

History Department Statement on the killing of George Floyd and the subsequent protest movement:

The faculty of the Wofford College History Department stand in solidarity with those condemning the unconscionable killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and far, far too many other African Americans. Our training as historians teaches us that such events, and the widespread social response to them we have all witnessed, do not occur in a vacuum. The reaction we have seen is not the result of a single event or even series of events, no matter how horrific they are. Social movements find their catalysts in such moments, but they are the products of decades, even centuries, of history.

The problems of contemporary American society are deeply rooted in American history—in this case, in the history of race in America. It is a history that the American people as a whole have never truly grappled with and faced. America's racial history is America's shame. White Americans in particular have generally chosen at best to hide that shame and at worst to deny it. That is true at every level—the national, state, local, and in our specific case, the college level. We encounter that denial every day, even if we chose not to see it. It is there in the names of our streets and buildings, in the portraits we display, in the statues erected to honor the dishonorable.

As historians, we have been asking ourselves how we can best serve to address this problem that can seem so overwhelming. What do we have to offer? What can we add to the statements our colleagues in other departments have produced? Of course, we can and will redouble our efforts to ensure that our classes do everything they can to address issues of race—in topics discussed and readings assigned. At the same time, we recognize our own limitations as a department whose members are all white.

The faculty of the Wofford College Department of History are committed to working to expand our own knowledge, as well as that of the Wofford College community, and the entire Upstate region of South Carolina. For most of American history, the topic of race (when dealt with at all) was addressed almost exclusively by white scholars. It is only within the lifetimes of many of us that meaningful opportunities have emerged for African Americans to rediscover and write African American history. If we are to learn what has so often been suppressed, ignored, and denied, it is to those scholars we must look.

With that in mind, the History Department will, with the support of the President's Office, re-purpose the Lewis P. Jones Visiting Professorship of History during the academic year 2021-22. Our standard practice with this program is to bring in one scholar to teach a class to senior History majors during the Spring semester. Rather than that, we will use the fund to sponsor a year-long course in African American history for the entire Wofford College and Upstate communities, taught by leading African American historians. We envision one speaker per month for the entire academic year. These scholars will give talks on their areas of historical expertise, open to all. Then, after each talk, we plan to have our own discussion events, during

which we all can dig more deeply into what we have learned from these scholars and apply that knowledge to our own communities and circumstances.

In normal times, we would have preferred to run this program this coming academic year but given the uncertainty over our ability to hold large indoor public events in the near future due to COVID-19, it seemed wise to wait until we could plan these events with greater confidence. It is our hope that, if health conditions improve, we can inaugurate the series with a major address by an African American historian during the Spring 2021 semester.

We recognize that this is but a small first step toward a more perfect understanding of the American past. Much more work remains to be done by every one of us. But we also remain steadfast in our commitment to the principle that knowledge of the past is essential to building a better future.

The History Department's informational pamphlet features this quotation from James Baldwin: "The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do." Recent events have demonstrated Baldwin's wisdom for all to see.

In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin writes: "To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought."

We hope that this study of African American history by the Wofford and Upstate communities can make some small contribution to moving beyond the invented past currently crumbling all around us and building a truer, more sound structure out of stronger historical material, one that Americans of every race can inhabit in security and justice. We know it is a necessary step, however inadequate it may seem in isolation. As Baldwin reminds us, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

Ken Banks
Mark Byrnes
Kate Marsden
Tracy Revels
Anne Rodrick
Tim Schmitz
Clayton Whisnant