Telling the Story of African-Americans in Hattiesburg, Mississippi: A Case Study of Socially Sustainable Tourism?

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Southeastern Geographer, Volume 53, Number 4, Winter 2013, pp. 428-454 (Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: 10.1353/sgo.2013.0032

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Telling the Story of African-Americans in Hattiesburg, Mississippi
A Case Study of Socially Sustainable Tourism?

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This case study from Hattiesburg, Mississippi focuses on recent efforts of the Hattiesburg Convention Commission to forge a partnership with city and state governments and African-American civic organizations with the goal of developing a local tourism industry that celebrates the racially diverse history of this community in the American South. Our research, conducted in 2012–13, relies on field observations and in-depth interviews with local stakeholders and is informed by recent literature on sustainable development and tourism. Our findings suggest this emergent tourism in Hattiesburg has achieved a degree of social sustainability—defined here in terms of its success in forging multi-racial partnerships and creating narratives of places that partly mitigate their conflictive histories. Financial sustainability—which we define as profitability—has proven more elusive and will likely be achieved only over the long term.

INTRODUCTION

Is socially sustainable tourism achievable? Is it possible for a place to create a tourism industry that tells the stories of diverse social communities and distributes its benefits equitably among those same communities? Even more difficult, is it possible for a place to meet these social...
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challenges while maintaining financial viability? In particular—just to make the challenge more daunting—is socially sustainable tourism possible in a city like Hattiesburg, Mississippi, located deep in the American South? Could Hattiesburg develop a sustainable tourism industry that acknowledges its own deep racial divides of the not-so-distant past, and even capitalizes on those divides—framed within narratives of post-civil-rights-era reconciliation—as genuine tourism assets?

This paper presents a case study of the Hattiesburg Convention Commission’s efforts over the past five years to forge partnerships with city and state governments, as well as African-American civic organizations, with the goal of developing a local tourism industry that celebrates the racially diverse history of this South Mississippi community.

We begin by examining recent scholarly literature on sustainability and tourism to determine how this case study relates and contributes to academic and applied research on the role of tourism in development. We turn next to examine the City of Hattiesburg, its incipient tourism industry, and the local context in which its African American Military History Museum and Eureka School/Freedom Summer Museum came into being. The third section wrestles with our main research questions: to what extent can tourism accommodate the sometimes contradictory and conflictive stories of diverse social and racial communities; how successfully can it distribute its benefits across those communities; and can it do so while achieving financial sustainability? We conclude with a discussion of our findings—written in the wake of a tornado that hit Hattiesburg and both study projects in early February of 2013—as well as a search for lessons for future inquiry and application (NOAA-NWS 2013).

Our research, which we conducted between January 2012 and February 2013, is based on field observations and in-depth interviews with many of the major actors involved in this story, including the CEO and Commissioners of the Hattiesburg Convention Commission, current and former employees of the Commission who have experience with the projects examined in this article, local political officials, and leaders of neighborhood associations that represent predominantly African-American communities in the area. Our interviews for this research centered on those most immediately involved in the development of the two study projects. However, we also deliberately included residents who are indirectly affected by the projects, as well as employees formally involved in the projects who might bring alternative or critical perspectives to bear.

Our methodology follows the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Corbin and Strauss 2008), which has been employed in a variety of different contexts in tourism research in recent years (Decrop and Snelders 2005; Martin and Woodside 2008; Koutra and Edwards 2012). In Charmaz’s (2006, p 9) interpretation, grounded theory methods provide “a set of principles and practices” to guide qualitative research in a systematic way, allowing researchers to develop explanatory theories that are fully “grounded” in rich empirical data. Woodside, MacDonald, and Burford (2004) have called for greater application of this methodological perspective to provide deeper and more nuanced understanding in tourism research. Grounded theory is recognized as
a component of the qualitative geographer’s research and pedagogical toolkit (Hay 2006; DeLyser et al. 2010), although its application in geographical research is limited to date (Knigge and Cope 2006a, 2006b).

We selected grounded theory as a model for our research topic because the social context for the museums we wished to study—and the underlying racial issues involved—are complex, deeply sensitive, and not well understood outside the relatively small group of insiders involved in the projects. Grounded theory allowed us the flexibility to incorporate some of the strong emotions of our informants and pursue unexpected dimensions of the projects that unfolded in the course of our interviews. A grounded approach also provided us the flexibility to include in our research the impact of the major tornado that stuck Hattiesburg and both museums in the late stages of field work.

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM: CULTIVATING PARTICIPATION AND EXPANDING THE STORY OF A PLACE

Sustainability—as a concept and a term—long ago outgrew the academy and now enjoys near-universal recognition in mainstream society. Evocative of much classic twentieth-century environmentalist thought (Leopold 1949; Schumacher 1973; Berry 1977) and informed in part by development theories of the 1970s and 1980s (Daly 1977; Eckholm 1982; UNEP 2000), the term first came into widespread use with Our Common Future (WCED 1987), which viewed poverty and environmental degradation as reflections of broader contradictions within society. High-profile international events, such as the Earth Summit of 2002, along with a quarter-century of work since Our Common Future was first published, has broadened the scope of sustainability. Indeed, it is now a common topic of discussion in academic and mainstream settings as well as an important policy goal for governmental and nongovernmental organizations at all levels of society (Adams 2001).

Strict definitions of sustainability are elusive and sometimes contradictory, but much of the core literature identifies social and economic equity, grassroots participation and democracy, poverty alleviation, environmental protection, and resilience as its foundations and goals (Douglass 1984; Redclift 1987; Tisdell 1988; Pearce and Warford 1993; Conway 1997; Moldan et al. 1997; Adams 2001). Such objectives, however, are not well-suited for scientific research nor easily applied to public policy. Diagnostic indicators and statistical indices are now common features of sustainability research, but it is important to keep in mind that in its original inception, sustainability was not regarded as a “fixed state of harmony” (WCED 1987, p 9), but a dynamic condition whose measurement must take into account multiple geographical and temporal scales (Bell 1999; Bossel 1999; Adams 2001; Bell and Morse 2003).

How then can tourism be sustainable? Sustainable tourism research mirrors the broader sustainability literature by focusing on social and economic inclusiveness, public participation, and benign environmental impacts, but it also emphasizes profitability, reflecting the importance of the private sector, or at least the private sector idea of the bottom line, in tourism.
As critical as profitability might be, however, it cannot supersede the social benefits of tourism activities (Theobald 2005; Graci 2013). One way that researchers have sought to balance these contrasting agendas is through the concept of the *three p*'s, or the *triple bottom line*, in which commercial viability (profit), social conscience and activism (people), and environmental responsibility (planet) are equal variables of sustainable tourism (Roberts and Cohen 2002; Buckley 2003; Slaper and Hall 2011). The triple bottom line, although useful, tends to focus on localized phenomena at the expense of broader scale processes. Recent work is beginning to address this gap by moving beyond the local to examine how policy, governance systems, and other broad-scale societal factors influence tourism sustainability (Bramwell and Lane 2011; Hall 2011).

Pro-poor tourism (PPT) provides an example of how sustainability as a concept, as well as an ideal, has made its way into tourism research and the industry itself. PPT seeks to “increase net benefits to the poor” through a range of practices, such as philanthropy and preferential selection of contracts, services, labor, and facilities, giving local residents a greater stake in tourism, which results in greater benefits to communities at large (Ashley and Haysom 2005, p 2; Blake et al. 2008; Goodwin 2008). As an approach, PPT resembles a host of other socially-sustainable *tourisms* that promote a range of objectives, including community-based initiatives (Blackstock 2005; Hwang et al. 2012), fair trade policies (Ashley and Haysom 2005), cultural or historical sensitivity (Alderman and Campbell 2008; Alderman and Modlin 2008, 2013; Dwyer and Alderman 2008), social justice (Cole and Morgan 2010), and reconciliation (Barton and Leonard 2010).

A rich body of tourism research examining racial representation, social exclusion, and historical narratives in the American South has emerged in recent years. Much of this work focuses on how race and class politics have privileged the histories and identities of Anglo-American elites while diminishing or excluding those of African Americans, poor whites, and women. *Destination Dixie* (Cox 2012) is a collection of historical essays that examines how such narratives came to dominate representations of the Civil War, antebellum society, and other themes promoted through tourism in the American South. Alderman and others have produced an impressive body of research examining such themes as the (in)visibility of the slave experience at promotional websites and facilities of historic plantations (Alderman and Campbell 2008; Alderman and Modlin 2008), inclusion or exclusion of African Americans as photographic subjects in North Carolina tourism brochures (Alderman and Modlin 2013), and on how film tourism in Mount Airy, North Carolina has led to marginalization of African Americans through the (re)creation of an idealized representative of a mid-twentieth century town in the American South (Alderman et al. 2012). A common thread throughout this literature is the question of whether or not southern heritage tourism promotes broader goals of social justice and responsibility, and at least by implication, sustainability. Such themes are particularly apparent in Barton and Leonard’s study (2012), which docu-
ments the Emmett Till Memorial Commission (ETMC) and its efforts to develop tourism not only as a means for economic growth, but more importantly to promote social justice and race reconciliation in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi. Recent efforts of the Hattiesburg Convention Commission, which we document in this article, echo some of the experiences of the ETMC, although we also see some important differences.

HATTIESBURG: AN EMERGING REGIONAL HUB IN SOUTH MISSISSIPPI

Long known as the Hub City for its importance as a railway center in the early twentieth century, Hattiesburg, Mississippi is located at the nexus of three major highways, about 70 miles (113 km) north of the beaches and casinos of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, 112 miles (180 km) northeast of the French Quarter in New Orleans, and 90 miles (145 km) southeast of the state capital in Jackson. Hattiesburg is the seat of Forrest County, with most of the metro area’s suburban sprawl tending westward into neighboring Lamar County (Figure 1).

The Hattiesburg Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), including Oak Grove, Petal, and several small, rural communities, had a 2010 population of 142,842. Most of the population belongs to an Anglo majority (68.1 percent) and an African-American minority (28.3 percent), with other ethnic groups comprising smaller proportions (U.S. Census Bureau 2013). Reflecting typical patterns of suburbanization, Lamar County has the highest proportion of Anglo residents (77.3 percent) while Forrest County has a larger African-American minority (36.1 percent). In 2010, the Hattiesburg MSA had a median household income of $39,273, but median home prices varied from $160,400 (Lamar) to $117,500 (Forrest). Some 20.9 percent of Hattiesburg residents live in poverty, notably higher than the national average of 13.8 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2013).

Hattiesburg was founded in 1882 as a logging town. The timber industry collapsed in 1925, beginning a long, slow process of economic redevelopment and diversification (Hickman 1962; Kelley and Spillman 1976; Napier 1985). Now an established regional center for south Mississippi, the Hattiesburg MSA has grown in population since 1990 by 26.9 percent, well above the 15.3 percent statewide average for that period (U.S. Census Bureau 2013). Two universities and several colleges, as well as regional hospitals and specialized medical facilities make Hattiesburg increasingly important as a regional provider of higher education and medical care. A growing community of professionals and the annual influx of around 20,000 college students give Hattiesburg a different feel than other communities in South Mississippi (Davidson 2009; City of Hattiesburg 2012; University of Southern Mississippi 2012; William Carey University 2012). Camp Shelby, founded in 1917 just south of Hattiesburg, remains an important training facility for the U.S. Armed Forces and National Guard (Mississippi Armed Forces Museum 2012).

Prospects for a local tourism industry in Hattiesburg have been limited by the absence of significant natural, cultural, and historical assets. The logging boom
Figure 1. Greater Hattiesburg and selected tourism sites.
left behind an historic downtown and scenic old neighborhoods, but none of urban Hattiesburg is antebellum in origin: the traditional attraction for tourists coming to Mississippi and other states of the American South (Alderman and Modlin 2008). The University of Southern Mississippi attracts spectators for its sports teams and other events, but most of the draw is local or within a one-day commute. The many hotels, restaurants, gas stations, and convenience stores that serve highway traffic are located along Interstate 59, toward the western, suburban side of town. Historic downtown Hattiesburg and much of the African-American community lie several miles east of this current inflow of tourism.

Hattiesburg has long served as host city to Camp Shelby by providing shopping, dining, and recreation for its military personnel. During World War II, Hattiesburg boasted two United Service Organizations (USO) social clubs for Camp Shelby servicemen. At that time, Jim Crow racial segregation codes in Mississippi required that two clubs be built—one for White soldiers and the other for Colored soldiers. The White USO building, on Front Street in downtown Hattiesburg, was later remodeled as a public community center; it remains a central feature of the downtown landscape. The Colored USO building, located on East 6th Street in the Mobile-Bouie neighborhood—the old Black downtown during the Jim Crow era—suffered decades of neglect (Figures 2 and 3). Just down the street from the Colored USO building is another segregation era landmark: Eureka School, an historically Black school that served the African-American community from 1921 to 1987 (Figures 4 and 5).

THE HATTIESBURG CONVENTION COMMISSION AND DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION

Tourism traditionally has not been a strong priority for economic development in Mississippi in general, nor for Hattiesburg in particular. An important exception has been the extensive (and growing) casino industry, but state law restricts most areas of Mississippi from involvement in gaming-based development. To pursue tourism more aggressively, the City of Hattiesburg founded the Hattiesburg Tourism Commission in 1990. The following year, the Hattiesburg City Council requested an act of the Mississippi State Legislature to create the Hattiesburg Convention Commission. The City also requested that the State levy a two percent restaurant and package liquor tax on behalf of the Commission's work. Roughly half of this tax today derives from out-of-town visitors with the remainder coming from local residents. The purpose of this tax was to develop a city convention center, in addition to other tourism-related facilities. This latter provision made possible the projects that are the focus of this paper.

The Hattiesburg Tourism Commission, founded in 1990, hired Richard “Rick” Taylor in 1993. A native of Hattiesburg with prior experience as a meetings and conventions manager in the Caribbean region, Taylor was charged with the task of coordinating the development of the new convention center in Hattiesburg. Plans for the center received a mixed welcome from the community. The only example familiar to most locals was New Orleans’ imposing Ernest N. Morial Center. The African-American population of Hattiesburg viewed the center’s proposed loca-
Figure 2. The historical marker in front of the USO Museum (note the workers on the roof repairing storm damage from the tornado of 10 February 2013).

Figure 3. The USO Museum.
Figure 4. Eureka School (note storm damage to the roof of the building).

Figure 5. The historical marker in front of Eureka School.
Figure 6. Lake Terrace Convention Center.

tion—near the junction between U.S. Highway 49 and Interstate 59—as serving the west, predominantly White, side of town, and uncomfortably near Hattiesburg’s formerly segregated country club. Despite these reservations, the Lake Terrace Convention Center opened its doors in 1998 as a 68,550 square foot building on a 32-acre site (Figure 6).

Taylor now serves as Executive Director of Hattiesburg’s Lake Terrace Convention Center, as well as the Executive Director of VISITHattiesburg (the current brand name for the city’s tourism bureau). He answers to the Hattiesburg Convention Commission, whose members are appointed at large by the Mayor and ratified by the City Council. Ed Morgan, the White Mayor of Hattiesburg from 1989 to 2001, originally appointed one African-American member to the five-member commission—U.S. Army veteran Charles J. Brown—who has continued to serve to the present.

Brown grew up in very poor circumstances in the near vicinity of today’s museum projects. He swore when he joined the Army that he would never return to his hometown of Hattiesburg. He was severely wounded twice during his service in Vietnam. Facing the possibility of paralysis after surgery for a head wound, however, he decided to move back closer to his family. He returned to health, but remained in Hattiesburg and has stayed involved in a wide variety of civic projects since then.

Brown notes that the original Convention Commission consisted of “five men with five [different] ideas,” once the Convention Center had been constructed and was in operation. One idea that gained
early attention was the restoration of Hattiesburg’s downtown Saenger Theater (Figure 7). The Saenger opened in 1929 and enjoyed years of prominence, but fell into disrepair by the 1960s (Hattiesburg Saenger 2012). It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979 and soon after was donated to the City of Hattiesburg. Efforts by the City to renovate the theater made little progress until the Convention Commission adopted the project in the 1990s. The $3.75 million dollar restoration, financed in part by a municipal bond, was completed in 2000. The renovated Saenger Theater provided one of the first assets in the revitalization of downtown Hattiesburg (Hattiesburg Historic Downtown Association 2012), which has since come to include a small, but growing number of restaurants, stores, nightclubs, bars, art galleries, office spaces, and coffee shops, as well as a seasonal farmers’ market and expanding apartment spaces.

Executive Director Taylor notes that the Saenger renovation represented a “warm and fuzzy” project seen by Hattiesburg residents as a more locally-oriented attraction than the Convention Center and one that helped soothe some hard feelings from the Convention Center controversy. Taylor envisions the Saenger project as a first step in which “the geographic location [within Hattiesburg] balanced our presentation to explain ourselves.”

On the other hand, representation of the city’s African-American community remained ambiguous. Both downtown and the Saenger Theater were segregated through the 1960s. Typical of the Ameri-
can South, Blacks could attend performances in the Saenger only by entering through a separate entrance and sitting in a segregated balcony. Even today, despite the fact that enforced segregation has long since faded into the past, enduring social and cultural divides between Hattiesburg’s Black and White communities are reflected in many of the events at the Saenger.

**DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY: ORIGINS OF THE USO MUSEUM AND EUREKA SCHOOL**

During the long renovation of the Saenger Theater, Commissioner Charles Brown began championing a cause he had embraced for years: the preservation of Hattiesburg’s former Black USO building and its transformation into a museum honoring the history of African-American military service in the United States. Beginning with its founding during World War II in 1941, the USO opened clubs and facilities across the country in support of military personnel. In many communities of the segregated American South, the USO had to open two different facilities to serve separately Black and White servicemen and women in an effort not to stir up local ethnic politics. This was the case in Hattiesburg: a White USO club was built in the heart of downtown, and a Black (then termed Colored) USO club was built in the Black business district on the periphery of downtown.

Oral tradition in Hattiesburg’s African-American community holds that the main purpose of the Black facility was to keep soldiers out of trouble on Mobile Street (the city’s main Black business district), where plenty of such opportunities could be found. Longtime residents remember that the national USO provided only building materials for the Black club while the local community volunteered much of the labor involved in its construction. In addition to providing comfort and entertainment, the club also served a variety of civic functions, including a small library, which was a particularly important service to the community given that African-American residents were excluded from entering the Hattiesburg Public Library under Mississippi’s Jim Crow legislation.

The Black USO Club in Hattiesburg was in operation between 1942 and 1946. The USO closed all of its facilities nationwide by 1947. In the decades that followed, the building that had served as Hattiesburg’s Black USO Club served as a general-purpose civic center for the surrounding neighborhood where most of the city’s Black population lived. As a high school student, Commissioner Brown worked as a janitor in the building. He remembers the old USO Club at various times housed Black first grade classes, dances for the city’s Black high school, and private events for the Black community (including his own high school graduation party). The library room continued into the 1960s to serve as the only library service for the city’s Black population: students and other residents would visit the librarian there to request a book, and the librarian would retrieve the book from the White library, located nearby on North Main Street, within a day or so. Given its multiple social roles during the last decades of Jim Crow segregation, there can be little wonder that the old USO Club holds great sentimental value for Hattiesburg’s African-American population. The band leader
who was hired for the USO museum opening reception said that he had played his “first gig” in that same building. One interviewee said that the former USO building was where he “learned how to kiss.”

Hattiesburg’s African-American Mayor Johnny DuPree, Ph.D., used the USO building library as a child, remarking that it was one of the few sites in then-segregated Hattiesburg that “allowed you to learn,” as an African-American. The Mayor also noted that the Eureka School provided the local community a place of refuge from the neighborhood’s severe floods. The two historic buildings also served, along with churches, as rallying points during Hattiesburg’s civil rights struggle in the 1960s.

The old Black USO Club was deteriorated and little-used by the 1990s when an informal group of about a dozen local Black veterans asked permission to use the building to house their collection of military memorabilia. They began by collecting obituaries and flags, but expanded to uniforms, weapons, photographs, medals, and more. The project received a large boost with the return of Ms. Iola Williams to her home city of Hattiesburg. Williams had served as the first African-American City Council member in San Jose, California and later was Vice Mayor there. She accepted the position of Hattiesburg’s Director of Parks and Recreation in the late 1990s, but reportedly did so on the condition that the former USO building be preserved and transferred to her authority.

After the successful restoration of the Saenger, the Convention Commission adopted the Black USO Club in the early 2000s as its next major project. The decision reflects the geography of tourism in Hattiesburg. Because the city is generally lacking in tourism assets—particularly on the west, historically White side of town—the Commission had to look downtown, including in its historically (and still predominantly) Black neighborhoods. Renovation of the Black USO Club therefore presented a timely opportunity, especially with a Black Commission Member and a city official as champions of the project.

The Convention Commission engaged a local architectural firm to renovate the USO building to historic preservation standards, and another professional firm to develop the exhibit space and produce an introductory film. The result was a multimedia, hands-on presentation of the role of African-Americans in the United States military, from the Revolutionary War to the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Commissioner Brown notes with evident pride that the museum features Barack Obama, the first African-American President and current Commander in Chief of the U.S. Armed Forces. Also, Augustus Collins currently serves as the first African-American Adjutant General for State of Mississippi, which further broadens the timeliness and relevance of the museum.

The floor space of the museum totals 7,864 ft² (731 m²), of which about three-quarters is devoted to exhibits, a period-authentic lobby used for public events, and a theater for the film. Out of approximately 800 artifacts in the museum collection, the vast majority of which were donated by local residents of the African-American community, about a hundred are on display. Parallel with the display of artifacts are efforts to store items not being exhibited and outreach to the community to acquire additional artifacts for the museum.

The African American Military History Museum (commonly called the “USO Museum”) may be the only such museum in
the United States. Although similar museums exist, they focus either on specific groups, such as the Buffalo Soldiers Museum in Houston (Buffalo Soldiers Museum 2012), or are broadly centered on the African-American experience in general, such as Chicago’s DuSable Museum, which has exhibits on African-Americans in the military among many others (DuSable Museum 2012).

The next, related project targeted by the Convention Commission is the renovation of the Eureka School Building, located one block north of the USO museum. Eureka was constructed as a Black public school in 1921 and was the second brick school for Black students in Mississippi. It served as a public school from 1921 to 1987 in various configurations, first as a combined primary and secondary facility, and after 1949, as an elementary school (Eureka School 2012). Eureka was Hattiesburg’s only Black high school until 1949, when the city opened Rowan High, located southwest of downtown. Eureka survived desegregation, but finally closed its doors as a public school in 1987. Even after that, however, it continued to serve as an adult literacy center and a (poorly maintained) storage facility for Hattiesburg Public Schools System.

The schools’ alumni organization—EURO, which stands for Eureka and Rowan—has held regular, biannual reunions since 1977 (EURO Hattiesburg 2012). EURO oversees the Eureka building and advises the Convention Commission on renovations. Convention Commissioner Charles Brown has served on EURO since its founding year. Alumni readily recall fellow students’ achievements and their school’s team colors. Despite EURO’s disadvantages relative to White schools, alumni point with pride to successful graduates, who include Jesse Brown, the first African-American Naval Pilot and the first Naval officer killed in the Korean war, and Walter Massey, former President of Morehouse College, Director of the National Science Foundation, and Chairman of Bank of America.

The Convention Commission took possession of Eureka School from the City in 2006 to begin restoring the building to historic preservation standards and developing it as a civil rights museum. Its renovation will complement the USO Museum’s educational mission and address the need for more space for tour groups. The Commission budgets $250,000 per year for this project, which is supplemented by matching grants. The Mississippi Department of Archives and History, for example, has provided a $250,000 grant for general historical preservation, plus a $210,000 grant for civil rights historical site preservation.

The Convention Center initially set a target of late 2014 to open Eureka School as a museum, in time for the 50th anniversary of Hattiesburg’s celebrated role in the civil rights struggle during the 1964 Freedom Summer. (See the following section titled “Environmentally Sustainable?” regarding setbacks due to tornado damage.) Mississippi did not have a civil rights museum at the start of the Eureka project, and now plans to complete one in Jackson by 2017 (Foundation for Mississippi History 2013). In terms of its role in telling the narrative of civil rights, Taylor sees Eureka as complementing the Jackson project by emphasizing Hattiesburg’s unique story of Freedom Summer, although there may be competition for artifacts between the two museums. Hattiesburg rightfully
"owns" freedom summer, in the words of some residents, given the epic, well-documented nature of the struggle locally, and the measure of success they achieved.

Looking beyond the USO and Eureka projects, the Convention Commission was asked by the City in 2011 to manage the Hattiesburg Zoo (Hattiesburg Zoo 2012) with a mandate to make the facility financially self-supporting. An emerging customer base for the zoo is the city's small Latino population, which began to grow as a result of job opportunities from clean up and recovery work after Hurricane Katrina. Employees have observed that the zoo is now becoming a public space for Latinos, particularly on Sundays and holidays. To encourage and build upon this, the Zoo has added bilingual signage and distributes Spanish language flyers to promote its recent Birthday Bash celebration and the annual Halloween festival. The Zoo is now also considering special Latino-oriented events. This outreach on the part of Zoo administrators and the Convention Commission stands in contrast to the high-profile and divisive anti-immigrant laws of neighboring Alabama and other states in the American South.

HATTIESBURG’S USO AND EUREKA MUSEUMS: SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS STORIES?

The long-term success of tourism in Hattiesburg is fundamentally a question of its social, economic, and political sustainability. There is some cause for optimism; almost from the beginning, the development of Hattiesburg’s tourism assets went hand in hand with efforts to reconcile the city’s Black and White communities. But, do these modest, early successes add up to sustainable tourism?

Commercially Sustainable?

Viewed in isolation, the USO Museum and Eureka School projects cannot be considered commercially sustainable successes, nor do they have any realistic potential to support themselves independently in the near future. The Commission was able to pay for the USO building renovation out of their cash flow at the time, so the Museum does not need to repay a bond or other loan in that regard. Since then, the Convention Commission has subsidized the USO Museum at approximately $186,000 per year—which covers the salaries of a small staff, utilities and building maintenance, and other operating expenses—and expects to do so indefinitely. The USO Museum does not maintain a strict visitor count, but the guest register suggests a long-term average of 60 to 70 visitors per week. The museum also hosts about 100 school field trip tours per year, with many of these tours concentrated in February’s Black History Month. Admission to the USO museum is free, with a World War II era jerry can at the entrance for donations. Visitors have made some generous contributions, but these total only a small percentage of the museum’s operating costs.

The Convention Commission regards the USO Museum and Eureka School as components of a larger tourism package that will contribute to an overall commercially sustainable tourism program for Hattiesburg in the medium- and long-term future. The two projects contribute to tourism strategies such as targeting niche markets including military reunions, historical
and heritage tourism in general, and specifically, civil rights history-related tourism. VISITHattiesburg, for example, funded a Mississippi Blues Trail plaque on Mobile Street, on the same block as the Eureka School, joining the state’s initiative on music and music-based tourism (Mississippi Blues Trail 2012).

The long-term goal of the Convention Commission is for the USO and Eureka School museums, as well as future tourism products, to present visitors to Hattiesburg with a growing number of opportunities to spend time in town, lengthen their stays, and thereby increase local spending. This is also consistent with VISITHattiesburg’s initiatives to piggy-back attractions with convention visits in order to encourage convention attendants to stay for a day or more after a convention or bring their family along for the visit.

In a more intangible sense, the USO and Eureka projects provide Hattiesburg with the ability to say “we are all one city . . . in a city for which that statement was not true for most of its history,” admits VISITHattiesburg Executive Director Taylor. In a state that suffers from severe and persistent stigmas based on racial inequalities, both past and present, Hattiesburg’s tourism promotion website, VISIThattie.com, has the potential to project an image of the community that is more diverse, progressive, and welcoming to all potential visitors.

Taylor emphasizes, however, that the mandate of Hattiesburg’s tourism program is “tourism as economic development”—in other words, to generate more wealth in tourism-related industries, grow the local tax base, and help create more local jobs. He is “. . . happy that these projects also tell stories that people want to be told,” but makes clear that the social contributions of the USO Museum and the Eureka School have not been their primary objective. This is an interesting distinction from and arguably a more pragmatic approach than the Emmett Till Memorial Commission (ETMC), which has placed greater emphasis on racial reconciliation (Barton and Leonard 2010).

Politically Sustainable?

The Convention Commission depends upon a substantial tax levy for its work. About half the tax burden from the two percent restaurant and package liquor tax falls on visitors, but about half falls on residents of Hattiesburg. Have the USO and Eureka projects been necessary to maintain political support for this tax and the overall work of the Commission?

Part of the controversy regarding the Convention Center, according to Taylor, stemmed from the perception that the Center is primarily for “outsiders,” or visitors to the city. In contrast, the Saenger Theater, USO, and Eureka projects serve both outsiders and locals. Taylor notes that “we were not naïve” regarding the significance of these projects for the city’s African-American population. The USO building provided the Convention Commission and VISITHattiesburg with a “direct relationship into the heart of the African-American community.” Taylor emphasizes, however, that he does not view this as a cynical position: he and the Commission believe in the value of these projects for Hattiesburg’s overall tourism growth and development.

Our research does not suggest a direct connection, or quid pro quo, between the
USO and Eureka projects and political support for the Convention Commission. When asked specifically about this issue, Mayor DuPree instead emphasized the city’s relationship with the Commission as a “good partnership.” He recognized the Commission had to overcome “early skepticism,” but today sees the Commission’s work as bringing “stability to that community [Mobile-Bouie neighborhood],” helping to “build the greater community” of Hattiesburg, and providing more tangible economic impacts such as reducing economic leakage from the tourism industry.

**Socially Sustainable?**

Have these projects been socially successful, in the sense of making a significant contribution and satisfying diverse constituents in the community? Most directly and concretely, both projects have preserved for public use historically significant buildings that likely would not have survived otherwise. The USO building and Eureka School were both in serious deterioration before intervention by the Convention Commission. Their renovations not only saved the structures, but also are helping to preserve the historic integrity of the Mobile-Bouie neighborhood. By virtue of their missions, both facilities also collect, protect, and preserve valuable artifacts of the local African-American community.

The buildings also symbolize important memories among African-Americans who experienced segregation, military service, or both. Commissioner Brown recalled his revelation after joining the Army and visiting a Black USO club in Fayetteville, NC. When he entered, he realized it was “the exact same building! Even the exact same furniture!” At that moment, he realized that civil rights were not a local issue, but that “Blacks were treated in the exact same way all across the South.”

The development of these two projects comes at a significant turning point in the African-American experience in Hattiesburg and elsewhere in the American South. Most of those who experienced the segregation era and civil rights struggles as adults are now senior citizens. As such, both their memories and their memorabilia are in danger of being lost. These older generations are concerned that their enthusiasm for preserving African-American heritage has not transferred to younger generations. As such, they understand the importance of the USO Museum as an educational resource. They are interested in matching museum exhibits with their own recollections—and are quick to point out when they fail to match. White visitors are curious about an era and experience with which they are not familiar and appreciate the opportunity to learn about noteworthy African Americans of Hattiesburg, some of whom are nationally recognized for their achievements but remain almost unknown to the local White community. Mayor DuPree notes that the USO museum provides the local African-American community with a positive portrayal of “people who look like them.” By showcasing African-Americans’ role in the U.S. military, he says the museum adds “to the context of being American.”

The current USO Museum Director, Latoya Norman, is also proud of the museum’s outreach programs for children, particularly those in the neighborhoods that surround the museum. In recent years, the museum has hosted periodic “Night at the Museum” events that focus on various themes. The director works
with local libraries, Black History Bowl, and summer programs at a nearby neighborhood community center. Norman also takes pride in the structure of the museum itself, which focuses on local as much as national African-American heroes, and appeals to young people through its use of interactive exhibits.

The locations of the USO Museum and Eureka School have shifted the geography of racial recognition in Hattiesburg and may help establish greater trust among African-Americans for how city leaders represent their experience. Local African-American leaders, for example, have expressed concerns about Clyde Kennard’s recognition as a named building on the USM campus (located on the west, predominantly White side of the city). Kennard’s applications to enroll at USM were rejected in the late 1950s, and led to his imprisonment on fabricated charges.

There also have been a number of positive externalities to the contemporary, mostly African-American neighborhood surrounding the USO and Eureka facilities. Prior to these two major building renovations, the Mobile-Bouie historic neighborhood struggled to maintain its physical structures. By the early 2000s, most local businesses had closed and Hurricane Katrina damaged many of the vulnerable residences. Many properties on historic Mobile Street have reverted to public ownership over time due to defaults on taxes or other neglect.

The Convention Commission is an active member of the Mobile-Bouie Neighborhood Association, which has provided some insight into residents’ perceptions of the projects. Taylor has been told that two or three families in the vicinity of Eureka have reversed their decisions to move from the neighborhood as a result of the new investment in that building. Residents have become emboldened to expect and demand more attention from city officials—in a neighborhood that has felt much neglected in the past. Indirectly related to the renovation projects, the City has upgraded street lighting along 6th Avenue, which fronts both buildings.

Melvin Williams, President of the Mobile-Bouie Neighborhood Association, emphasizes the positive contributions of the museums—both tangible and intangible—to the community. These contributions, in his view, include bringing more city attention to the neighborhood, helping instill neighborhood pride, and bolstering real estate values. He views the Neighborhood Association’s partnership with the Convention Commission as a valuable asset in the neighborhood’s current efforts to place sections of Mobile Street on the National Register of Historic Places. Williams has reached out to the Commission as a partner in helping to combat graffiti. We spoke with Mr. Williams two days after an incident in which thieves stole donations from the USO museum after hours; Williams said he had warned the museum that they needed to enhance their security.

Taylor believes the USO and Eureka buildings are centers of “a new civic space” in the Mobile-Bouie neighborhood. In addition to the museum, the school building’s cafetorium—a 1950s addition along the east side of the building—is expected to serve as a community meeting space. The Convention Commission also is considering an incubator kitchen in the cafetorium, to encourage local restaurateurs and promote a renewal of businesses in the Mobile-Bouie area.
Another indirect outcome of the USO museum has been the project’s social significance for veterans—White as well as Black. “Service and sacrifice” is how Board member and veteran Fred Varnado describes the key theme of the USO museum. Varnado tells of veterans visiting the museum who “broke down” in tears when they first entered the lobby. He says that “I still have an emotional experience every time I come here.” Veteran and Board President Sheila Varnado notes that she has seen as many White veterans tear up in the museum as Black vets. Outdoor benches on the museum grounds commemorate the “Gold Star Mothers”—women who have lost children to military service—and provide more opportunities for visitors to consider the universalizing qualities of sacrifice through military service.

Black veterans appreciate the military as one of American society’s greatest integrating forces. Veteran and Convention Commissioner Charles Brown says he thought he had arrived in “second heaven” given the fair treatment he received in the Army. One of the most prominent interactive exhibits in the USO museum is devoted to the “Red Ball Express:” a convoy system that supplied forward troops after the D-Day invasion—and carried back casualties—which was primarily operated by African-American troops. The exhibit has prompted White veteran visitors to reflect on and express their gratitude to the courageous drivers in this operation.

Many World War II, Korea, and Vietnam veterans in the Hattiesburg area had never been formally recognized for their service. The USO Museum has provided a catalyst for exhibits, ceremonies, events that highlight veterans from all these conflicts—as well as Desert Storm and today’s theaters in Iraq and Afghanistan. Local Korean War veterans of all ethnicities for the first time now keep in touch via the USO museum. The museum also provides a space for informal memories and stories of service for veterans—particularly important, for example, for Vietnam veterans who may have been reluctant to tell their stories for many years after their service. Vietnam veteran Brown states that veterans of that war “. . . came back as individuals—not as units,” so the museum plays a particularly helpful role in reuniting and reconciling their experiences.

Environmentally Sustainable?

Following most of our interviews for this research project, on February 10, 2013, an EF4 tornado swept across greater Hattiesburg (NOAA-NWS 2013). It caused substantial damage to the roof of the USO museum, which in turn led to severe water damage to the building and its displays. Fortunately the museum’s artifacts suffered little harm and have been temporarily housed in the Hattiesburg Convention Center while the facility is repaired. The museum will remain closed to the public for at least a year. That the tornado struck in February—Black History Month—the most heavily-visited month of the year for the museum, is particularly unfortunate. Still, shortly after the storm, the museum main web page highlighted a “Rise Up and Rebuild” call to action for museum supporters and provided a secure online means of donating money to the effort.

The Eureka School museum facility was also damaged by the tornado. Still in the beginnings of renovation, an extensive portion of its roof collapsed as a result of
the storm, and new air conditioning units were lost, which will likely postpone its opening to 2015 or beyond. The full extent of damages to the two buildings is still being assessed as of this writing, and part of the Eureka roof remains open to the elements—for fear that hurried, temporary repairs might compromise the historic integrity of the school building. Prior to the tornado, an additional $2.1 million was considered necessary to finish the renovation project of Eureka School; the total cost of repairs following the tornado is not yet established.

Both the USO Museum and Eureka School are insured, and the Hattiesburg Convention Commission expressed its full support for reconstruction of the two buildings. This support extended to museum personnel, who were transferred to the Convention Center to assist in the rebuilding effort or have been given different assignments in the city government.

Although the recent tornado highlights how tenuous any historic facility is in the face of a natural disaster, their emerging role as repositories of local history means that their value to the community will only increase over time. Hurricanes Katrina (2005) and Isaac (2012), not to mention the recent tornado, highlight the physical vulnerability of historic structures in the Gulf South. This is especially true for African-American and other low-income neighborhoods of the region, which historically have corresponded to flood-prone areas (Ueland and Warf 2006).

Controversies and Critical Perspectives

In an effort to provide as balanced a portrait as possible of emergent tourism in Hattiesburg, we specifically sought out former employees and other interview subjects who might have critical views of these projects. Not surprisingly, there are controversies involved in the USO and Eureka projects which potentially threaten the positive social contributions. One of these controversies concerns the relative role of Blacks and Whites in control over the projects. There appears to be general preference within the all-African-American USO Museum Board to staff the museum with African-Americans. “It was a Black place—let’s keep it Black,” one Board member stated emphatically. The first Museum Curator, and the Research Assistant she hired, were trained anthropologists with degrees from the University of Southern Mississippi. Both, however, are White, which raised concerns among some board members. It also resulted in occasional verbal and physical abuse from some local residents, including the women being spit at and objects being thrown at them or their cars. Both women eventually resigned. This episode, although in no way condoned by the USO Museum Board, reflects the divides that still exist in Hattiesburg and other communities of the American South (Barton and Leonard 2010). The legacy of slavery, segregation and violence of the Jim Crow Era, and the dramatic social transformations that have occurred since the Civil Rights Era all suggest that racial reconciliation is an ongoing process.

The original curator was concerned from the time of her hire about taking on any role as spokeswoman for the museum, since she was neither a veteran nor African-American. The small number of staff at the museum, however, forced her to assume a public role. Her replacement and current museum director, African-
American Latoya Norman, originally was hired to direct educational activities. She brought strong skills in community engagement and education, but no training as a curator of artifacts. As of this writing, the Convention Commission is searching for a curator to serve both the USO and the new Eureka museum projects.

This situation highlights another inherent challenge within the projects: is their primary mission to serve as formal museums or tourist attractions? Clearly, the latter is the primary mission in the view of the Convention Commission, but this conflicts to some degree with the projects’ potential for making a social contribution. The museums’ budgets are limited to developing and maintaining the facilities as tourist attractions rather than historical archives. The former curators of the USM Museum, on the other hand, lament the scarce resources available for true museum curatorship. The women point out that the museums are being entrusted by residents with the “stewardship” of prized local artifacts—of special importance since so many artifacts already have been lost to flooding, time, and other factors.

There are also controversies within the local African-American community with regard to these projects. Whose story will be told, and whose will be emphasized? These questions have been of some concern among local African-American families who are represented in the USO museum, or believe they are under-represented. There are accusations that military memorabilia of some board members are too prominently displayed in the museum. Other accusations include that certain prominent civil rights activists in the community have been excluded from the projects, or that senior citizens are being “bought off” with special treatment from the Convention Board.

There are also controversies among the various African-American neighborhoods in Hattiesburg. Both projects are located within the Mobile-Bouie neighborhood. Residents of other neighborhoods are concerned that Mobile-Bouie has received an unfair share of attention and resources. Palmers Crossing, an historic Black farming community that recently was annexed by Hattiesburg and is located about five miles south of the Mobile-Bouie neighborhood, also has a rich history of African-American culture and civil rights struggle. Residents of Palmers Crossing, however, have had to struggle to develop their own small, home-grown museum of local artifacts and express concerns about not being represented fairly in the Eureka museum.

The location of these projects remains a challenge as well. The neighborhoods in which they are located are severely disadvantaged, with comparatively high rates of crime, drug use, and other social ills, although the perception of many White residents of Hattiesburg is far worse than the reality. How then can more people be encouraged to visit from affluent neighborhoods of the city? The image of the USO museum, to date, remains contradictory and nearly a Catch-22 situation: many local Whites perceive the museum’s theme as exclusively a “Black thing,” while many local Blacks perceive the institutional setting of the USO Museum and the Convention Commission as a “White thing.” Clearly, many challenges remain before Hattiesburg can unequivocally say “we are all one city” through its tourism product.
CONCLUSIONS

Returning to the original questions that motivated this research: is socially sustainable tourism achievable, and financially viable, in a Southern community such as Hattiesburg? The museum initiative addressed here is still very much a work in progress, with many variables still in play. At this point, we conclude that—at worst—the subject of this case study cannot be judged a failure. This alone is no small achievement, given the economic recession of recent years, Hattiesburg’s historical racial tensions, and the damage caused by the tornado in early 2013. Indeed, there is much to encourage hope for the long-term success of the incipient tourism that has taken hold in Hattiesburg. The authors found general enthusiasm among the very diverse parties involved. Where we found criticism, sentiments sprang from high hopes for the project to meet some particular objective rather than from outright opposition to tourism initiatives.

Hattiesburg’s USO Museum and Eureka School projects seem representative of general trends in tourism across the American South in which there is growing awareness of the need to broaden existing narratives to include multiple histories and identities (Alderman and Campbell 2008; Alderman and Modlin 2008; Barton and Leonard 2010). In Mississippi, for example, there is a clear shift from focusing on a white antebellum life to the development and promotion of African-American struggles and achievements. The state’s relatively new Blues and Civil Rights trails are examples of this trend and provide optimism for greater inclusiveness and appreciation for diversity with regard to tourism across the state. We conclude that the experiences of the Hattiesburg Convention Commission are unique and instructive in a number of ways:

Multiple Motivations

The motivations for the USO and Eureka projects come from two or more directions. Local African-American residents have been committed to social justice by preserving and showcasing two key sites in their historical experience. These advocates were joined by other African-Americans motivated at least as much by their experience as American veterans. What made the difference in both projects, however, was their commercial potential in the eyes of the Hattiesburg Convention Commission.

Partnership

All parties involved have come to recognize and appreciate critical contributions by all other parties. Local African-American advocates of historic preservation have come to recognize the Convention Commission’s resources and expertise in developing tourist attractions. Meanwhile, the Convention Commission needs the goodwill of the local African-American community for credibility, access to the sites over which they wield political control, donations of artifacts to the museum, and situated knowledge from their historical experience.

Big-Picture Perspective

Viewed in isolation, the USO Museum and Eureka School cannot sustain themselves financially through visitor fees or other existing sources. Viewed in the larger
frame of Hattiesburg’s overall tourism industry, however, the Convention Commission regards them as commercially viable investments. As components of a larger tourism industry, these projects have the potential to benefit from local tourism development in general because they can be linked to Hattiesburg’s tourism traffic, promotions, and infrastructure.

**Courage and Candor**

For too long, the conflictive history of the American South was hidden behind a romanticized “Gone With the Wind” veneer (Alderman and Campbell 2008; Alderman and Modlin 2008). Even today, it is easy to de-link African-American tourism attractions from larger historical experiences. Blues landmarks and other attractions, for example, seldom refer to the oppressive conditions that caused “the Blues.” The USO and Eureka museums are not intended to be candy-coated. Veterans who lead the USO initiative emphasize “sacrifice” as the central theme of the museum, including loss of life for many of those they honor. Central to the museum is a World War II photograph of “Hattiesburg’s own Ruth Bailey Earl [who] stands in the center as a symbol of the indomitable spirit of the African American soldier and the African American woman” (African-American Military History Museum 2012). In the image, Earl stands hands on hips, glaring defiantly at the viewer. Next to the photograph is the large multi-media exhibit devoted to the “Red Ball Express” supply route, emphasizing the danger of the mission that was delegated to African-American soldiers.

The Eureka Museum will be devoted to the experience of Hattiesburg during Freedom Summer in 1964: an ultimately successful movement that came with much bloodshed (Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld was beaten with a tire iron while trying to register voters) and death (local NAACP leader Vernon Dahmer died when his home was firebombed by the Ku Klux Klan). Painful as the Freedom Summer story was, it contains important memories that local African-American advocates wish to preserve and pass along to future generations.

**Compromise**

An element of compromise is probably necessary to the success of any tourism venture, and perhaps most importantly for tourism based on vulnerable environmental, historic, or cultural assets. Compromises in Hattiesburg have been struck between the museums’ integrity as archives, for example, and their promotion as tourism attractions. Compromises were reached, uneasily, between employing African-Americans in the projects versus outsiders with specialized technical training. These compromises are being reached between community groups with a long history of animosity and distrust: significant achievements in their own right.

Are the above lessons generalizable to socially sustainable tourism initiatives elsewhere in the American South, in other regions of the U.S., or in other countries around the world? Hattiesburg’s work in tourism development faces many obstacles: a small city in the poorest state of the country, a location without obvious or inherent tourism assets, a city with a contentious and violent racial history, and persistent racial divisions that continue to run deep. The long-term success of these small and incipient projects is hardly guaranteed. However, to the extent the projects
do realize some sustainable success, if there is hope for Hattiesburg—despite its disadvantages—there should be hope for nearly any destination.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the time, cooperation, and candor provided by all those interviewed for this research: in particular, Rick Taylor, members of the African American Military History Museum and Hattiesburg Convention Commission boards, employees and past employees of the museums, and Hattiesburg Mayor Johnny DuPree. We also recognize the sincere dedication of all parties toward making the USO and Eureka museum projects successful, for the benefit of the Hattiesburg and all its citizens. Finally, we would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of the manuscript and Andy Reese for the help and comments during the review process.

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