

2019

## Introduction

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## Introduction

by *Charles C. Bolton*

When Dennis Mitchell, editor of the *Journal of Mississippi History*, approached me in 2017 about creating a special issue on neglected Mississippi governors, I had my doubts. What else was there to say about these men? I knew that David G. Sansing,<sup>1</sup> longtime professor of history at the University of Mississippi, had written brief biographies of Mississippi's governors for *Mississippi History Now*, the online publication of the Mississippi Historical Society, and that he had also recently published *Mississippi Governors: Soldiers, Statesmen, Scholars, Scoundrels* (2016). In addition, I knew, as someone who had done a good deal of archival research in Mississippi sources over the previous three decades, that the documentary record for many of the state's chief executives remained quite limited.

Despite these initial misgivings, I resolved to explore the idea further. I started by narrowing the time frame to the twentieth century, the period of Mississippi history I knew best. I ultimately recognized that some governors of this era—James K. Vardaman, Theodore G. Bilbo, Ross Barnett, William F. Winter—had indeed received substantial attention from historians and that a closer look at some of the others might be worthwhile. I was also fortunate to identify seven scholars who expressed enthusiasm about the opportunity to write essays focusing on some of the “neglected” individuals who occupied the Governor's Mansion in the twentieth century.

The eight men who are the subjects of the articles in this issue are E. F. Noel, Paul B. Johnson Sr., Thomas Bailey, Fielding Wright, J. P. Coleman, Paul B. Johnson Jr., Cliff Finch, and Kirk Fordice. Since source material remains thin for some of these former governors, I suggested to the authors that although their essays should focus on their particular subject, they might also need to highlight a particular theme important to understanding the governor and the time during which he served. So, these pieces are not, strictly speaking, biographical accounts of the men highlighted here, al-

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<sup>1</sup> Since Bolton wrote this introduction David Sansing, a past president of the Mississippi Historical Society, died in 2019 at age 86. Sansing taught at Ole Miss from 1970 to 1994. He published massively on the state's history and taught thousands of students, including your editor.

though important biographical details are included in all the essays.

Jere Nash's essay looks at E. F. Noel, and while uncovering a variety of new information about the man, Nash also shows the important role that Noel played in advancing the careers of James K. Vardaman and Theodore G. Bilbo, two of the most influential governors (and politicians) in early twentieth-century Mississippi. Kevin D. Greene examines the life of Paul B. Johnson Sr. and focuses specifically on his work as a progressive New Dealer and his signature reform, free textbooks for schools. Charles C. Bolton's essay concludes that during Thomas L. Bailey's brief tenure in the governor's office, he represented a moderate alternative to most of the state's political establishment, which viewed the economic and military mobilization associated with World War II as a threat to the state's system of segregation and black disfranchisement. Fielding L. Wright is perhaps best known as a leader of the Dixiecrats in the late 1940s. In his article, James Patterson Smith illustrates how Wright came to occupy this prominent position in the South's political opposition to racial change and how, in the process, Wright's earlier reputation as a southern progressive was forgotten. Robert Luckett's study of J. P. Coleman details the governor's battle with hardline, massive resisters over what strategy the state should adopt in its response to the U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared racial segregation unconstitutional. Patricia Michelle Boyett's essay on Paul B. Johnson Jr., who served in the immediate aftermath of the 1960s civil rights reforms, examines how the governor used both racial myths and a continued strategy of massive resistance to maintain white privilege even after the official end of racial segregation. Chris Danielson demonstrates the crucial role played by Cliff Finch in integrating the state's Democratic Party in the 1970s. Danielson identifies this political event as the governor's greatest achievement, although Danielson notes that it had the unintended consequence of bolstering the growth of the state's Republican Party. The final essay is a reflective piece about Kirk Fordice by one of his key staffers, Andy Taggart. Drawing largely on his own personal recollections, Taggart views Fordice as an atypical politician, a characteristic that proved both a strength and a weakness for the first Republican since Reconstruction to serve as governor of Mississippi.