



Episode 8: Preserving History

Alvin Hall:

Birmingham, Alabama was a center of the Civil Rights Movement. But a little-known fact about this town is that one of the most popular upscale places for African American travelers to stay during segregation is right here—The A.G. Gaston Motel. This hotel is one of many locations across America that's being restored to preserve the history that took place there. I wanted to understand how these restoration efforts were undertaken and ultimately achieved. How did these communities come together to save these once vital places?

This is Driving the Green Book from Macmillan Podcasts and I'm your host, Alvin Hall. While my producer Janée Woods Weber and I were in Birmingham, we had to stop by the motel to see it for ourselves.

The two-story building with open walkways was undergoing restoration in phases and is pretty much a construction site. At the original covered entrance, there was a wire fence and scaffolding covering areas that were being repaired. Nonetheless, we were able to stand in the courtyard and talk to the city's director of cultural preservation, Denise Gilmore.

Hall:

This is truly an honor. This is a place that I have known about for years. When people would come to Birmingham when I was growing up in the '50s, people would talk about the Gaston Motel. And to finally see it is amazing. I had no idea it was such an intimate scale.

Denise Gilmore:

It absolutely is. And if you think about what A.G. Gaston used as a model for constructing this motel—at the time when this was built in the early '50s, the Holiday Inns were the gold standard for lodging. So he looked at all the different motels and he decided that he was going to build this motel even more luxurious

than any Holiday Inn because he believed that Black people had a right to first-class accommodations as they traveled through the segregated South. And so this became the gathering place for the community.

Hall:

African American travelers wanted comfortable, safe places to stay that offered high-end amenities and services. So, it's not surprising that a facility like this became the gathering place for travelers as well as local citizens.

The A.G. Gaston was considered among the top-tier lodgings in America. It had a stellar reputation among entertainers, politicians, vacationers, and everyday people coming through Birmingham.

Gilmore:

First of all, let me say that I consider it an honor and a privilege and actually not even work, but a calling. To think that I have an opportunity to help preserve this site, not only for future generations but for those of us right now. To be able to understand their history and their heritage. So it is a calling and a privilege. When I set foot in here, every time I come in here, I get chills just knowing what took place here and the importance of this story and this legacy that must be told. It must not be forgotten.

Hall:

Why is this historical site being preserved now?

Gilmore:

So, the motel literally has sat empty for seventeen years, and then the city acquired the property. After it closed as a motel open to travelers, Mr. Gaston converted it to housing for senior residents. And that was to keep it occupied and to try to keep revenue coming in, 'cause he still was a very good businessman.

So part of what you see on the site is us restoring it back to the way it was. When he converted it to senior residences they changed the rooms, they put in smaller rooms and they combined rooms so that they could be larger to accommodate how people lived in the mid-'80s. So not even to think about the space that would be required today.

There had been a number of ideas about how to preserve the motel and a number of RFPs (requests for approval) that the city administrations through the years had

considered. At one point one of the ideas was to tear down part of the motel and build a kind of freedom center or freedom tower.

Of course, the entire site is significant, but because of local allies and the city government, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the National Park Service, and Congresswoman Terri Sewell—there's a long list of people whose names could be called on the roll. I would just say it was truly a collaborative effort to get this saved because it had been sitting here empty for about seventeen years.

I guess you could say our hero to the rescue is [that] on January 12, 2017, President Barack Obama signed a declaration making this site a national monument.

Hall:

Oh. So wonderful.

Gilmore:

[He did it] one week before he left office, but just in time. So, because of this arrangement in 2017, [that's what] brought the National Park Service and the city of Birmingham together.

So the Gaston Motel sits as the historic centerpiece of the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument. Also included in that is 16th Street Baptist Church, Saint Paul United Methodist Church, the historic Bethel Baptist Church, Kelly Ingram Park, the Colored Masonic Temple, and then also the Fourth Avenue business district and the Civil Rights Institute as supporters of the National Monument.

Hall:

The A.G. Gaston Motel is also a historically important place, where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gathered with local organizers, including Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. In fact, room 30 became known as the “War Room” because that's where the group strategized about civil rights campaigns.

Gilmore:

If you look just up on the second-floor balcony in the corner, room 30 was indeed the “War Room.” But let's expand the narrative. It was not only Dr. King. You can't talk about the civil rights movement in Birmingham without talking about Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, because he's actually the one who began what we know now as the modern-day civil rights movement.

Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth was organizing and protesting in the late '40s and early '50s. Actually, Dr. King was invited once he became the pastor at Dexter [Avenue

Baptist Church] in Montgomery. They invited him to come up and to join forces. So it was Dr. King, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, Reverend A.D. King, and other local pastors and civil rights leaders who all met in that room. They strategized and organized the 1963 campaign called Project C so that Black people could protest for their civil rights.

And as you well know, that campaign led to those images that we're seeing around the world in Kelly Ingram Park of the fire hoses and the dogs being set upon these pretty innocent little children marching in their Sunday best for their civil rights.

Hall:

During the civil rights era, Birmingham was nicknamed "Bombingham" because of the type of terrorist attacks that occurred in the city. The bombing that horrified America the most was at the 16th Street Baptist Church, in which four little girls were killed.

MLK speech clip:

They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers.

Hall:

There were also many other bombings of African Americans' private homes and institutions, including at the A.G. Gaston Motel in 1963.

Gilmore:

This motel was bombed because it was the place where the civil rights leaders gathered, where people came and they stood in this courtyard. You may have seen the photos of the crowd in the courtyard looking up and Dr. King looking out over the balcony.

Just standing here knowing that we're on sacred ground right now, it just gives me chills even though it must be a hundred degrees right now here in the shade.

But, when I look up there I can see Dr. King standing at that balcony looking out and addressing the supporters that had gathered.

So this place was bombed because it was a central gathering point for people to come and get marching orders. The civil rights leaders strategized, they planned, and then they would come out and they would let them know what to do next. So this was the place to get the marching orders and then to carry out the movement.

Hall:

And at the same time, it was functioning as a motel for people driving through Birmingham and entertainers coming to Birmingham.

Gilmore:

Absolutely. Anybody who was anybody traveling through the segregated South would have stayed at the Gaston Motel.

Old-timers tell stories about the Supper Club (which was a lounge) and the parties and hanging out. In fact, they tell me there are stories they can't tell me, but they assured me they had a good time.

I had the opportunity to visit with one of A.G. Gaston's granddaughters and she was sharing with me stories about the restaurant. And because [A.G. Gaston] loved a thick ribeye steak, they had the best steaks that were better than any Delmonico's steak. They also shared that you would come to the Supper Club and restaurant for the best lemon pie.

I'm just imagining that when we finish the restoration which is currently underway now, as you can see the scaffolding and you can see some of the historic treatments that we've done on mockups that tells us what it looked like in its period of historic significance. But our intent is to open the restaurant again. And I certainly want to have some of the same things that were on that [original] menu.

Hall:

Rib-eye steak.

Gilmore:

And lemon pie and all the other good things that they had. So we're really looking forward to the restoration being completed.

[AD BREAK]

Hall:

Cultural sites like the A.G. Gaston and other historic locations featured in the Green Book are being restored in cities across America. While driving the Green Book, Janée and I saw this happening in Cincinnati, we saw it happening in Louisville, Nashville, and New Orleans, where significant sections of historically Black neighborhoods still stand, and where local officials, citizens, and activists understand the importance of preserving often overlooked parts of that city's history.

We met activist Joyce Coleman and her friend Carl Westmoreland in Cincinnati, who offered us an example of what's been happening in their city.

Carl Westmoreland:

The Colored Women's Club was right next door and it is a certified 1840s mansion. That thing is about a quarter of a block and these Black women have owned it for over 150 years.

Weber:

Does it still exist?

Joyce Coleman:

It still exists.

Westmoreland:

It's there as we speak. It's not falling down.

Coleman:

They're doing a fundraiser. It's not on the [historic] register. Somebody there did not know for a historic building that there are certain things that you cannot change. They changed the roof. It had a slate roof and they had the slate roof taken off, so it's not on the historic register. But there's a movement to get it back on the historic register. So they're in the process of doing that. There are the "Ten Good Men" or something like that. The "Ten Good Men" have a breakfast there once a week as a fundraiser and other activities are going on there.

Weber:

Do people in the community have a memory of the history of the Club for Colored Women?

Coleman:

If I tell them.

Westmoreland:

It was almost lost, but because of people like Joyce and a woman that I've known for years, Carol Braddock. These half dozen or so women have made us remember. They started holding meetings and bringing people in from the community [who could

help us figure out] how we can restore this so that it's like how it was when we went there. And, oh my goodness. There were chandeliers and it was just gorgeous.

Hall:

It's clear that a lot of the push for preservation is driven by emotion, a sense of legacy, and the desire to save history. But there are also some practical elements involved in making this happen. The primary one is: "How do you raise the money needed to realize these projects?" Jesse Turner, Jr., a second-generation banker at the Tristate Bank of Memphis, talked to us about the community's vision and coordinated efforts in the early '80s to save the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee.

Hall:

Business people couldn't get loans from white banks so easily, people couldn't get mortgages, so the community literally banded together to support this idea?

Jesse Turner, Jr.:

Right. It did. And one of the things they did is they never owned more than ten or twelve percent of the stock. They were the largest single shareholder. So the ownership of the bank was spread out and it's still spread out. There's no one or two groups that own thirty or forty percent of the bank. It's truly a community-owned bank.

Hall:

How did the bank become associated with the Lorraine Motel?

Turner:

During that time there was, from what I understand, a movement that came together with some citizens. I think Charles Scruggs was one of the early supporters who was a longtime radio personality and ultimately manager of WDIA radio. This is where Dr. King got killed and no one had done anything to preserve the site. So I think Scruggs basically got together several people and they formed a foundation to try to save the Lorraine. They raised a little money, but they couldn't raise very much.

From what I understand, the owner decided that he couldn't keep [the motel] and it was to be sold at auction. So the community rallied with this group of citizens trying to raise enough money to save it from foreclosure.

I think they found someone who apparently was going to buy it, but the person was not going to pay more than \$144,000.

They figured, if this is the only person bidding then we've got to get \$144,000 or we lose it to him. So that was their goal. From what I understand the bank, my father, and others connected with the bank were connected with this group. He did the accounting for them. They went out and tried to raise money and they raised some of it from the local union—AFSCME—some of it from a white business person who sold cosmetics—Lucky Heart Cosmetics—but they were short. The bank decided to look at making them a loan. According to what I've read, and some of what I've been told, is that the bank went to the auction and my father had gotten approval from the board to lend them the money. And it turned out they had \$90,000, or I think it might've actually been closer to \$80,000.

Hall:

How are they going to get the other \$60,000 to close this gap? Doing so requires three things: an unshakable belief in the project, the ability to convince others of the value of the project, and connections to people with money willing to act as guarantors.

Turner:

They couldn't close the deal because they didn't have the rest of the money. So he basically offered to put up the remaining money. He said, "The bank will lend the \$60,000 if we can get some help."

So A.W. Willis, who was connected with the Universal Life Insurance Company and a civil rights attorney in his own right, got AFSCME to guarantee part of it and another entity to guarantee the rest.

He said he would lend them \$50,000 on a handshake if they could find an underwriter. And A. W. Willis found Paul Shapiro of Lucky Heart Cosmetics and James Smith of AFSCME, who each agreed to guarantee \$25,000 each. The bank basically made the loan with them saying "We will get our organizations to guarantee it." And, of course, the bank had faith in the project. So he made the loan.

My father is a member of a community where his father was a Baptist minister. And he has learned over the years, as I think the business folks in the community can support, that you can get community involvement, but you have to go out and sell it. You do a lot of things on faith. The bank had always had a reputation of trying to make loans that others would not make. It did so at the time and actually continues to do so now.

Hall:

As the bank had faith in the project, so did the local Black church. It acted on its faith in the community—extending its power and influence beyond the pulpit. During the civil rights movement and throughout Black American history, the church has embodied a less-acknowledged role in marshaling resources—like funding to strengthen communities.

While everyone may associate this activism with the African American Baptist and Methodist churches some of the less widely-known socially and politically proactive Black denominations include, the AME (the African Methodist Episcopal church), AMEZ (the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church), and the CME (the Christian Methodist Episcopal church).

Jesse told me about a striking example of the way his bank and a church worked together. There was a college founded by the CME church in Tyler, Texas that was struggling to maintain enrollment. It had lost its accreditation.

A.W. Willis's son, Archie III, approached Jesse to see if they could formulate a plan to help. Over the course of a year, they were able to get six African American banks around the country to come together to give the church a \$4.5 million loan. The church used the money to save the school, they got its accreditation restored, and student enrollment went from 250 to 1200 students.

Turner:

And so what happened? Well, the bank converted the faith of the CME church members into cash. We had the faith that the CME church would pay. And so we made that loan on the faith of the CME church. So here's a case of the bank working with the community to save an institution, just like we did with the Lorraine. We've done that with that and I'm sure with other businesses.

So there is a model for us for saving these types of institutions and I suspect that lending is being done with Black banks all over the country, but it probably just isn't being documented.

Hall:

Jesse Turner, Jr.'s story reminds me of people who didn't have a Green Book. What they did have was a community that shared its knowledge and experience. Together they had faith in each other and helped each other reach the place they wanted to be.

That's all for this episode of Driving the Green Book. When we come back next week, we visit historic Black neighborhoods to examine how these once-thriving areas have fared over the decades of urban renewal.

CREDITS

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Safe travels.