining her extraordinary collection of papers and photographs, as she had directed in her will.

In 1970, the legislature passed landmark historic preservation legislation. The Mississippi Antiquities Law states that historic preservation is in the public interest of the State of Mississippi and shall be declared public policy.² Mississippi's is one of the strongest state historic preservation laws in the country. In 1981, the legislature established a program for the care of state and local government records. The department grew and thrived, increasing its holdings of historic documents and artifacts and reaching an expanding audience.

Most significantly, that audience grew more diverse. Inspired by Governor Winter's personal commitment to racial reconciliation, the department strengthened its focus on African American history in Mississippi, acquiring significant collections of papers, mounting award-winning exhibits, and offering grants for the preservation of sites associated with African American history. The first African American trustees joined the board—Jackson State University vice president Estus Smith, followed by civil rights leader Dr. Gilbert Mason, master brick mason Duncan Morgan, and then Reuben Anderson, the first African American

² See MISS. CODE ANN. § 39-7-3 (West, Westlaw through 2022 Reg. Sess.).

state supreme court justice, who later became the first African American MDAH board president.

In 1984, curator Patti Carr Black mounted at the Old Capitol an exhibit on the Civil Rights Movement. The first permanent civil rights exhibit in the country, it went on to win national awards—and to surprise and challenge people both in Mississippi and beyond. Governor Winter's close friendship with Myrlie Evers led to her decision to donate the Medgar and Myrlie Evers Collection to MDAH in 2002.

Stories about Mississippi's fraught racial history had been absent from the department's work during its earliest decades. The department was established in 1902 as a product of the Lost Cause Movement. MDAH collected, preserved, and shared stories that reinforced the idea that the state was best led by white men. That changed under Winter's leadership. When MDAH faced resistance to telling a more complete story that dealt honestly with the state's complex history, Winter was ready. In the speech dedicating the William Winter Archives and History Building, he said:

History must reflect our bad times as well as our good ones, our mistakes as well as our successes, our defeats as well as our victories. It is only through a clear and honest look at our past that we are able to . . . make wise judgments that will keep us from repeating the mistakes of that past.³

Winter donated his own large and significant collection of papers and artifacts to MDAH. This collection offers a comprehensive catalog of his extraordinary life.

Governor Winter treated everyone he encountered with genuine interest, respect, and compassion. His particular view of history derived from the way he felt about people. He believed that each of us has a story to tell, and that all of those stories matter. That simple and powerful understanding of history has had a tremendous impact on our work.

Governor Winter's proudest moment at MDAH was the opening of the Two Mississippi Museums in 2017. The Two Museums tell Mississippi's stories honestly, in all their

³ Winter, *supra* note 1.

complexity, through the voices of the people who lived them. If you visit the museums, you will encounter stories of governors and legislators and generals, but you will also find stories of mule traders and blues musicians, Choctaw basket weavers and Choctaw chiefs, sharecroppers, bootleggers, and Pulitzer-Prize winning writers. And of course, stories of local people who took a stand for racial equality during the Civil Rights Movement. These are the stories that form “the continuing chain of people and events” that Governor Winter spoke of when he dedicated the archives building. And these are the stories that fill the Two Mississippi Museums. His belief that we must lift up these stories, and truly understand them, was at the heart of his conviction that the Two Mississippi Museums project was critical to Mississippi’s future.

After convincing state leaders of the need to build the Museum of Mississippi History and the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, Winter was instrumental in securing public and private funds for construction of the museums. He and fellow board member Reuben Anderson had proposed to then Governor Haley Barbour that these two museum projects be combined and constructed in downtown Jackson under the administration of MDAH. Barbour agreed and led the effort to win legislative support for the project. Even after retiring from the board of trustees, Winter remained a strong public advocate for the museums and was an active member of the steering committee that raised private funds for the project.

The Two Mississippi Museums opened on a cold but sunny day, December 9, 2017. Looking out on a large crowd on the snowy museum grounds, 94-year-old Winter spoke in a strong, clear voice, reminding us as he had so many times before of the importance of facing our history. “These museums will challenge all of us to have a better understanding of where we have come from, and then inspire us to work harder to find our common ideals and goals. We will find that we have much more in common than what might appear to divide us.”⁴

Winter also spoke directly to Mississippi’s young people:

⁴ William F. Winter, Remarks at the Opening Ceremony of the Two Mississippi Museums in Jackson, Mississippi (Dec. 9, 2017).

You may not know this, but supporting the education of Mississippi children has been the work of my lifetime. You are the future of our state. And if we send you out into this world without a strong understanding of where you have come from, then we have let you down. These Two Museums were built for all of us. But most especially, they were built for you.⁵

Standing at the intersection of Winter's greatest passions—history, education, and racial reconciliation—the Two Mississippi Museums were a source of pride and gratification to Winter at the end of his life. In his final months, Winter worked to raise funds for an endowment to bring Mississippi's school children to the Two Mississippi Museums, or as he called them, "Mississippi's largest classroom." His passion for public education was shared by his wife Elise, who died only months after he died.

The Winter family has continued this legacy, joining with the Foundation for Mississippi History to create a fund, the William and Elise Winter Education Endowment, that will underwrite visits to the Two Mississippi Museums long into the future, even for the many children whose schools lack funds for field trips.

No one understood more deeply the need to face our past than Governor Winter. And yet no one moved through life with more optimism and hope. He urged us to "use our sense of history to build a fairer, a more just and a more stable society."⁶ He believed we could do it, and that belief was his greatest gift to us.

William Winter left an indelible mark on the Department of Archives and History, just as he did on this state. We see his impact throughout our daily work in protecting historic places, preserving documents and artifacts, and telling a more honest, inclusive history of Mississippi. And we will see it continue as new generations of school children have their lives enriched by visiting the Two Mississippi Museums.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Winter, *supra* note 1.

