

**Remarks by Commissioner Bob Rackleff for the
Bernard and Shirley Collection Exhibit Lecture Series
At the
Mary Brogan Museum of Art and Science
Tallahassee, Florida
October 25, 2009**

Thank you for the kind introduction. It's a great pleasure be here to help kick off this lecture series. I can't think of a better way to help celebrate this historic exhibit than, well, some history.

I've gone upstairs probably five times to look at the Bernard and Shirley's marvelous collection of art and documents, and I learn something new every time. I have yet to tire of seeing it.

And I can't think of another community more appropriate for this exhibit than Tallahassee and Leon County – and not just because this couple graduated from Florida A & M and have many friends here.

That's because there is simply no other Florida community with the breadth and depth of African-American history than ours – and that includes St. Augustine and Pensacola. This part of our history is something we should honor and celebrate much more than we do – and I hope that this exhibit will inspire us to do just that.

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My role here is to be the warm-up act for the lectures that follow, and I encourage you to tell your friends about them. They are all excellent.

The second lecture in this series will be on January 17, 2010 – by Patricia Stephens Due, one of the giants of the struggle for racial justice here and a national figure in that struggle. She now lives in Quincy.

Mrs. Due will lecture about her experiences as a FAMU student leader of some of the most important civil rights campaigns here, most notably the lunch counter demonstrations at several of our downtown department stores. This included America's first "Jail-In" for sitting at the whites-only lunch counter at a Tallahassee Woolworth store in 1960. Her "Letter from the Leon County Jail," patterned on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," gained national attention.

Incidentally, the McCrory's building, 200-240 South Monroe Street, is slated for demolition. Its owners have applied for a demolition permit to erase the last remaining site of these historic events. We should save the building and convert it in the Florida

Civil Rights Museum, complete with a re-recreated lunch counter, to honor that history – not consign it to a dustbin.

The third lecture will be on February 14, 2010 by Pulitzer-Prize winner Doug Blackmon entitled “A Persistent Past: Grappling with a Tortured Racial History in the Era of Obama.” He will base this on his ground-breaking history book, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*.

The fourth lecture will be a week later, on February 21, 2010 by former FAMU dean and historian, Dr. Larry Rivers, who is now president of Ft. Valley State College. He will speak about his book, *The History of Slavery in Florida* – a wonderfully insightful book – with an emphasis on slavery in North Florida.

In all, it’s an excellent line-up, and I encourage you all to attend these future lectures.

Let me also recommend the following books, listed in no particular order:

1. *The Pain and the Promise: The struggle for Civil Rights in Tallahassee, Florida*, by historian Glenda Rabby, a very thorough account of this struggle from the 1950s to the 1970s.
2. *Freedom in the Family: A Mother-Daughter Memoir of the Fight for Civil Rights*, by Patricia Stephens Due and her daughter, Tananarive Due, which provides a uniquely poignant account of the considerable personal sacrifices it took to achieve progress.
3. *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World*, by Yale historian David Brion Davis, the most comprehensive and insightful history so far of the economic and human impact of slavery in America.
4. As I mentioned earlier, Doug Blackmon’s *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*, which documents the vicious system by a corrupt Southern legal system to supply black convict labor to white-owned factories, mines and farms.
5. Finally, also mentioned earlier, Larry Rivers’s *History of Slavery in Florida*, which I find even more fascinating each time I re-read parts of it. He brings to life how slavery really worked.

Well, you have your reading assignment now. I can provide you with a list of the books I just mentioned, after this lecture is over.

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Let me turn now to my thoughts about what happened in our community in the past two centuries – and how this continues to influence events and conditions today.

I speak as an eyewitness to many events of the past half-century – as an elected Leon County Commissioner – and as a published historian with articles in the *Negro History*

Bulletin, Florida Historical Quarterly, Preservation and other journals. I'm also just a dissertation shy of a doctorate in U.S. History at FSU.

I was also a participant, in a small way.

I especially remember the Reverend C. K. Steele. I learned from him just about everything I needed to know about courage and commitment.

Reverend Steele was lion-hearted, but he wasn't alone in his courage – and this is important to remember.

There were thousands of black and white citizens here who followed his leadership – from the bus boycotts of the 1950s – the integration of lunch counters, movie theaters, and public schools in the 1960s – and voting rights and economic rights well into the 1970s.

My best memory of working with Reverend Steele was in 1972, when black citizens of Gadsden County faced decades-old barriers to full citizenship.

In a majority-black county, only a small percentage of black residents were registered to vote. There were no black elected officials, and no prospect of black candidates ever being elected. In the town of Gretna, probably 70 percent black then, there were almost no registered black voters at all.

This was no accident. African Americans were excluded by a combination of subtly racist policies – such as very restricted hours at the supervisor of elections office – and overt intimidation, even violence.

With local leaders there like John Hutley and the late Fred Youmans and others, the NAACP and SCLC organized a voter registration drive in Gadsden County in 1972 that I took part in.

After several weeks of frustrated attempts to register black voters – stymied by the resistance of the white leadership of Gadsden County – we marched down U.S. 90 from Quincy to the Capitol building in Tallahassee to draw attention to this injustice and demand opening up the voter books to black citizens. Needless to say, 20 miles is a long walk.

Reverend Steele was at the head of the column the whole way – and after we reached the Capitol, he spoke forcefully and eloquently to a crowd of hundreds. Fortunately, Gov. Reubin Askew was listening, because in a matter of days, the voter books were moved to the downtown fire station in Quincy, and the hours were extended, including Saturday mornings.

Within months, we registered hundreds of new voters and began a string of electoral victories for black candidates in Gadsden County that continues today. Gretna was our first victory, taking control of the town council in the first election.

One of the results of my involvement was that later in 1972 I became the Executive Director of the Florida Commission on Human Relations, our state's civil rights agency – where I could implement some of Reverend Steele's agenda as state policy under Governor Reubin Askew.

I could go on about these experiences, but I'm not here only to reminisce.

I want instead to take the rest of my time to describe two aspects of our history that don't get enough attention – the slave economy and its legacy – and the racial intolerance that dominated our community until just a few years ago.

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First, the slave economy.

Most Americans think of slavery, if at all, as only part of our antebellum economy – and relatively unimportant to the rest of the North American continent.

To open your eyes to that myth, please read the book I mentioned earlier, David Brion Davis's book, *Inhuman Bondage*, a history of slavery in North America. He establishes that slavery was not just part of the American economy – it was the American economy – which he documents with overwhelming evidence.

For example:

- At the beginning of the Civil War, the market value of the nation's four million slaves came to \$4.5 billion in 1860 dollars – a figure impressive enough in its own right. But, get this, this exceeded the value of all the farm land in the slave and border states. Compared another way, the value of slaves was worth three times the combined capital invested in business and industrial property in the entire United States then.
- In 1860, two-thirds of the richest Americans lived in the South – their wealth based primarily on the value of their slaves and the land, mines and factories the slaves labored in.
- The slaves of the American South produced nearly two-thirds of the world's raw cotton – which in turn fueled the emerging industrial revolution of Northern states and of Europe. It was industrial agricultural production on a scale never seen before in history. They didn't call it King Cotton for nothing.

- Cotton comprised over half of America's exports, and these earnings from overseas supported the full range of our economic activities. Banking, insurance, maritime shipping, railroads, textile manufacturing – one American industry after another came to depend on both the products of slave labor and on the maintenance of the slave labor system.
- After all, slaves were property – property bought and sold and recorded in legal documents – property that had to be financed and insured – property that had to be shipped safely from one slave state to another – that had to be equipped with tools and seeds and other necessities of that economic system – and that had to be recovered if a slave ran away. A wide range of business services grew up to keep slavery efficient and the owners wealthy. No detail was too small for some service or industrial company to attend to.
- The legal codes of Florida and Leon County grew to protect this system. They grew increasingly elaborate to protect the income and profits of slave owners from every imaginable threat – from running away or potential slave revolts to subversive abolitionist newspapers or gun ownership by free blacks. Commercial codes throughout the nation regulated and protected slave owner property rights, as well.
- With that wealth came great economic and political power. It's worth noting that Southerners, all of them slaveholders, served as President in 50 of the 72 years leading up to Abraham Lincoln's inauguration. It wasn't because these Southern white men shared a unique statesmanship gene. It was the constitutional clause that let Southern states claim three-fifths of their slave population for political representation that gave slave owning states a dominating political edge. Most notably, Thomas Jefferson would not have defeated John Adams for President in 1800 had the three-fifths formula not provided the winning electoral college margin.
- That slavery was central to the nation's economy was underscored in 1861, when the mayor of New York City proposed that the city and nearby areas secede from the Union, along with the southern states – the profits of cotton shipping and related New York business interests were so important to their prosperity.

Well, I think you get my point: Slavery was the central reality of the 19th-century American economy.

Make no mistake, slavery was also the reason for the Civil War. The South was a slave empire which demanded the right to expand ever-westward to prevent being overwhelmed by faster-growing free states. Southern leaders even openly discussed invading and annexing Cuba to expand American slavery.

And when it was clear that public opinion was turning against them, the South launched our nation's greatest catastrophe – the Civil War – to protect the institution that underpinned the Southern economy and society.

Let me repeat: Slavery was the reason for the Civil War. The historical record is overwhelming and damning – Congressional and state legislative debates, newspapers and correspondence, the records of the Secession Commission – all these documents openly declared that the South went to war to save slavery.

It was only after defeat that Southern leaders changed their minds and made the preposterous claim that they were really out to preserve liberty – a claim that falls victim to the simple question: Whose liberty?

Because of that history, when the local Sons of Confederate Veterans organization came to the Leon County Commission several years ago seeking a resolution honoring Confederate veterans, Bill Proctor and I spoke out against it, and our colleagues joined with us to deny that request.

I said that they were welcome to celebrate the service of Confederate veterans privately all they wanted. But our county government had no business in the 21st century sanctioning a celebration of the defenders of slavery. Likewise, our state government has no business issuing a Confederate battle flag license plate.

Slavery not only provided the South – and much of the nation – with its antebellum prosperity – even today we each benefit in some way from the labor of those slaves.

Let me illustrate that by telling you how I got here today.

I came here on streets originally built by black slave labor. I passed by antebellum buildings built by skilled and unskilled slave labor – using lumber, mortar and bricks produced nearby in mills operated by slaves.

When I hear the CSX train rumble through town, I know that the tracks were laid by slaves rented out by their owners to the railroad company – its rail bed carved out of clay hills by their hands. The going rate paid to their owners was \$120 to \$150 a year per slave.

Many of us know the role that George Proctor, a free black, played in designing and building several signature homes here in the 1830s and 40s. Less well known are the oppressive state and local laws that denied him the right to vote or to conduct his business or own property freely.

These laws deliberately pushed him and other free blacks to the margins of society. One law enacted in Florida provided a process by which a free black who became desperately poor could offer himself as a slave. (There were not a lot of takers.) These laws

ultimately forced Proctor to leave for California, where he later disappeared from historical records.

In other words, the built legacy of slavery is all around us today. It should remind us of injustice and suffering – and debts still to be repaid. After all, we continue to profit from the work of those slaves.

But more important, its history can also remind us of the many achievements and contributions that slaves were able to accomplish. More often than not, individually and collectively, the long-ago slaves of our community overcame unimaginable challenges to assert their humanity and creativity. To me, that was the real legacy of slavery.

The struggles and abilities of black slaves here created the beginnings of Tallahassee and Leon County. Their labors were largely responsible for transforming a Spanish colonial backwater into the most populous county in Florida in 1860. After all, blacks comprised nearly three-quarters of Leon County's population and provided most of its physical labor.

They created a heritage of achievement that belongs to everyone today – and we all owe them our gratitude and admiration.

I mention just one, seemingly modest achievement – the Clifford Hill Cemetery. Once a year, I attend the anniversary ceremony at this lovely cemetery established in the 1950s to overcome the widespread denial of burial rights of blacks in existing cemeteries. Several families pooled their money, bought several acres near Miccosukee Road, and established a cemetery where they could bury their loved ones in dignity – and keep their memories alive. The anniversary ceremony and the loveliness of the grounds never fail to inspire me.

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We should also not forget that the peaceful quest for racial justice in the past century was met time and again by violence, intimidation, and oppression that persisted until recently – so recently that some of us here either experienced it directly or observed it firsthand.

I want to turn to that briefly.

Nothing illustrates this better than the experiences of Rev. C. K. Steele.

Beginning in the 1950s, Reverend Steele faced the constant danger of assassination – of sharing the same fate as Florida's T. Harry Moore and wife slain in 1951, or Mississippi's Medgar Evers in 1963, or numerous others assassinated by white terrorists. This was years before the nation seemed to care about Southern white violence against black leaders.

His parsonage at the intersection of Tennessee and Boulevard Streets was a target for cross burnings, rocks thrown through windows and gunshots fired in the night. I remember visiting his home in 1972 and seeing the bullet holes still in the wooden siding. He once told an interviewer, "I would put my car up [at night], expecting a bullet to whiz out of the cemetery. But, I had surrendered," he said. "I was utterly surrendered to live or die. I'm in His cause. I'm in His hands, what do I have to fear?"

Beyond the physical danger, there was constant harassment for him and his followers.

The Florida Senate operated the notorious Johns Committee – chaired by Sen. Charlie Johns – formed to root out and expose Communism in Florida. Failing that, the committee quickly degenerated into harassing civil rights organizations or entrapping the occasional gay or lesbian state employee. The Johns Committee demanded membership lists and financial records from the NAACP, SCLC, CORE, ICC and others – and threatened contempt citations if they refused. State employees were prohibited from being members of the NAACP.

This was also during FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's secret campaign to discredit civil rights leaders – convinced that Communists had infiltrated the movement thoroughly and were using it to benefit the Soviet Union.

Much of our local white leadership participated willingly in this harassment. Our police chief and sheriff arrested peaceful demonstrators, but stood by while white thugs physically assaulted these demonstrators. The police and deputies themselves assaulted and otherwise abused peaceful demonstrators – Patricia Stephens Due among them. Today her eyesight is impaired because a Tallahassee police officer sprayed tear gas directly in her eyes.

City Judge John Rudd routinely jailed and fined civil rights activists on trumped-up charges. He and other judges helped target leaders and organizations with false criminal charges or civil damage suits. On the federal bench, district court judge G. Harrold Carswell repeatedly ruled against plaintiffs with civil rights complaints.

Reverend Steele's wife, Lois, was blacklisted for years from a public school teaching job here, despite her excellent qualifications, and had to settle for part time jobs with black employers. She even briefly took a teaching job in Brooklyn, New York, out of desperation.

Retaliation came from the private sector, as well, against Reverend Steele and his family.

Despite an unblemished credit record, Reverend Steele could not get a home mortgage until 1972 – and then only after supporters told the Sun Federal president that they would picket his bank if he failed to grant the mortgage request. With few exceptions, white business leaders either supported this or did nothing to stop it.

Then there were the daily reminders of white supremacy that all black citizens endured – the segregated waiting rooms, cemeteries, swimming pools, schools, hospitals, even blood banks – blood banks! – the “white” and “colored” drinking water fountains in front of our courthouse. Remember the gas station rest rooms that came in threes – “men,” “women” and “colored”? White real estate agents specified whites-only in for sale advertisements, and lawyers routinely inserted whites-only deed restrictions to keep blacks out of their residential neighborhoods.

Threatened by the possibility of racial integration, Tallahassee’s public golf course became the Capital City Country Club in the 1950s rather than allow blacks to play there. The city leased this public facility to this whites-only private club for 99 years for the huge sum of one dollar. Despite legal challenges, it remains private today and will until at least the year 2055. Among the club’s incorporators were then U.S. Attorney G. Harrold Carswell, banker Wilson Carraway, and attorney Charles Ausley.

Segregation here was every bit as pervasive, punitive, and fiercely defended as the Apartheid regime in South Africa. There was no aspect of daily life too trivial to overlook as an opportunity to rob black people of their dignity. I saw it firsthand.

Fortunately, there were exceptions back then, albeit rare.

Governor LeRoy Collins ennobled us all as a voice of reason and justice – most notably with a speech on statewide television in 1960 in which he called racial segregation immoral and unjust – and established a statewide biracial committee to come up with solutions. He followed that by service as head of the U.S. Justice Department’s Community Relations Service to help defuse explosive racial confrontations, particularly in Selma, Alabama.

I knew Governor Collins and drew inspiration from him for years. I’m especially proud that we named our public library for him – the LeRoy Collins Leon County Public Library.

But he also paid a high price for his decency – when he lost the 1968 election for U.S. Senate to a Republican who used Governor Collins’s enlightened policies against him in openly racial appeals to white voters. For the life of me, I can’t remember the name of that opponent in 1968. But, you know what, he wasn’t important.

That’s one of the greatest rewards for the courage and commitment of the men and women we recount in this lecture series – that we remember them – and forget the cowards and thugs.

Let me mention three other courageous persons – Harold Knowles, Marilyn Holifield and Philip Hadley – the three black teenagers who transferred from all-black Lincoln High School to integrate all-white Leon High School in 1963.

It was two years of torment for all of them. They experienced ostracism, open taunts, even violence at the hands of many of the white students. But they endured and graduated, and today we can appreciate how courageous it was for three adolescents to defy the entrenched system designed to keep them down.

I brought with me today a copy of a crudely mimeographed newsletter, “The Rebel Yell,” billed as the “official voice of the Leon High School Rebel Underground.” A friend who was a student there in 1963 saved the newsletter and gave it to me recently.

It led with an article, “Race Mixers to Invade LHS,” warning that, “Come September, three little stooges of the NAACP will be coming to LEON for the purpose of breaking down the homogeneous pure white social structure we have enjoyed all these years.” It went on with great detail, concluding with this declaration, “To Hell With Integration.”

In short, integrating Leon County’s public schools was neither painless nor easy.

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Let me leave you with this concluding thought:

Long after the cowards and thugs have passed into obscurity, we keep alive the memory of our heroes – men and women who lived their faith, who sacrificed greatly, who walked in the light. That is the greatest reward we can bestow on them. And part of that is what we are doing today.

We owe our memory to the men and women who endured slavery, who built the economy and society we live in today, and who risked safety and security to stand up to the power structure determined to keep them down.

But we truly honor them only if we live our lives like they did – by taking risks for justice, by sacrificing our comforts to take needed action, by personally taking on the many unmet challenges that lie ahead, by living our faith.

That is the true lesson of the Kinsey exhibit. Let’s live that lesson.

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