The Rhetorical Landscape of Public Memory in Alabama

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Introduction

Recently, there has been much controversy surrounding public sites of history, such as the Confederate statue pictured here. This has sparked much debate about the ways in which we commemorate histories and how we choose what histories are commemorated. The aim of this project is to examine and understand not only the types of events that are commemorated in Alabama’s public memory, but also the ways in which these events are portrayed.

Methodology

To begin, I added every historical marker, memorial, monument, and museum in every county in Alabama into a database that denoted different characteristics of each site, as seen here. This database can be used in a variety of ways, such as purely referential in nature, or analytical too as shown in this project. After completing the database, I analyzed all the information and compiled it into a research paper that draws conclusions about the larger picture of Alabama’s history that is painted through its sites of public commemoration.

Key Findings

• Public commemoration of history in Alabama began shortly after the end of the Civil War in the early 1870s
• White, male history was and still is by far the dominant force in what stories are memorialized
• As time has passed, Alabama’s public memory has become more diverse, including stories of Black, Indigenous, and Women’s histories
• There is still a long way to go for Alabama’s public memory to be more representative, but the trends are promising for the future

Conclusion

By understanding the stories that are chosen for public commemoration, we can understand a lot about the state of Alabama. These sites can show us social power dynamics, growth and diversity of ideas, as well as the types of things that Alabama residents and historians deem important. By critically analyzing these memory sites, we argue over a grand picture of the state of Alabama for what it has valued from its past, what it is articulating about its present and presence, and what that tells us as we face our future.

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