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CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF THE VULCAN HISTORICAL REVIEW

Kendra Bell and Sarah Coley

To the reader:

The job of the historian is both simple and complex: to attempt to provide readers and listeners with a good story, while at the same time accurately describing and interpreting places and events that have shaped the human experience.

"Letter from the Editors," Vulcan Historical Review, Volume 12, 2008

In 1997, a small group of students and faculty at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, bonded by their passion for investigating the past, launched what would become the lasting tradition of the *Vulcan Historical Review* (VHR). The VHR is an award-winning, peer-reviewed journal that showcases the historical research of students at UAB. As a student-run publication, it offers both undergraduate and graduate students the opportunity for professional development in academic scholarship as authors, editors, and collaborators. Fueled by ambition and dedication, the publication reflects the personality of its namesake, the Vulcan statue, and the surrounding city of Birmingham, Alabama. Nicknamed the Magic City for its origins as an industrial city fueled by rapid growth, Birmingham is watched over by the Vulcan statue, a symbol of the industrial boom that enticed so many to settle in the city during the late nineteenth century. Named after the Roman god of fire and furnaces, the statue was commissioned in the early twentieth century and dedicated at its current position in 1939. It sits atop Red Mountain, source of the city's iron ore and mineral wealth, as a testament to the ambition and dedication required to dream a city. Like the Vulcan Statue, the VHR is also a symbol of ambition, dedication, and opportunity, even as the city's history reflects complex themes of individual and collective struggle.

Since its first printing in 1997, the journal's focus on professionalism in the selection and editing process has consistently brought it recognition and respect. For the first five volumes, the VHR placed first or second in the annual Gerald D. Nash History Competition sponsored by the Phi Alpha Theta National Honor Society. Last year, the 2020 edition earned third place for digital historical journals in the Nash History Competition. This year, the 2021 edition marks the journal's 25th anniversary, a testament to the History Department's ongoing commitment to the publication and to a quarter-century of student scholarship.

After twenty-five years, Dr. Colin Davis, the former UAB professor who served as the journal's founding faculty advisor, says the legacy of the publication is simply "brilliant." In a recent interview on the occasion of the journal's 25th anniversary, Dr. Davis recalled the "dynamic group of graduate students" that served as the journal's founding editorial staff, including the journal's first executive editor, Dr. Donna Cox Baker, who worked hard to secure funding and launch the publication. As a Phi Alpha Theta Honors Society publication, the journal is required to be run almost entirely by students, so by rules and design it has always been a truly student-run endeavor. At the time of first printing, the History Department at UAB was the only program at a small university to attempt such a departmental publication, demonstrating the ingenuity and drive of the students and faculty who brought it to life. With support from the department chair, the Dean of the Graduate School, and the then School of Behavioral Sciences, Dr. Davis and the students were able to print and publish the

first edition. After that, Dr. Davis recalled, “off it went,” as a “self-fulfilling animal” under the supervision of a dedicated and evolving group of students.

Reprising the success of the first printing with subsequent award-winning editions, the VHR gave the UAB History Department “real credibility,” Dr. Davis recalls, and enabled a then-small university to “lead the field” with something that the Phi Alpha Theta chapters at its sister schools, the University of Alabama and the University of Alabama at Huntsville, did not have. Although he has retired from his position at UAB, Dr. Davis says he has never retired from the historical profession. He continues to do research outside of the university and he continues to publish. His latest work explores the maritime history of fishermen. Unless prevented by pandemic-related travel restrictions, Dr. Davis will soon be conducting research in Norway. Looking back on twenty-five years of scholarship, Dr. Davis says that what most impresses him about the publication are the students, as it is “their enthusiasm and commitment that made it.”

Select volumes of the VHR highlight specific historical themes, while other editions showcase a variety of subjects. The range of topics covered over the years is vast, and includes the intricacies of world wars, biographies of historical figures, debates on historical theory, and investigations into oppression and social reform. Over the years, students have plunged into moments both politically charged and socially significant. The journal’s editors and contributors remain dedicated to employing history to draw meaning from a complex world. An example of a thematic issue comes from the 2011 edition, which drew upon the Reynolds-Finley Historical Library, UAB’s extensive collection of over 13,000 rare books and manuscripts on the history

of health and medicine. The VHR showcased a selection of essays on medical history. The VHR’s 17th volume, published in 2013, spotlighted the 50th anniversary of the civil rights movement in Alabama with an assemblage of student-authored pieces on local history as well as a reflective essay by former UAB professor Dr. Robert G. Corley about his experience of becoming a historian during the Jim Crow era.

Local history remains a central feature of the journal. The Magic City’s long and complex history continues to inspire diverse research. In 2019, the state of Alabama celebrated its bicentennial. Accordingly, the VHR editorial board authored a special article highlighting the state’s many achievements, including its role in the American Industrial Revolution and sending a man to the moon on the Saturn V rocket. The article also addressed some of the many painful and difficult aspects of Alabama history, such as the removal of Native Americans, the establishment of a convict-leasing system, and long-standing racial injustices.

Willingness to confront historical controversy in all its forms is a central commitment of the journal. Student authors writing for the VHR do not shy away from uncomfortable topics in history, instead choosing to examine their meaning. In 2014, Volume 18 evaluated the complexity of the Civil War, especially concerning the historiography of who has counted as a human being throughout American history. In 2017, the VHR published a selection of articles addressing a heated scholarly debate about the historian’s duties and the ethics of responsibility in the context of research methods. The VHR student authors and editors have demonstrated a commitment to placing a critical eye on all moments from the past while

acknowledging historians' responsibility for examining historical injustice in myriad forms.

Printed during the global Covid-19 pandemic that began in 2020 and continues into 2021, the 25th anniversary edition of the *Vulcan Historical Review* requires special reflection. This moment asks us to pause, to contemplate what it means to be human, and to reflect on existence not only in our own time, but also at various points in the past. In this edition, authors explore the human condition in both the everyday and the uncommon. They survey historical moments touching daily life, including famine, addiction, war, injustice, death, and their legacy. Without the historian, moments from the past are like portraits hanging on a wall, unable to speak. To impart their story to us, they need voices. In this volume, and in editions to come, authors will continue to draw sources from the vast archives of humanity's past and, through their research and writing, give them voice. After a quarter-century of ambitious and conscientious historical research, the VHR remains dedicated to providing students with the opportunity to investigate these voices and a platform from which they can be heard.