

MISSISSIPPI BOOK FESTIVAL 2021

‘There is nothing more powerful than remembering’: Q&A with Secretary of the Smithsonian Lonnie G. Bunch III



by **Emily Liner**, *Special to Mississippi Today*
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UNITED STATES – SEPTEMBER 18: Lonnie G. Bunch III, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, testifies before the House Administration Committee on "Oversight of the Smithsonian Institute" in Washington on Wednesday September 18, 2019. (Photo by Caroline Brehman/CQ Roll Call via AP Images)

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Lonnie G. Bunch III's efforts to lay the foundation for the newest museum on the National Mall took him from Mozambique to Mississippi.

The National Museum of African American History and Culture is celebrating its fifth anniversary of welcoming visitors on Sept. 24. But for 11 long years prior to its 2016 opening, it was a museum abstractly envisioned “in the mind of the director,” as Bunch recalled in an interview with *Mississippi Today*.

Bunch, who now serves as the 14th Secretary of the Smithsonian, chronicles his tenure as the founding director of the NMAAHC in his memoir *A Fool's Errand: Creating the National Museum of African American History and Culture in the Age of Bush, Obama, and Trump*.

Bunch was slated to headline the 2021 Mississippi Book Festival for a conversation with former Congressman Gregg Harper. The annual event was cancelled for the second year in a row due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but organizers will be releasing videos of author panels and conversations on Oct. 12.

Harper is one of a number of Mississippians that Bunch has gotten to know during the course of his career. Bunch shared memories of laughing alongside Harper and Myrlie Evers, who he described as “unbelievably funny,” and breaking bread with former Governor William F. Winter and blues singer Dorothy Moore. Bunch developed close relationships with Mamie Till Mobley, the mother of Emmett Till, and Oprah Winfrey, a major donor and fundraiser on the NMAAHC Museum Council.

Bunch also wrote the foreword to William R. Ferris' *I Am a Man: Photographs of the Civil Rights Movement, 1960–1970*. The Mississippi Book Festival had planned to highlight this publication, which accompanied a recent exhibition of the same name at the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, at its 2021 event as well.

Mississippi Today's discussion with Bunch covered a wide range of topics, including critical race theory and confederate monuments. This is the transcript of that conversation, which has

been edited for length and clarity.

Mississippi Today: In the book, you had a unique goal for the museum. You said that your definition of success was making the ancestors smile. What did you mean by that?

Bunch: There are a lot of people who talk about ancestors and libation. I never did that. It was never anything that was on my mind. Yet as I began to work in that building, I began to think about paying homage to people that got left behind, whose stories no one knew. I write in the book about going to Mozambique. I talked to this young woman who said to me that her ancestor was on the slave ship that we found and that they said his name every day. That's when I realized this was really not about yesterday. It's about today and tomorrow.

What I wanted was to do something that I could imagine all of our ancestors nodding and saying, "You got it right. You told the story truthfully. But you helped us find hope, as well as a clear understanding of the past." It was almost trying to set a bar that was almost impossible to reach, but I didn't want to settle to be just a good museum. I wanted it to be a place that would be transformative for a nation and that would help people who knew the story. It would help them find themselves. Or for people who didn't know the story, they would see—you know, I am an old '60s integrationist, I wanted everybody to see we're in this together. And for me, this was about creating something that was about the greater good.

Mississippi Today: That echoes another one of the goals that you mentioned in the book, which was to make this an American museum told through the lens of African Americans. How did you try to accomplish that?

Bunch: I did it on both a philosophical and a practical level. As I was thinking about coming back from Chicago to build this museum, I thought a lot about, "OK, what can the Smithsonian do that this museum couldn't do if it was in Los Angeles or Chicago or New York?" I realized that the Smithsonian has the ability to draw millions of people into a subject they may not be initially interested in because they're coming to view the Smithsonian. That led me to thinking about how do I make sure that if this is just a story by African Americans for African Americans, that might be important in Chicago, but not on The Mall, not a national story. It was really important for me to shape this as a story of us all.

That is really tied to two things. It's tied to my belief in what America is, trying to create a sense that we are a community, that we're in this together whether we like it or not. The other piece was that I realized that there were a lot of museums—and it would be many, many more

in the future—that looked at the Latino story or looked at a particular community’s story. I realized that I wanted to set a model that said: “This is not just about a community. It’s about a country.”

The way we did it was I imbued that in everybody. As we looked at the programs and began to do the exhibitions, I actually had a very concrete list and said, “OK, you’re doing an exhibition on the Black military experience. Show me where it talks about the broader issue. Show me where it makes it an American story.” It was really something that was intentional. I made people actually show that to me before I said, “OK, let’s keep going now,” and as the exhibition would evolve.

Mississippi Today: What kind of encounters did you have either in Mississippi or with Mississippians as you developed the collections and the relationships that built the museum?

Bunch: I thought a lot about this. When I was a little kid, my father, who was a teacher, brought a puzzle of the states, and we were learning the states through the puzzle. One day we were putting it together and he couldn’t find Mississippi. It got lost. And he said, “Mississippi is a state we should forget,” because of all that had happened. I always then became fascinated by Mississippi because we left it out of the puzzle.

There’s so many stories about Mississippi that are stories of pain, stories of hurt. And I wanted to tell those stories. I also wanted to understand what it was about people in Mississippi that had a kind of resiliency.

I remember going and talking to the family of Fannie Lou Hamer, and listening to them talk about her and the challenges she faced. The physical punishment. But they said she had a love for Mississippi because she wanted Mississippi to be what she hoped it would be.

That kind of thing had me think about Mississippi, obviously, because of my ties to Emmett Till and Emmett Till’s mother. Bringing the casket and actually doing the display [in the NMAAHC], it was really less about the broken body of Emmett Till and more about the mother’s courage to basically take the worst moment of her life and turn it into something that helped to transform a nation.

I spent a lot of time talking to people in Mississippi. We collected a lot of things from Mississippi, and one of the things that was most moving to me was a letter by one of the Freedom Riders who had written about what it was like to be in Mississippi.

In some ways, Mississippi is an example of what we hope America will evolve from. On the other hand, it's clear that all of those issues were in every state. No, they may not have been as big as they were in Mississippi, but every state of the union had trouble with issues of race. So what we wanted to do was to not single out Mississippi. We wanted to tell its truer history.

I also came away looking at things like the Black colleges that were created in Mississippi and not just people involved in civil rights, but the educational communities that come out of that.

In essence, Mississippi is really important for helping us understand the challenges of race, helping us understand the pain of change. But it also is an example of when change works, what happens.

There was a governor of Mississippi who was very much in favor of the civil rights movement (William F. Winter). I was down in Jackson with him having the opportunity to hear his story, and what he tried to do was just amazing to me. I actually spent dinner with him and Dorothy Moore, who sang the song "Misty Blue." I was like a little kid going, "Wow, I'm with this great singer. I'm with this great political leader." That just by itself changed my notion of what Mississippi was.

Mississippi Today: You mentioned your relationship with Emmett Till's mother Mamie Till Mobley. I would love for you to talk about that a little bit more.

Bunch: My dear friend Studs Terkel, the great oral historian, used to come to my office and he'd say, "Do you know this person? Do you know that person?" Any time I mentioned somebody, he knew them. He came to my office and he said, "Would you like to meet Emmett Till's mother?" I didn't know she was still alive. I was stunned. And I said, "Of course."

For me, as a Black kid growing up in the North, I did not know Emmett Till's name, but I knew his story. It was the cautionary tale for a lot of us who had relatives in the South: Don't end up like that child.

When his mother came to my office, we were supposed to have an hour lunch. She spent seven hours talking to me about everything from the moment she kissed him goodbye to the time she buried him. I'm a pump, I'm just crying away, and she is unbelievably stoic. I was so moved that I ended up writing about her for the *Chicago Tribune*. We became friends. I'd go see her every week.

In her house, she had this huge picture of Emmett Till on the couch. So he was with her every day, and when you sat there, he was always looking at you. You could really see that this was the moment that transformed her. She said to me that she had been carrying the burden of Emmett Till for 50 years—and it was my turn.

She unfortunately died. When they found the casket that supposedly was going to be taken care of, and it wasn't, the family reached out to me and said, "Could you do something?" I have to be honest, I was so concerned about, "Do I want to collect the casket? Is that what I should be doing?" But I felt that at least for the family I'd collect it and preserve it. But I thought we'd never display it. But as we are working on the exhibitions, I realized that the story was his mother, not necessarily his broken body.

We actually brought the casket back to the original church and had a service there. What's so interesting was, the senior choir was the children's choir—many of those that sang at the funeral. Then we brought the casket back, put it in the exhibition, and it's become the most sacred space in the museum.

That really is my way of honoring—yes, Mamie Till Mobley—but I'm honoring the role that women play. Women get undervalued often in the struggle for fairness. So this was my way of making sure, at least through the story of Mamie Till Mobley, that we begin to reposition this and understand the power and pain that these women carry.

What I hope is conveyed in my work and my career is that there is nothing more powerful than remembering, than honoring people and telling full stories, telling difficult stories. The goal of my work is to make the country better, and I think you cannot be made better if you are not willing to illuminate the dark corners of a country's existence.

Mississippi Today: Critical race theory: Probably the three biggest buzzwords in the news right now. How do you respond to political leaders who are attempting to legislate the use of historical and educational methods like critical race theory?

Bunch: I don't get involved in a debate around critical race theory, because as a scholar, I could pick apart any theory. But for me, the issue is: What kind of country is afraid to deal with its own history? I think that George [W.] Bush said it best at the opening of the museum. He said a great country doesn't run away from its history. It looks at it and it learns from it.

For me, the debate really ought to be: How do we make sure that we tell a diversity of

opinions? Not everybody's gonna agree with this story or that, but you don't want to legislate what is historically accurate. I think that what the great strength of the country has been is that even though we've had these debates for hundreds of years, the great strength is that ultimately truth prevails. So to me, it's an opportunity to tell good scholarship, and that good scholarship will make us better as a country.

Mississippi Today: Many communities in Mississippi and around the country are debating about what they should do about confederate monuments in public spaces. What advice would you give to a community that is reckoning with its racial history?

Bunch: There are a couple of things. One is recognizing what the monuments symbolize, when those monuments were established, what they were supposed to say. I think that's first and foremost.

For me, the fundamental question is that the South lost the war, but they won the peace. And these monuments are examples of winning the peace—the Lost Cause, *Gone with the Wind*, all of that. You can't erase that, but it seems to me that what you want to do is try to give people an opportunity to understand a little more about how that legacy of the Lost Cause led to America not living up to its ideals in terms of issues of discrimination and race.

I'm a historian, so I believe that you prune history, you don't throw it all away. So there is nothing wrong with taking down some monuments. As I talked to Mayor Mitch Landrieu in New Orleans, I said, "Put them in a place so they can be interpreted, because they are part of the history." I stole that idea from Hungary. I went to Hungary, and all these statues are really Soviet statues. Now the leadership is different, but initially the notion was, we want to pull these away, but we don't want to lose that history because that's part of who we are. And so I would argue pruning is good, because pruning also gives us room for other people.

I think it's really important to understand when these monuments were put up. The ones in the 1890s were about segregation. Ones in the '20s, same thing, the Klan was big again in 1915. Some of the monuments aren't until the 1950s. It really is that these monuments are as much about the moment of today than they are about yesterday.

Mississippi Today: You were going to be in conversation with former Congressman Gregg Harper [at the Mississippi Book Festival]. You mentioned him in the book. You shared a memory of touring the Two Mississippi Museums with him.

Bunch: One of the great things about this job and getting to know Congressman Harper is that here you have somebody who you might think politically you're different, but yet here is someone who appreciates history and wants to be part of a way to ensure a country is living up to its stated ideals. I learn so much whenever I'm with him. I just enjoy learning from him, talking to him.

Many times I will talk about when he and I were with Myrlie Evers. We hung out and just laughed all night long. I was like a little kid, both learning and laughing. I had known her but not well, and now we're real close because I've never met anybody so funny. She is unbelievably funny. We were together one night with the Congressman and about 30 other people, and I guess I was criticized because all the two of us did was laugh all night long and ignore everybody else. The Congressman has opened doors for me that I'll never forget.

Mississippi Today: You also talk about the diversity of the museum profession. How has that changed since you started your career and what more should be done to ensure that underrepresented groups have professional opportunities?

Bunch: For years of my career, I would fight that fight. I would speak at conferences. I wrote a piece that people are still quoting 20 years later. It was called "Flies in the Buttermilk." I was pushing people. And what I realized is that the museum profession talked a good game but didn't live up to the ideals, the standard. I decided when I got a chance to build the National Museum of African American History and Culture, that I wasn't gonna talk anymore. I was going to model exactly what I expected. I had a staff that was 40% non-African American, because I said, "If this is an American story, I want a diversity of people to grapple with it."

I think the museum profession, candidly, has improved. The challenge is I think in three ways. One is, unfortunately, leadership is still rare in the museum community, even leadership in the curatorial area, because the curatorial area is still the most powerful part of a museum. So I worry a little bit that there hasn't been enough movement in that arena.

The other thing is that what I want people to do is to see this as not just, "Oh, we're fixing something that was an omission for 30 years." No, what we're really doing is saying: We can't understand the interpretation of whatever it is without making sure that we've got these multiple points of view, and the best way to do it is to make sure you've got a diverse group of people around the table. I've always felt that as a leader, what I wanted was people who could cover the waterfront, so that before I made a decision, I heard everything rather than just what I wanted to hear or what I expected. So I think there's movement, but there's still a lot of work

yet to be there.

Mississippi Today: You essentially crowdfunded a lot of the collections and democratized it in some really innovative ways. We're living through a really interesting period of history right now. What could American families do to preserve our living history so that it might be in a museum in 10 or 20 or 50 years?

Bunch: One of the things that really hit me over the last 10 years, especially, is that we were able to collect not just the traditional stuff you would expect, but collect the memories of people left on their cell phone or the videos they took. I always tell families, just talk into your phone for a minute. Tell the story of what this means to you or what that artifact means so that's preserved and collected.

Often, there were times in my career I wanted to tell stories and there were no collections. So I am committed to making sure we have a diversity of collections so that it may not happen in my lifetime, but somebody down the road, we want to be able to tell that story.

I always use the example of near the end of my career at [the National Museum of] American History. I got to be part of a team that created the American Presidency exhibition—I think one of the most important exhibitions we did. We were able to do that because the history of the presidency was important to the Smithsonian, so it had collections for almost a hundred years. I want to make sure that some of these other stories are as important to cultural institutions, so that they will have the collections that allow us to remember, and allow us to be challenged, and will allow us to be made better.

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