

The background image shows the Alabama State Department of Archives and History building, a grand neoclassical structure with white columns and a pediment. The text "STATE DEPARTMENT OF" is visible on the right side of the building's facade.

STATEMENT OF RECOMMITMENT

As our state and nation struggle to navigate through a place of contention, fear, and uncertainty, the Alabama Department of Archives and History (ADAH) recommits itself to the mission of illuminating the path that brought us here, and thereby equipping all of us, together, to build a future characterized by justice, human dignity, and a commitment to the wellbeing of all people.

Our recommitment includes acknowledgment of these truths.

1. Systemic racism remains a reality in American society, despite belief in racial equality on the part of most individuals. Historically, our governments, our economy, and many private institutions seeded or perpetuated discrimination against racial minorities to the political, economic, and social advantage of whites. The decline of overt bigotry in mainstream society has not erased the legacies of blatantly racist systems that operated for hundreds of years.

2. The ADAH is, in significant part, rooted in this legacy. The State of Alabama founded the department in 1901 to address a lack of proper management of government records, but also to serve a white southern concern for the preservation of Confederate history and the promotion of Lost Cause ideals. For well over a half-century, the agency committed extensive resources to the acquisition of Confederate records and artifacts while declining to acquire and preserve materials documenting the lives and contributions of African Americans in Alabama.

3. As an organization, we remain mostly white, especially in agency leadership and in our archival and curatorial staffs. Even with a serious, sustained commitment to understand the historical roots of injustice and its present manifestations, we cannot know the full measure of fear and frustration experienced by African Americans who have lived different realities in the past and today. We listen and study with intent and with sympathy, but our understanding requires ongoing work.

Our recommitment includes these objectives.

4. We will continue and expand efforts of the past four decades to document and tell a fully inclusive story of Alabama's role in the American experience. If history is to serve the present, it must offer an honest assessment of the past.

5. We will be a facilitator of public dialogue, seeking opportunities to build bridges through mutually respectful discussions of personal, community, and state history. These voices will help shape our exhibitions and public programs.

6. We will pursue greater diversity at the ADAH through robust recruitment initiatives. These will include introducing high school students to career opportunities in public history and providing paid internships to



June 23, 2020

undergraduate and graduate students. We will offer a welcoming, inclusive community of colleagues, and meaningful opportunities to contribute to the work of the agency.

7. We will model and advocate for responsible stewardship of historical materials held by collecting institutions as well as in the public square. As communities struggle with decisions over Confederate iconography, we assert that options are not limited to static persistence, on the one hand, or to destruction on the other.

Our recommitment includes the continued development of resources such as the following, useful for gaining a greater understanding of racism's origins and consequences.

8. *We the People: Alabama's Defining Documents* was a special exhibition of Alabama's six constitutions during 2019, the state's bicentennial year. The exhibit website and catalog let the historical record speak for itself in explaining how Alabama law stacked the deck against African Americans during slavery, after emancipation, and for two-thirds of the way through the twentieth century.

9. Family history can be a challenging pursuit for anyone, sometimes resulting in dead ends and unanswered questions. For African Americans, genealogy comes with added complexity because black ancestors almost universally lived in slavery. When African Americans can be found in antebellum historical records, it is often in a bill of sale written by a slave trader or in an estate inventory, listed alongside livestock and pieces of furniture. To better understand how race has bearing even on researching family history, watch our two-part guide to "Tracing Your African American Ancestors."

10. For more than thirty years, the Friends of the Alabama Archives have sponsored Food for Thought, a monthly lecture series bringing scholarship to public audiences. On our YouTube channel, explore playlists containing talks on topics such as "Slavery, Emancipation, and Reconstruction," "Race and Equal Rights," or "The Civil Rights Movement."

11. Take a visual journey through African American community life in the 1960s with the Jim Pepler *Southern Courier* Photograph Collection, containing eleven thousand images of political activism, religious life, music, sports, and black neighborhoods.

12. Find more content from the ADAH and our partners at Alabama History@Home.

***Steve Murray, Director, and the Board of Trustees
Alabama Department of Archives and History***

Links to resources described above are available in the document posted at archives.alabama.gov



Alabama DEPARTMENT OF
ARCHIVES & HISTORY

OUR PURPOSE & PATH IN RECOMMITMENT

Steve Murray



The Statement of Recommitment issued by the Archives on June 23, 2020, grew from a process of introspection and acknowledgment that was necessary for the agency to fulfill its mission of public service in an environment characterized by broken trust and fear in the wake of George Floyd's murder. By laying on the table some uncomfortable but incontrovertible truths about our organization's contributions to systemic racism, we created a space for asserting our commitment to inclusive history and for offering resources useful in a moment of national crisis. The statement serves as a milepost on a journey that began far behind us and will continue for many miles hence.

By the first week of June, our agency was wrestling with the same anxiety and frustration that gripped most of society. During an online meeting of our staff, discussion focused primarily on our care for

each other and the imperative of racial justice. We also touched on the relevance of historical understanding and our collective responsibility to make history useful in the present for the creation of a better future. On that same day and the next, statements supporting racial justice and the Black Lives Matter movement were proliferating from corporations, governments, museums, and other organizations. The obvious questions arose: Should the Archives make a statement? What would it say?

Our immediate inclination was to return to a theme of the staff call—the responsibility *to make history useful*. Public service is core to the mission and culture of our organization. Within a week of closing due to pandemic conditions in mid-March, our staff launched a new website, *Alabama History@Home* (alabamahistoryhome.org), to function as a clearinghouse for online resources useful for

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ADAH, ca. 1940

education and entertainment during isolation. Among them were a digital exhibit and publication on the history of Alabama's state constitutions; photographs and textual materials documenting the long struggle for civil and voting rights; and hours of recorded public programs related to slavery, Reconstruction, and other topics from African American history.

As white Americans were voicing—to a seemingly unprecedented degree—a desire to grasp the underlying issues contributing to racial injustice, we knew these online resources could be useful for improving understanding and fueling dialogue. An obvious option was to release a statement promoting the availability of the resources, and such a listing appears in the final section of the Statement of Recommitment.

We also knew that a statement consisting only of useful resources would be incomplete to the point of being dishonest. It would have omitted the fact that the Archives was a major contributor to the intellectual underpinnings of systemic racism from the turn of the twentieth century until around the

time of the centennial of the Civil War, and that the legacies of those contributions linger with us still.

As indicated in the Statement, “The State of Alabama founded the department in 1901 to address a lack of proper management of government records, but also to serve a white southern concern for the preservation of Confederate history and the promotion of Lost Cause ideals.” The architects, engineers, and evangelists of this work were Thomas McAdory Owen, who directed the agency from its founding until his death in 1920, and Marie Bankhead Owen, who succeeded her husband and served as director until 1955.

The erudite Tom Owen searched every corner of the state for Confederate records and artifacts and created a publications program that, in volume of output,



Founding Director
Thomas M. Owen, 1900

would be the envy of any state historical society today. From the ADAH offices he staffed the Historical Committee of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, entreated communities and other states to engage in documentation of the war, and worked with scholars

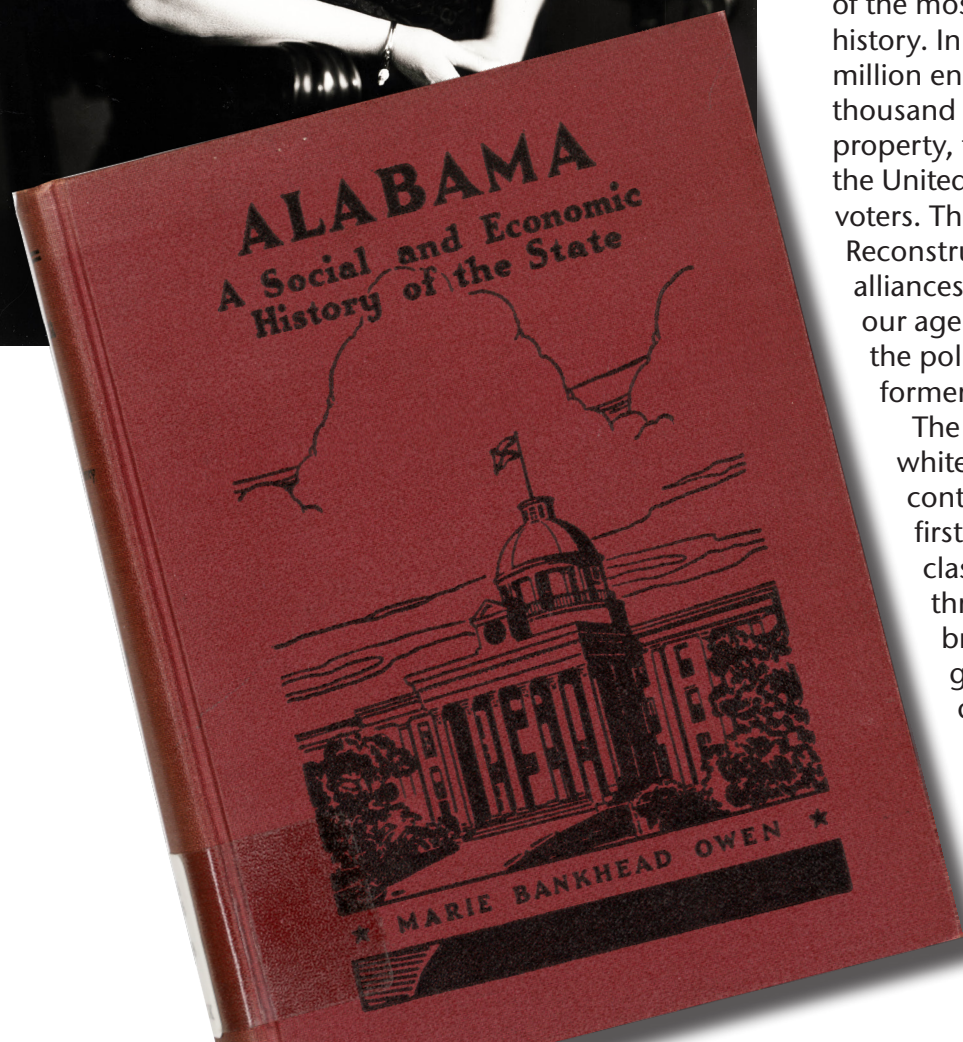
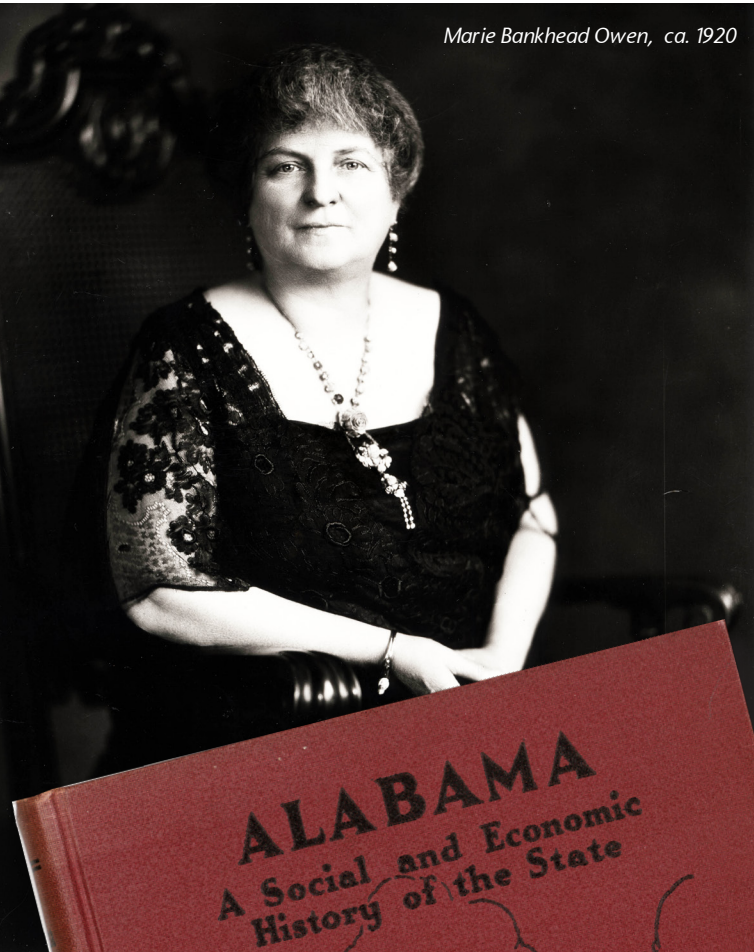
to infuse both academic teaching and public history with the tenets of the Lost Cause—the benign nature of slavery, the moral superiority of the Confederate purpose, and the wretchedness of Reconstruction.

Marie Owen, possessing a legendarily indomitable personality, maintained Tom’s legacy while undertaking initiatives of her own. She secured legislation to replace the Reconstruction-era state seal and commissioned a state coat of arms incorporating the Confederate battle flag and a state motto, “We Dare Defend Our Rights.” During the debate over ratification of the 19th Amendment, she rose to prominence in the anti-ratification campaign, fearing that constitutional protection for women’s suffrage would usher in renewed federal enforcement of Black voting rights under the 15th Amendment.

The fault of the Owens was not in the decision to collect Confederate history, which is of indisputable importance, but in the disproportionate use of agency resources to preserve the Confederate past while declining to do anything remotely similar for the history of African Americans in Alabama. Our state, and the South generally, was the site of one of the most dramatic transitions in all of human history. In a five-year period from 1865 to 1870, four million enslaved Americans—more than four hundred thousand in Alabama alone—went from being chattel property, to being free people, to being citizens of the United States, and the men among them became voters. Though only a quarter-century removed from Reconstruction—and even closer to the interracial alliances of the Populist movement of the 1890s—our agency’s founders did not seek to document the political and social embrace of freedom by formerly enslaved Alabamians.

The Owens’ priorities, shared by their white counterparts in other southern states, contributed to two troubling legacies. The first was the ubiquity of the Lost Cause in classrooms, textbooks, and popular culture throughout the twentieth century and its broad persistence to this day. That root has grown deep. The second is a profound deficit in the historical record that can never be fully overcome. Historically Black Colleges and Universities and some other institutions have made vital contributions in documenting African American history,

Marie Bankhead Owen, ca. 1920



If history is to serve the present, it must offer an honest assessment of the past.

but the fact remains that the state's historical agency lost decades worth of potential effort.

For these reasons, we knew that any statement lacking acknowledgment of our past practice would ring hollow to African Americans possessing a justified distrust of Alabama state government. Only forthrightness could be the basis for building trust and for contributing to pressing conversations about monuments, the names of buildings, and public commemoration generally. If the Archives is to take a leading role in informing the interpretation of Alabama history today, it is necessary to be honest about our role a century ago.

A vital consideration in crafting the Statement of Recommitment was the stance of the ADAH's Board of Trustees, the seventeen leaders who provide overall direction for the agency. Their unanimous support provided welcome affirmation for the staff and established accountability for measuring our progress toward the objectives detailed in the Statement.

Very much on the minds of our team is the matter of how we regard organizational forbears who expended great effort distorting our state's history, but who also laid a foundation—through institutional capacity, an extraordinary facility, and phenomenal, if

incomplete, collections—for today's generation to do much that is good. With resources made possible by the Owens, we subject records to fresh examination, document more fully the experiences of our state's people, and promote effective, inclusive history education.

Just as the nation is called to reconcile with the faults of American democracy as crafted by the founders, the ADAH is called to reconcile with the problematic origins of an institution we cherish. Like our strides toward diversity and trust, this work will require ongoing commitment.

The response to the Statement of Recommitment has been mostly quite positive, with words of appreciation and encouragement coming from both longtime supporters and new acquaintances. Among the comments expressing concern, most have wondered if our affirmation of inclusion will lead to a jettison of the Confederate materials collected and preserved over many decades.

Our path toward inclusivity involves not the removal of existing materials but a broader effort to grow our collections, and the application of honest, responsible interpretation in the telling of a history that represents and serves all Alabamians.



Archives staff at work in the State Capitol, 1915