

Editor's Introduction

The papers published in this volume emerged as the best of the 2005 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies, an undergraduate research program dedicated to furthering the interdisciplinary study of Memphis and the Mid-South region. Since 2003, each year the Rhodes Institute has invited students at Rhodes College to enter a competitive application process for research fellowships. In 2005, the Institute awarded seventeen such fellowships to some of the College's most talented students. The papers contained here reflect the intellectual maturity and sophistication of their authors, as well as the breadth of research methods employed by Rhodes Institute fellows.

David Tyler's essay about a relatively unknown United States Supreme Court case shows the value of combining archival research with oral interviews. *Memphis v. Greene* originated when Hein Park, a wealthy, white neighborhood in Midtown Memphis succeeded in persuading the city council to close one of its through streets to traffic. The street closing, in effect, cut off the elite neighborhood from a poor and predominately African-American community to the north. N.T. Greene, a local black activist, soon filed suit in federal court, and the case made it all the way to the highest judicial tribunal in the land. Tyler immersed himself in city council minutes, newspaper accounts, and legal sources, while he also tracked down the case's leading participants for interviews. The result is an original and penetrating examination of how the Civil Rights Movement in Memphis continued well beyond the traditional temporal boundaries set by most historians.

Sara Rutherford takes a more personal and more sweeping approach to her subject, the genre of "blues poetry." Rutherford began her work by reading through the narratives of African-American slaves from the Mississippi Delta

region, and she concluded her analysis by attending “poetry slams” in Midtown Memphis. Between the two, she found a rich, two-century-long tradition of verse that reveals the continued struggle to define an African-American identity in the South. Examining blues poetry both for its literary value and for what it tells us about black history, Rutherford’s thoughtful essay stands out as one of the first serious attempts to synthesize this important tradition. At the end of her piece is a brief sampling of blues poems to read and enjoy.

Adam Doupé provides an engaging overview of one of the most important controversies in the history of modern Memphis—the struggle over whether to build Interstate 40 through historic Overton Park. Like Tyler, Doupé spent a great deal of time in archives, particularly examining newspapers. Like Rutherford, he paints with a broad brush, attempting to cover the entirety of the controversy. The great value of Doupé’s essay is its originality. Not a single scholar has attempted to survey the history of this controversy that, like the Hein Park street closing, made it all the way to the United States Supreme Court. By providing a narrative framework and illuminating the conflict between business leaders and neighborhood activists, the essay lays the groundwork for future scholarly examination of the dispute.

The Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies is proud to offer these essays to the Mid-South community. Our region continues to be an ideal laboratory or a rich text—choose your metaphor—for continued scholarly investigation. My hope is that these papers demonstrate the high quality of the research being carried out by the fellows in the Rhodes Institute.

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