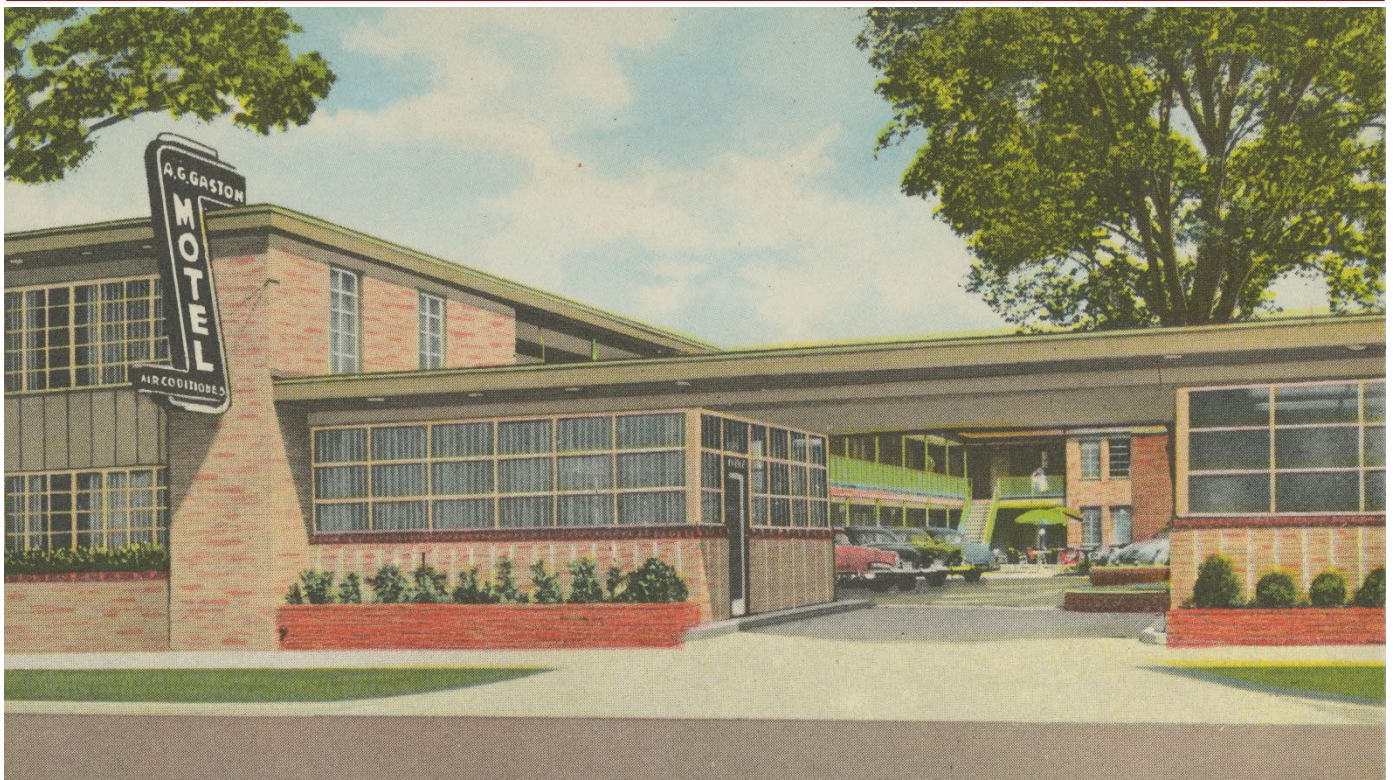




Historic Furnishings Report

Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument
Birmingham, Alabama

A.G. Gaston Motel



Cover: Exterior of the A.G. Gaston Motel, c.1954, Henry Ford Museum

APPROVED:

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Birmingham, Alabama

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History Associates, Incorporated

On behalf of the National Park Service

September 15, 2025

Contents

Acknowledgments	5
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Executive Summary	7
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Administrative Information

Interpretive Objectives	9
Operating Plan	10
Accessibility Strategy	11
Prior Planning Documents	11

Historical Information

A Note on Sources	14
History of the Structure	15
Analysis of Historic Occupancy	17
Evidence of Room Furnishings	21
<i>War Room Suite</i>	
<i>Typical Guest Room</i>	
<i>Lobby</i>	
<i>Courtyard</i>	

Furnishings Plan

Floor Plans	28
List of Recommended Furnishings	31
<i>War Room Suite</i>	
<i>Typical Guest Room</i>	
<i>Lobby</i>	
<i>Courtyard</i>	
Related Media	38
Collections Care, Maintenance, and Security	40

Illustrations

List of Illustrations	43
Illustrations with Captions	45

Bibliography	63
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Several organizations in Birmingham graciously allowed us access to their private collections. Kim Brown and Andrew McFadden of the A.G. Gaston Boys and Girls Club personally escorted us to view A.G. Gaston's personal objects, and Lisa McNair, daughter of Birmingham photographer Chris McNair, shared historic images of the motel's interior, taken by her father.

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Birmingham News; Bradley Fisher at the National Archives and Records Administration who analyzed FBI case files for mentions of the motel's furnishings; Natalie Salive at the University of Richmond who similarly reviewed their unprocessed Wyatt Tee Walker collection; Julie Botnick at the Smithsonian Institution's Archives Center who provided valuable previous research on Duke Ellington, confirming he had not stayed at the A.G. Gaston Motel; Kris Ford and Eric Tidwell at the Atlanta University Center's Archive Research Center who reviewed their Johnson Publishing Company, Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr., and Joseph Echols and Evelyn Gibson Lowrey collections for relevant materials; Sidney Carlson White at the Jackie Robinson Museum who provided research on Jackie Robinson's stay at the Gaston Motel; and Rachel Ledebor at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History who provided valuable insight into their Civil Rights and Social Justice Collections, as well as their Charles Moore Photographic Archive.

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Executive Summary

The A.G. Gaston Motel, a mid-century modern motel which operated in Birmingham, Alabama, from 1954–1982, played a significant role in the local Black community, and the national civil rights movement. Owned by Black entrepreneur A.G. Gaston, the motel provided first-class, air-conditioned accommodations and dining to African Americans traveling to the segregated city. It served as a place to rest and socialize, welcoming people of all races. In 1963, it hosted Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph David Abernathy, Fred Shuttlesworth, and other members of the national civil rights movement, becoming their de facto headquarters while in Birmingham.

In 2024, the National Park Service (NPS) hired History Associates, Inc. (HAI) to research and draft a historic furnishings report for the A.G. Gaston Motel within the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument. The report, which outlines property- and period-appropriate furnishings for the motel's War Room suite, typical guest room, lobby, and courtyard, is meant to complement wider interpretive plans for self-guided experiences through the site's exhibitions and historic spaces. It is part of a larger rehabilitation project to restore the motel to its period of significance (1954–1963) and create a primary visitor experience for the National Monument.

After visiting the site and reviewing prior planning and construction documents for the property, the team conducted an extensive investigation of resources related to the A.G. Gaston Motel at local, regional, national, and digital repositories. This research revealed that while the courtyard was heavily photographed, little information documenting the operations and interiors of the motel has survived over the years. However, anecdotal evidence and a few key archival photographs provided the documentation needed to create a historic furnishings plan which will allow visitors to immerse themselves in the mid-century A.G. Gaston Motel. They demonstrated the styles of the motel's guest rooms, presented commentary on its amenities and décor, and provided insight into how individuals interacted with the rooms.

The historic furnishings plan outlines period-appropriate lighting, flooring, wall treatments, window treatments, furniture, decorations, and props that will best emulate these documented circumstances. With no furnishings original to the motel available, the plan largely recommends the acquisition of antique or reproduction items of a similar design and fabrication. Rarely did our research reveal the names of furniture manufacturers or mid-century furniture catalogs. However, visual assessment did allow us to match certain objects to specific designs and products. In these cases, such as with the Herman Miller Daybed, it is highly recommended NPS acquire the object or its modern equivalent from the manufacturer directly. It is our sincere hope that the combination of these treatments, antique pieces, and props will breathe life into the historic spaces of the A.G. Gaston Motel and enable NPS to better tell the story of segregation and civil rights.

Administrative Information

Administrative Information

The A.G. Gaston Motel in Birmingham, Alabama was built in 1954 by Black entrepreneur Arthur George Gaston. Located at 1510 Fifth Avenue in Birmingham's Black business district, the motel provided upscale accommodations for African Americans traveling through the segregated city. The two-story motel's air-conditioned rooms, coffee shop, and restaurant attracted famous Black musicians, social conventions, and the leaders of the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph David Abernathy, Fred Shuttlesworth, and other members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights used it as a base to coordinate nonviolent sit-ins and marches in Birmingham in 1963.

The motel continued to serve the local community and travelers to Birmingham until late 1982, when A.G. Gaston converted it into the Gaston Gardens, an apartment building for senior citizens. Upon Gaston's death in 1996, the rental property was closed, divested, and left vacant. In 2006, the City of Birmingham took possession of the A.G. Gaston Motel.¹

The motel is listed as a location within the Birmingham Civil Rights Historic District, which was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2006, and the Birmingham Civil Rights National

Monument, established by President Barack Obama in 2017.² In conjunction with the creation of the National Monument, the City of Birmingham donated part of its interest in the motel to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, who subsequently conveyed it to the National Park Service (NPS).³ Today, the City of Birmingham owns the eastern half of the motel (the former coffee shop and restaurant) while NPS owns the western half (the lobby and original guest rooms). Together, they jointly work toward the preservation, renovation, operation, and interpretation of the site.

Interpretive Objectives

According to the 2018 *Foundation Document*, the purpose of the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument is to “preserve and interpret the events, stories, and places associated with the nonviolent struggle against racial segregation in Birmingham, Alabama during the mid-20th century; events [that] propelled human and civil rights to the forefront of the American conscience.” Additionally, it identifies the following interpretive themes:

- African American Entrepreneurs and the A.G. Gaston Motel
- Places, Churches, the Power of Community Organizing, and the Contribution of Individuals
- Youth Activism and the Children's Crusade

¹ *A.G. Gaston Motel Historic Structure Report* (Lord Aeck Sargent, 2016), 9.

² “Birmingham Civil Rights Historic District,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination

Form (National Park Service, 2006); Proclamation No. 9565, 82 FR 6151 (2017).

³ Proclamation No. 9565, 6154.

- Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth
- 16th Street Bombing and the Importance of Media
- The Evolution of Race Relations and Human Rights⁴

Aligning with these themes, the exhibition spaces and furnished period rooms within the A.G. Gaston Motel will focus on July 1954–May 1963 as their primary interpretive period. The furnished War Room suite, typical guest room, lobby, and courtyard will display the motel’s configuration as experienced by guests and the civil rights leaders during its first decade in operation. The historic furnishings in these rooms will aim to place visitors in this time as accurately as possible and deepen their understanding of the Black travel experience and fight for desegregation in Birmingham. The park may elect to focus its messaging on A.G. Gaston, the typical guest experience, and how the discussions and events which took place here impacted the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement.

Operating Plan

At time of writing, the western portion of the A.G. Gaston Motel is open from 10 am until 4 pm, Thursday through Saturday, except for Thanksgiving holidays and Christmas through New Year’s Day holidays. Visitors to the motel will primarily view the exhibit areas and period rooms at their own pace as a self-guided experience. Volunteers or park rangers may provide additional guided tours through the site for special occasions. As such, NPS should adequately mark the recommended circulation route in the motel lobby—the visitor’s initial entry point—throughout the site, and on introductory handouts.

Visitors will enter the motel lobby from the porte-cochère and pass through the northwestern exit into the courtyard. They will then move down the walkway toward the far staircase where they can access the second-floor spaces via the exterior staircase or accessible first-floor elevator. Once upstairs, visitors will move southeast through the exhibit space toward Room 207, the typical guest room. They will continue to pass through additional exhibit space before entering Room 209, the historic War Room suite, via the pass-through bathroom. To exit, visitors will descend the staircase located near the War Room or travel back along the exterior walkway toward the elevator for an accessible exit.

If staffing availability permits, best practice would be to have at minimum four park rangers working at the site at a time. This would allow for two rangers stationed at the lobby, one stationed at the exhibits, and one available to answer questions as guests flow between the lobby and second floor. Having a minimum of four staff members available on site would especially be preferable during the park’s busiest operating times such as Saturdays or holidays. Depending on park resources, additional volunteers or park rangers may be necessary to staff the lobby or lead occasional guided tours.

Confirmed in discussion with NPS staff, the War Room and typical guest rooms will have a Plexiglass, stanchion, or metal barrier system to separate the public from historic furnishings. This will protect the antique or reproduced furnishings in the non-monitored spaces, facilitate crowd control, and promote respectful visitor behavior. It will also provide interpretive opportunities via a

⁴ *Foundation Document: Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument* (National Park Service, 2018), 4, 10-11.

reader rail system in addition to interpretive wall panels and tactile exhibits.

Accessibility Strategy

Within the historic period rooms, exhibit elements should provide accessibility without compromising the mid-century atmosphere. As outlined in this plan, visitor pathways measure at least thirty-six inches wide to provide adequate clearance for visitors in wheelchairs along the one-way circulation path. Historic lighting elements are strategically placed to create a warm light level between ten and thirty foot-candles in combination with modern fixtures.

Any interpretive text and graphics added to the historic rooms will be placed at a height of forty-sixty inches and have a minimum text size of forty-eight points to be read from three feet away. All text content and design should maximize readability. Any reader rails or barrier systems within the War Room suite will have a maximum height of thirty inches from the floor to the lowest portion of the panel to accommodate wheelchairs. Reader rail interpretive panels should be angled at thirty to forty-five degrees to maximize readability and reduce overhead glare.

The park may also incorporate multisensory elements, such as 1950s music from the guest room's radio and news coverage of the civil rights movement on the lobby's television set.

A virtual experience based on Matterport renderings of the furnished period rooms should be made available to visitors who cannot visit the A.G. Gaston Motel in person. These renderings, or a similar photographic walk-through, can also provide second-floor access to on-site visitors should

the elevator need repairs or maintenance during visiting hours.

Additionally, all interpretive elements, whether physical, digital, or multimedia, should have captioning, audio descriptions, assistive listening technology, and tactile access as appropriate. NPS may create accompanying publications in large print or braille or an audio tour for visitors with visual impairments.

Prior Planning Documents

The following planning documents have contributed to this report and affect the ongoing restoration, use, and management of the A.G. Gaston Motel within the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument, Birmingham, Alabama:

“Schematic Design Narrative & Drawings, Rehabilitate Interior of A.G. Gaston Motel,” Houser Walker Architecture, 2023.

A.G. Gaston Motel Historic Structure Report, Lord Aeck Sargent, 2016.

“100% Construction Drawings, Rehabilitate Interior of A.G. Gaston Motel,” National Park Service, 2025.

Environmental Assessment for General Management Plan: Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument, National Park Service, 2022.

Foundation Document: Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument, National Park Service, 2018.

A.G. Gaston Motel Cultural Landscape Report, WLA Studio, 2019.

Per these documents, NPS has received recommendations regarding the interior flooring, ceiling, lighting, fan coils, and

exterior courtyard. The courtyard has already been restored to its 1963 conditions with brick paving, a plant bed, birdbath, and white metal patio furniture.

Historical Information

A Note on Sources

As there are no remaining original furnishings for the A.G. Gaston Motel and a significant lack of records regarding its direct operations, consultative research for this report relied on small collections of textual records and photographs held in various repositories across the United States.

While numerous exterior images of the motel exist, largely from 1963 press conferences, there are only a few depicting the interiors of the lobby, guest room, and War Room suite between July 1954–May 1963. Black and white photographs taken for the *Birmingham News* and two (liberally) colorized promotional postcards form the visual basis of this report. General descriptions of the motel’s various amenities in contemporary news articles and advertisements provide supporting evidence of historic furnishings. However, no primary sources were located related to Rhodes-Carroll Furniture Company, identified in advertisements as the motel’s original furniture provider, and interior designers associated with the motel, notably Mr. and Mrs. Dave Chernis.⁵

Though they did not overtly focus on the motel’s interior furnishings, first-hand accounts from published biographies, autobiographies, and oral histories also provided context for the historic use of the A.G. Gaston Motel. These accounts focus almost entirely on the adult experience at the motel. Aside from a brief recollection by Theresa Walker, wife of civil rights activist Wyatt Walker, during an oral history interview for the Civil Rights History Project Collection—which noted one occasion where the Walker children slept in the motel’s lobby—other documentary evidence relating to children at the motel was not identified.

⁵ “A.G. Gaston’s De Luxe Motel Furnished By Rhodes-Carroll Furniture Company,” *Birmingham News*, June 26, 1954, 28; “Nation’s Finest All-Negro Motel Opened,” *Birmingham News*, June 30, 1954, 10.

History of the Structure

The following is a summary of the structural and property history of the A.G. Gaston Motel. For a more detailed account, consult the 2016 Historic Structure Report compiled by Lord Aeck Sargent and the 2019 Cultural Landscape Report prepared by WLA Studio.

The future site of the A.G. Gaston Motel, located at 1510 Fifth Avenue in what would become known as Birmingham's Black business district, was redlined within a neighborhood of "negro concentration" as early as 1933.⁶ A.G. Gaston acquired the land under the purview of one of his other businesses, the Booker T. Washington Insurance Company, between 1942 and 1954 and transferred it to his burgeoning motel in March 1954.⁷ By this time, Gaston had already engaged Stanley B. Echols, a local Black architect, to design first-class accommodations where Black travelers could receive service free of racial discrimination, based on the offerings and design of the Holiday Inn Memphis.⁸ Construction of Echols's specifications by the Steel City Construction Company of Birmingham was completed in June 1954, with window glass supplied by Uneeda Glass Company (see figure 1).⁹ Gaston held a public grand opening ceremony for the A.G. Gaston Motel on July 1, 1954.¹⁰

The two-story, mid-century modern, L-shaped motel originally featured over twenty guest rooms, a two-room suite, lobby, clerk's office, courtyard, storage room, and basement mechanical room. Across the porte-cochère, amenities included a coffee shop for guests and a full restaurant and kitchen was added to the property by December 1954.¹¹ Local advertisements for the motel boasted the finest amenities, notably fully air-conditioned rooms and an "automatic musical vending device" and telephone in every room.¹²

In February 1963, Ernest and Caroline Gibson, the motel's new managers, convinced Gaston to remodel the motel's "somewhat rundown" areas. Renovations designed by Echols and carried out by A.H. Smith Construction Company resulted in new furniture, carpet, paint, and the addition of a milkshake machine to the coffee shop, bar, and restaurant.¹³

⁶ "Postal Map of the City of Birmingham, Alabama," May 1933, National Archives and Records Administration, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/85713712>.

⁷ *Historic Structure Report*, 3.

⁸ *Historic Structure Report*, 3, 13; Marie Sutton, *The A.G. Gaston Motel in Birmingham: A Civil Rights Landmark* (The History Press, 2014), 30.

⁹ *Historic Structure Report*, 3, 13.

¹⁰ "Nation's Newest," 6.

¹¹ *A.G. Gaston Motel Cultural Landscape Report* (WLA Studio, 2019), 14-15.

¹² "Nation's Newest," 6; "Birmingham Mortician Opens \$300,000 Motel," *Jet Magazine*, July 22, 1954, 49.

¹³ Sutton, *A.G. Gaston Motel*, 55-63.

During the spring of 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph David Abernathy, and other civil rights leaders utilized the A.G. Gaston Motel and its primary suite—Room 30, the “War Room”—as their headquarters, making it both a proving ground for the movement and a target. At 11:58 pm on May 11, 1963, white supremacists bombed the motel in an attempt to kill King and Abernathy, who had already left the city. Though the bomb missed Room 30, it greatly damaged one downstairs room and the motel office and shattered the lobby’s windows.¹⁴ Gaston initiated an estimated \$40,000–50,000 worth of repair work shortly after.¹⁵

In July 1963, the Birmingham City Council repealed the city ordinance requiring segregation in places of public accommodation; although, violent attacks across the city continued.¹⁶ Both desegregation and the lack of travel to Birmingham due to the continued racial tension hurt the A.G. Gaston Motel’s profits. Despite Gaston making comments saying otherwise, the motel reported financial losses in 1965 and 1966.¹⁷

Gaston began a \$250,000 motel expansion and remodel in 1968. An additional two-story building was erected across the motel’s parking lot that housed a banquet hall/supper club on the first floor and additional guest rooms on the second floor.¹⁸ The supper club hosted a variety of events throughout the motel’s operation, including high school sports banquets, proms, religious conferences, and concerts from popular musicians such as The Commodores.¹⁹

After continued financial struggles, Gaston announced in November 1982 that the motel would undergo a \$1 million conversion to provide 39 apartments for elderly and handicapped residents under the name “A.G. Gaston Gardens.” A.G. Gaston died at the age of 103 in January 1996 and Gaston Gardens ceased operations later that year.²⁰ The property then sat vacant for twenty years.

As noted above, the A.G. Gaston Motel was listed, along with several other nearby sites such as the 16th Street Church and Kelly Ingram Park, in the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Birmingham Civil Rights Historic District in 2006 and the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument in 2017.²¹ Today, the NPS and the City of Birmingham cooperatively rehabilitate and manage the site. The City has renovated the coffee shop and curated a gallery exhibit entitled “Black Power is Green: A.G. Gaston and the Path of a Black Millionaire.” NPS completed exterior renovations on the motel in spring 2021 and plans to renovate the interior are in progress.

¹⁴ Claude Sitton, “50 Hurt in Negro Rioting After Birmingham Blasts,” *New York Times*, May 13, 1963; Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home. Birmingham, Alabama: The Climatic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (Simon & Schuster, 2002), 434.

¹⁵ “King Seeks Clear Agreement With B’ham White,” *Jet Magazine*, May 30, 1963, 8.

¹⁶ *Historic Structure Report*, 8.

¹⁷ *Historic Structure Report*, 8-9.

¹⁸ *Historic Structure Report*, 9.

¹⁹ Bob Dickerson, interview by Annabelle Matt, November 6, 2024. Transcript available on request.

²⁰ *Historic Structure Report*, 9.

²¹ “BCR Historic District,” Nomination; Proclamation No.9565.

Analysis of Historic Occupancy

While traveling abroad in the early 1950s, A.G. Gaston learned the National Baptist Convention was searching for accommodations that could host their Black members in Birmingham. He quickly realized there was none. “It disturbed me that facilities for Negroes were so limited...the Negro-operated hotels were little more than shelter for transients.”²² Upon returning to the states, he immediately began making plans for the A.G. Gaston Motel. When the motel opened in 1954, the National Baptist Convention was its first customer.²³ Other conventions, large groups, and guests—both Black and White—soon followed.

The A.G. Gaston Motel became a popular and comfortable safe haven for travelers. Its listing in the *Negro Motorist Green Book* from 1956 to 1962 (excepting 1958) signaled to Black travelers in Birmingham that it could provide high-class service free from racial harassment.²⁴ As such, it was the go-to place for Black professionals visiting the segregated city and one of the only places in town where people of different races could mingle together.²⁵

The motel attracted numerous influential, famous, or soon-to-be famous African Americans as guests. After facing harassment and violence in 1956, both Autherine Lucy and Fred Shuttlesworth took refuge at the A.G. Gaston Motel.²⁶ In October 1957, writer and activist James Baldwin stayed overnight.²⁷ White photographers Bruce Davidson and Bob Adelman resided at the motel as they documented the civil rights movement.²⁸ Professional baseball player Willie Mays stayed as a guest for two weeks in January 1961 under a false name.²⁹ He was not the only athlete to stay there. Jackie Robinson, Floyd Patterson, and Hank Aaron all visited the motel, the former two after it was bombed in May 1963 and the latter in February 1968.³⁰ The motel also reportedly attracted many entertainers over the years including Al Hibbler, Joan Baez, Dick

²² A.G. Gaston, *Green Power, the Successful Way of A.G. Gaston* (Southern University Press, 1968), 97-98.

²³ Gaston, *Green Power*, 110.

²⁴ “The Green Book,” Digital Collections, New York Public Library,

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/the-green-book>.

²⁵ Ralph David Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography* (Harper & Row, 1989), 240;

Virginia Volker, interview by Horace Huntley, June 26, 1996, BCRI Oral History Collection, BCRI,

<https://bcriohp.org/items/show/108>.

²⁶ Sutton, *A.G. Gaston Motel*, 39; Anne Braden, interview by Andrew Manis, October 29, 1988, Andrew M. Manis Oral History Interviews, Birmingham Public Library,

<https://cdm16044.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15099coll2/id/73>.

²⁷ Bill V. Mullen, “Baldwin This Time: An Excerpt from Bill V. Mullen’s New Biography, James Baldwin: Living in Fire, and an Interview with the Author,” *James Baldwin Review* 5 (2019): 119; Ed Pavlić, “‘Indisputably Available’: The Texture—Gendered, Sexual, Violent—of James Baldwin’s Southern Silences,” *James Baldwin Review* 7 (2021): 21.

²⁸ Sutton, *A.G. Gaston Motel*, 78-80.

²⁹ “Mays, In Birmingham, Won’t Discuss Marriage Rift,” *Jet Magazine*, January 26, 1961, 28.

³⁰ Sidney Carlson-White, “What Birmingham Means to Us in the North,” Jackie Robinson Museum, <https://www.jackierobinsonmuseum.org/learn/stories/what-birmingham-means-to-us-in-the-north/>; Clippings Box 7, A.G. Gaston Collection, BCRI.

Gregory, Johnny Mathis, Nina Simone, Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, James Brown, Pete Seeger, Stevie Wonder, Little Richard, and Tina Turner.³¹ Future chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell even stayed there for his honeymoon.³²

Beyond out-of-town guests, the A.G. Gaston Motel's coffee shop, restaurant, and live entertainment attracted the local community. Food and drink options such as fried chicken, hushpuppies, fries, salad, 35-cent Coca-Cola, and high-quality coffee meant patrons were well-provided for as they socialized.³³

Though little is known about the staff of the A.G. Gaston Motel, they were key figures in its management and reputation. Ed Nathaniel Moore was hired as manager in 1955 and Herbert Varner as the nightwatchman in 1958.³⁴ Ernest and Caroline Gibson took over the management of the motel between February 1963 and 1964, overseeing its operations while it hosted the leaders, activists, and demonstrators of the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement. During this time, the Gibsons stayed in two rooms on the property. They had received threats to their home and thought the motel would be safer, despite the business also receiving threats that spring.³⁵

Civil Rights Leaders at the A.G. Gaston Motel

From April to May 1963, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) operated out of the A.G. Gaston Motel, using it as a base to spearhead the Birmingham campaign Project C. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph David Abernathy stayed in Room 30, the primary suite.³⁶ Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth stayed in Room 24 in early May, following a severe injury from a water hose blast.³⁷ Other members of the leadership team, including Wyatt Tee Walker, Andrew Young, James Bevel, and Dorothy Cotton, were assigned rooms in the motel as well.

Their presence transformed the A.G. Gaston Motel into a central hub of activity. National civil rights leaders met with local community members, activists gathered to take part in sit-ins and marches, and press from around the world covered it all with rapt attention. With so many people around, Young likened the motel to “grand central station at rush hour.”³⁸

³¹ Robert Mayor, *When the Children Marched: The Birmingham Civil Rights Movement*, (Enslow Publishers, 2008), 97; Sutton, *A.G. Gaston Motel*, 78-80; Carol Jenkins and Elizabeth Gardner Hines, *Black Titan: A.G. Gaston and the Making of a Black American Millionaire*, (One World, 2004), 163; “Pete Seeger Tours South for SNCC,” *The Student Voice* 3, no. 4 (December 1, 1962); Nims E. Gay, interview by Horace Huntley, April 6, 1995, BCRI Oral History Collection, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, <https://bcriohp.org/items/show/64>.

³² Jenkins and Gardner Hines, *Black Titan*, 163.

³³ Clippings Box 7; Sutton, *A.G. Gaston Motel*, 35.

³⁴ Ella Martin, “Dots...and Dashes,” *Huntsville Mirror*, August 27, 1955, 3; “Woodlawn News,” *Huntsville Mirror*, August 23, 1958, 5.

³⁵ Sutton, *A.G. Gaston Motel*, 87.

³⁶ Abernathy, *Walls Came Tumbling*, 240.

³⁷ Fred Shuttlesworth, interview 4 of 5 by Horace Huntley, December 10, 1996, BCRI Oral History Collection, BCRI, <https://bcriohp.org/items/show/122>; Paul Kix, *You Have to Be Prepared to Die Before You Can Live: Ten Weeks in Birmingham that Changed America*, (Celadon Books, 2023), 248-249; Mayor, *When Children Marched*, 111-112.

³⁸ Jenkins and Gardner Hines, *Black Titan*, 195.

Beginning on April 9, 1963, members of the SCLC and ACMHR met daily in Room 30 to strategize with local pastors, businessmen (including A.G. Gaston), lawyers, and high school activists.³⁹ Though other areas of the motel were also used for meetings, the primary suite was used so frequently, it was nicknamed the “War Room.”

In the early hours of April 11, Bull Connor’s deputy served a temporary injunction banning all anti-segregation protest in Birmingham to King and Abernathy, who were sipping coffee in the motel’s restaurant surrounded by reporters. The civil rights leaders proceeded to meet with their advising committee in the War Room suite to debate whether the April 12th Good Friday march should proceed. “They positioned themselves in the suite’s living room, twenty-five people standing and sitting and breathing in a room meant for perhaps eight. King took a seat at the living room table and dragged on a cigarette.”⁴⁰ King listened and then went into the suite’s bedroom to think and pray, ultimately deciding to march.⁴¹ After he was arrested and incarcerated, he sent pieces of what would become his *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* to Walker in Room 30 of the A.G. Gaston Motel to transcribe and publish.⁴²

As the campaign continued, the War Room suite continued to act as a conference room, office, and home. It was the place where Young wrestled Shuttlesworth to the ground to prevent him from marching and where Bobby Kennedy called to discuss the movement’s progress.⁴³ It was the place where Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader Jim Foreman found King “on the phone, wearing a robe and pajamas, and about to tuck into a steak dinner from room service.”⁴⁴ It was the place King would retreat to make difficult decisions, and the location from which he and Young would emerge to eat barbeque ribs at the motel’s restaurant.⁴⁵ It also served as the location for at least one press conference, as evidenced by archival photographs held by the Library of Congress, the Associated Press, and Getty Images.

While the War Room was primarily reserved for private strategizing, heated debate, contemplation, and rest, the motel’s courtyard was the public face of Project C. King, Abernathy, and Shuttlesworth held press conferences from the courtyard patio and made speeches to demonstrators from the balcony walkway.⁴⁶

Even after Project C ended, the motel continued to serve civil rights leadership. The SCLC returned to the A.G. Gaston Motel and “their upper room” twice in 1964. They coordinated plans

³⁹ For full list of participants, see Ruth Pendleton, *Minutes: Central Committee 1963* (Birmingham Historical Society, 2013), 3-4.

⁴⁰ Kix, *Prepared to Die*, 113-120.

⁴¹ Abernathy, *Walls Came Tumbling*, 248-249, 267; Dorothy Cotton, *If Your Back’s Not Bent: The Role of the Citizenship Education Program in the Civil Rights Movement*, (Atria Books, 2012), 210-211.

⁴² Kix, *Prepared to Die*, 147-149.

⁴³ Kix, *Prepared to Die*, 257; McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 417.

⁴⁴ McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 399.

⁴⁵ Kix, *Prepared to Die*, 188-189; Sutton, *A.G. Gaston Motel*, 77.

⁴⁶ Alabama Media Group Collection, Alabama Department of Archives & History; David Vann, interview by James DeVinney, November 1, 1985, Eyes on the Prize Collection, Washington University in St. Louis Library, <http://repository.wustl.edu/concern/videos/rj4306351>.

for Selma there in May and organized future grassroots efforts and voter drives from the War Room in November.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Abernathy, *Walls Came Tumbling*, 299; “SCLC Steps Up Vote Drive, Plans Job Push,” *Jet Magazine*, November 27, 1964, 49.

Evidence of Room Furnishings

At the time of the motel's opening, A.G. Gaston boasted "We just didn't spare any costs."⁴⁸ While this cannot be definitively confirmed, it's clear that Gaston wanted to provide first-class accommodations to his incoming guests. This would mean filling the motel with modern and upscale furnishings.

Initial coverage of the motel in the *Birmingham News* indicated that Gaston bought furnishings from the local Rhodes-Carroll Furniture Company, including their "finest and most substantial" "Mengel" line, and had contracted Mr. and Mrs. Dave Chernis as interior decorators.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, the exact furnishings from Rhodes-Carroll or the stylings of the Chernises cannot be identified as no catalogs or records from either company are discoverable in the public record. A feature on Rhodes-Carroll furniture in the *Birmingham News* did show some Mengel furniture, but it appears to be inconsistent with the furniture seen in motel photographs.⁵⁰

New furnishings were incorporated during the February 1963 renovation, including "new furniture, paintings, carpet, and electric fixtures."⁵¹ The extent to which these changes occurred throughout the motel, or whether they were primarily focused on the restaurant remains unclear. It is noted however, that the renovated restaurant included metal and leather chairs from renowned mid-century designer Herman Miller;⁵² thus, it is likely additional Herman Miller items appeared elsewhere throughout the motel. Beyond this, A.G. Gaston was known to regularly tweak the motel's décor in light of renovations or his recent travels.⁵³

War Room Suite, Room 209

Black and white photographs taken for the *Birmingham News* in June 1954 and a colorized 1954 postcard provide visual evidence of the suite's original furnishings (figures 8a-b, 9a-b). Views of the suite's sitting area and bedroom show a large two-room space divided by a track curtain for privacy. The entire suite is furnished with patterned carpeting, lightly painted walls, two overhead lamps, and a metal fan coil. Custom-made, half-length, floral-patterned curtains hang from the windows.⁵⁴ The room's furniture includes at least three armchairs, two upholstered sofas, two end tables, a dial television, a desk and desk chair, a waste bin, a distinct coffee table, a dresser, and three daybeds. The daybeds are especially reminiscent of Herman Miller's George

⁴⁸ "A.G. Gaston Enterprise Modern in All Details." *The Birmingham News*, June 30, 1954, 10.

⁴⁹ "De Luxe Motel," 28.

⁵⁰ "Commercial Furnishings from Rhodes-Carroll Contract Dept," *Birmingham News*, June 25, 1955, 28.

⁵¹ Sutton, *A.G. Gaston Motel*, 55-63.

⁵² Sutton, *A.G. Gaston Motel*, 60-63.

⁵³ Sutton, *A.G. Gaston Motel*, 37; Chris McNair Archives.

⁵⁴ "Enterprise Modern," 10.

Nelson Daybed, which has been emblematic of mid-century modern design since its creation in 1949.⁵⁵ Electric table lamps of three different designs are placed throughout the room, on each end table, the desk, and the dresser. A large rectangular mirror hangs above the dresser while a print reminiscent of St. Denis Gate by Johannes Schiefer hangs above one daybed.⁵⁶ Additional amenities within the room include a tray containing a water glass and pitcher atop the dresser and two standing ashtrays.

An additional colorized photograph found within the papers of Birmingham lawyer Arthur Shores shows little difference in the War Room suite over the next several years. The coffee table moved across the sitting room and a daybed was made up with a bedspread. Though this postcard is undated, it appears to be within the period of interpretation.⁵⁷

When Ralph David Abernathy checked into the suite on April 3, 1963, he recalled the room having “one bedroom with two double beds and a sitting room with chairs, a table, and a desk” as well as “cheap curtains and plastic-framed pictures.”⁵⁸ Though Abernathy may have been referring to actual beds, it seems likely he was still referring to the daybeds. Images from a War Room press conference from the period feature the same desk, curtains, and framed print as the 1954 *Birmingham News* photographs.⁵⁹ From advertisements boasting telephones in every room and anecdotal accounts of Fred Shuttlesworth talking to Bobby Kennedy in the War Room in 1963, the War Room suite also had a telephone, though the exact model and location remains unknown.⁶⁰

According to an image from the September 1963 issue of *Ebony*, the War Room suite received a major furnishing update after the motel was bombed by the Ku Klux Klan that spring. Plain curtains replaced the previous floral patterns, and additional hanging pendant lamps were installed. A sleek L-shaped sofa, higher coffee table, wood and leather armchairs, and new television supplanted previous furnishings in the sitting area.⁶¹ Changes to the bedroom also occurred, likely at the same time. An image dated to 1966 shows a double bed with a quilted covering, a long vanity dresser with a Shaker chair, and two arched mirrors.⁶²

The suite’s dividing curtain remained until sometime after 1968, when the cased opening was replaced with a partition wall and door to provide guests with the ability to close off the sitting room from the sleeping and bathroom areas.⁶³

⁵⁵ See <https://www.hermanmiller.com/products/seating/lounge-seating/nelson-daybed/>.

⁵⁶ See <https://backroadpicking.com/products/2-johannes-schiefer-impressionist-oil-prints-st-denis-gate-alexander-bridge>.

⁵⁷ “Postcard of the A.G. Gaston Motel in Birmingham, Al,” Book of letters sent to Arthur Shores (volume 2), Alabama Textual Materials Collection, Alabama Department of Archives and History.

⁵⁸ Abernathy, *Walls Came Tumbling*, 240, 582.

⁵⁹ LOC, AP, Getty

⁶⁰ “Enterprise Modern,” 10; Kix, *Prepared to Die*, 257.

⁶¹ “A.G. Gaston Motel.” *Ebony Magazine*, September 1963, 126.

⁶² “A.G. Gaston Motel.” *Ebony Magazine*, June 1966, 39.

⁶³ *Historic Structure Report*, 14-16.

Typical Guest Room and Bathroom, Room 207

Room 207 on the second floor of the A.G. Gaston Motel has been selected to represent all lodging rooms within the motel between 1954 and 1963. Unless noted otherwise, the information that follows is accurate for all rooms of this type, though neighboring rooms would have mirrored layouts, similar to modern hotel rooms.

The A.G. Gaston Motel offered Black travelers modern, double and single accommodations when visiting segregated Birmingham. According to Echols's original construction documents and architectural drawings, each guest room included a closet with a hat rack, clothes rod, and luggage rack.⁶⁴

Local newspaper advertisements announcing the motel's opening in 1954 describe the "de luxe" comfort amenities, including an "automatic musical vending device," or radio, telephone, and air conditioning in each unit.⁶⁵ Additional coverage noted that each guest room boasted custom-made window treatments and bed coverings, and a Spring Air mattress.⁶⁶ One advertisement from this time depicts a guest room with an armchair positioned near the window, as well as a small nightstand, lamp, floral patterned curtains, and two pieces of framed artwork above the double bed.⁶⁷ A 1954 colorized postcard highlights a similar scene, though the chair is missing and the nightstand is on the other side of the bed (figure 9a). The saturation of the colorized postcard likely exaggerates the true shade of the objects within the room, as well as the color of the painted walls. The guest room walls were likely a pale pinkish beige comparable to the color "Beige" in the 2001 Sherwin-Williams "Suburban Modern" color palette.⁶⁸

The floors were originally asphalt tile; however, a 1962 advertisement claims each room was furnished with "wall-to-wall carpeting."⁶⁹ Dial televisions can already be seen within a typical guest room by spring 1963,⁷⁰ and by 1964, modern radios, coffee makers, and ice machines were also installed in each unit. Two years later, advertisements highlighted a "resort atmosphere" with valet laundry service and a twenty-four-hour bellhop.⁷¹ The televisions were rentals, as indicated by a May 1967 property tax appeal.⁷² It is unclear if any other amenities would have been rented.

Photographs taken by Birmingham photographer Chris McNair indicate the guest rooms underwent a major renovation and furnishing update by 1969. His images capture two different guest rooms. The partial view of the first room reveals painted walls, half-length curtains, wall

⁶⁴ *Historic Structure Report*, 14.

⁶⁵ "Nation's Newest," 6; "Enterprise Modern," 10.

⁶⁶ "Enterprise Modern," 10.

⁶⁷ "Nation's Newest," 6.

⁶⁸ *A.G. Gaston Motel Historic Structure Report, Appendix F: Historic Paint Analysis* (Lord Aeck Sargent, 2016), 4.

⁶⁹ "A.G. Gaston Motel." *Ebony Magazine*, June 1962, 113.

⁷⁰ "Dick Gregory at A.G. Gaston Motel for a Press Conference After His Release from Jail," Declan Haun Collection of Visual Materials, Chicago History Museum, <https://images.chicagohistory.org/search/?searchQuery=ICHi-078465>.

⁷¹ Sutton, *A.G. Gaston Motel*, 99; "A.G. Gaston Motel." *Ebony Magazine*, June 1966, 39.

⁷² "1965/1966 Gaston Motel Income Statement," Board of Equalization Records, Birmingham Public Library; *Historic Structure Report*, 9.

and table lamps, a vanity dresser and chair (similar to that seen in the War Room), two curved armchairs, two end tables, two double beds, a telephone, and water glasses. Artwork appears to hang above both beds across from a framed mirror. The second photographed room is similar, but boasts wood-paneled walls, full-length curtains, indigenous artwork, and a pull-out couch instead of the double beds. A circular ashtray is visible on the vanity.

Bathroom

Echols's 1954 architectural drawings indicate each guest room contained a private, tiled bathroom and shower with a marble floor threshold separating the bathroom from the main sleeping area. Each bathroom consisted of a wall-mounted sink, toilet, and prefabricated Fiat No. 27 shower. The single source of lighting was a Kirlin #1207 75-watt recessed fixture located in the ceiling of each bathroom.⁷³

Based upon a small glimpse of the primary suite bathroom, this report assumes that all guest bathrooms featured a shower curtain and rod, a towel bar, and white towels.⁷⁴ Additionally, all units would have had a toilet paper holder, as seen in images from the motel's renovation into the Gaston Gardens in 1982.⁷⁵

There is little evidence to indicate that the motel's guest bathrooms underwent significant renovations over the years. Portions of the ceramic wall tiles, seen in the Gaston Garden renovations, remain today as do the original floor tiles of the primary suite bathroom.⁷⁶ The walls consisted of square, peach color tiles with a dark, rectangular maroon border, while the floor was covered with small, brown- or tan-colored square tiles.

Although not specifically identified in any materials consulted for this report, motel-branded complimentary soap bars were likely provided in the restroom for guests. Similar motel soap bars from the 1950s and 1960s can be found in various repositories, including the Henry Ford Museum.⁷⁷

Lobby

The lobby served as an entrance point to the motel and was intended to provide guests "an introduction to relaxed living." A.G. Gaston took great pride in the motel and reportedly decorated it "as if it was his own living room." Photographs of A.G. and Minnie Gaston reportedly hung on the walls, although the exact images and placement of the photographs are not specified.⁷⁸

⁷³ *Historic Structure Report*, 14, 27, 29.

⁷⁴ Figure 10b.

⁷⁵ Hardy, Jeff. "Conversion to Give Landmark New Purpose." *Birmingham Post-Herald*, December 14, 1982, B3.

⁷⁶ Hardy, Jeff. "Conversion to Give Landmark New Purpose." *Birmingham Post-Herald*, December 14, 1982, B3; Figures 11-12.

⁷⁷ Example: "Castle Motel Bar Soap, 1928-1965," The Henry Ford Museum, <https://www.thehenryford.org/collections-and-research/digital-collections/artifact/365343>.

⁷⁸ Sutton, *A.G. Gaston Motel*, 37.

A 1954 postcard of the A.G. Gaston Motel boasts a “beautifully appointed lobby” and features a colorized image of the reception desk area. Visible in the postcard are recessed lighting fixtures, the reception desk, a piece of artwork on the back wall, a dial television, sofa, end table, curtains, and several plants. The lobby’s original checkered floor, red brick accents, and wood paneling are also illustrated.⁷⁹ Official letterhead used by the motel also features a snapshot of the lobby from a different point of view. Guests are seen sitting on two sofas with a coffee table, end table, and plant around them.⁸⁰ Five Kirlin #1208 150-watt recessed ceiling light fixtures illuminated the lobby, one spaced equally apart in each corner of the room as well as one mounted over the reception desk. Two Kirlin #568 100-watt recessed fixtures were also located over the reception desk. One Kirlin #1212 300-watt recessed ceiling fixture was mounted in the center of the room.⁸¹

The original L-shaped reception desk was custom designed, composed of fir wood and Formica, positioned near the back of the lobby. The *Historic Structure Report* describes the desk as having an inward-sloping, beveled front and side, with a finished surface of 3/4 inch end grain fir plywood sitting on a 4-inch composite base. The desk separated the larger waiting area from a clerk’s room, linen/storage room, and restroom.⁸²

Also visible in the postcard are curtains hanging over the windows along the exterior walls. The colorized image suggests they were light green; however, the color saturation has likely altered their true shade.⁸³ Photographs from the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture capture the lobby’s exterior from the courtyard balcony. In these photographs, the curtains appear to be a sheer, light-colored fabric.⁸⁴

Although not documented in any sources identified for this report, motel room keys were likely kept inside the reception desk drawers or on hooks for staff to distribute to guests. The exact description of the motel room keys is unknown; however, similar keys from the period of interpretation can be found in archival collections such as the Henry Ford Museum.⁸⁵ Similarly, complimentary items such as stationary and matchbooks with advertisements for the motel were likely available in the lobby for guests.⁸⁶ The exact locations of these items is not specified; however, they were likely positioned at the reception desk, end tables, or on the coffee table.

⁷⁹ Figure 9a-b.

⁸⁰ Figure 1; “Mary Garin-Painter.”

⁸¹ *Historic Structure Report*, 28-29.

⁸² *Historic Structure Report*, 13, 27.

⁸³ Figure 9a-b.

⁸⁴ Figure 2.

⁸⁵ Example: “Sea Breeze Motel Key, 1955-1970,” The Henry Ford Museum, <https://www.thehenryford.org/collections-and-research/digital-collections/artifact/365286>.

⁸⁶ “A.G. Gaston Motel (2 Matchbooks)”.

Courtyard

The courtyard of the A.G. Gaston Motel was extensively photographed during the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement as prominent leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph David Abernathy, Fred Shuttlesworth, and others held numerous press conferences there.

Original furnishings in the courtyard consisted of two metal patio furniture sets, complete with a circular table, four chairs, and a scalloped table umbrella.⁸⁷ An advertisement for the motel's opening, published in the *Birmingham News* on June 30, 1954, listed the "convenient, spacious parking court," as a key amenity and insinuated the umbrellaed table was the perfect location to relax.⁸⁸ A 1954 postcard of the A.G. Gaston Motel indicates the patio umbrellas were a shade of green to match the exterior railings and stairs.⁸⁹ The courtyard also included a small, circular birdbath located in a flower bed near the back patio.⁹⁰

From the courtyard, guests could identify their rooms using square, vinyl room numbers located on the guest room exterior doors. The numbers began at "1" on the first floor near the lobby and continued chronologically across the first floor, up the second floor, and ended at room "30"—later known as the War Room Suite—above the lobby.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Figure 6.

⁸⁸ "Nation's Newest," 6.

⁸⁹ Figure 9a-b.

⁹⁰ "Martin Luther King Jr. and Others Holding a Press Conference at the Gaston Motel in Birmingham, Alabama," Alabama Media Group Collection, Alabama Department of Archives and History, <https://digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/amg/id/16446/rec/1>.

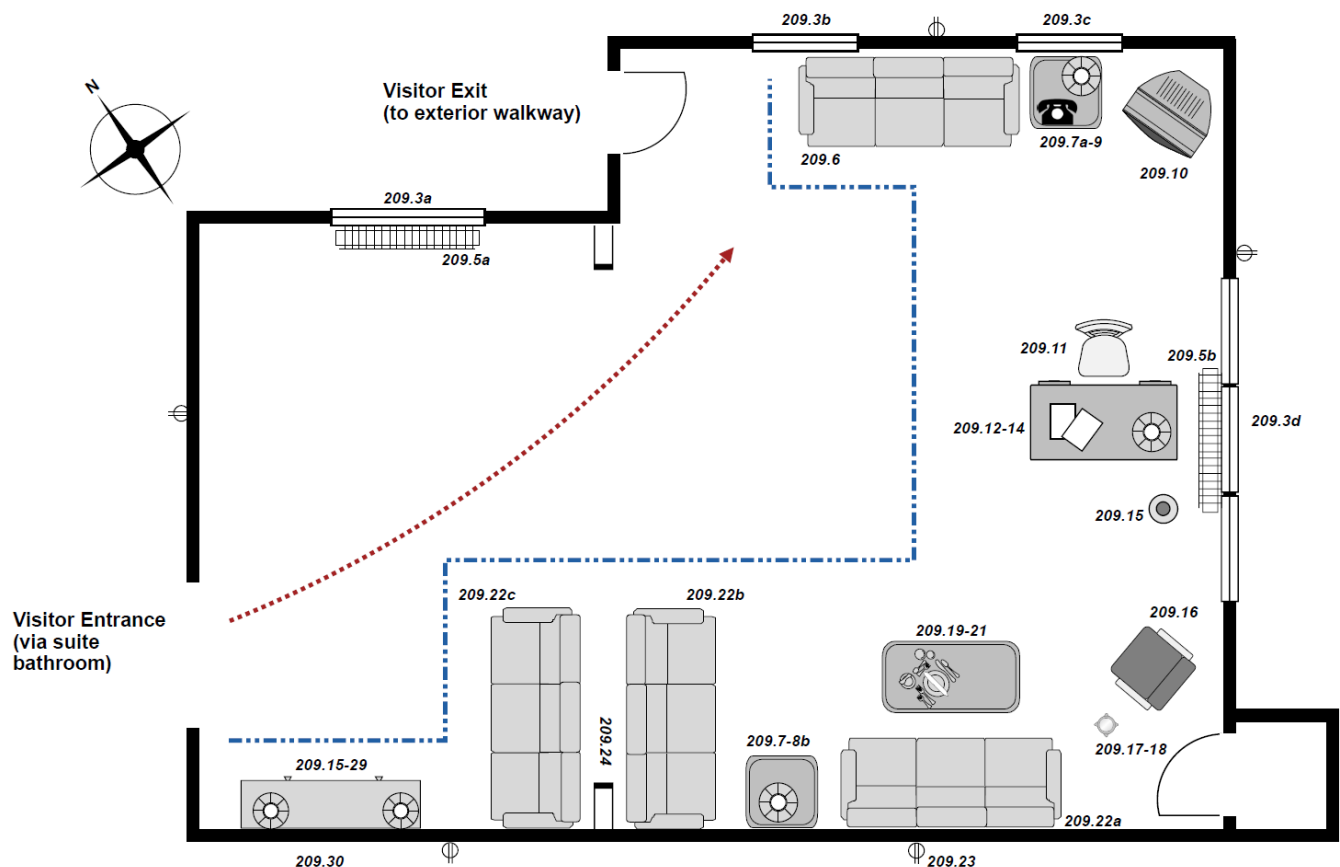
⁹¹ Figure 7; "Fred Shuttlesworth at the Gaston Motel in Birmingham, Alabama, During a Press Conference Held by Martin Luther King, Jr.," Alabama Media Group Collection, Alabama Department of Archives and History, <https://digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/amg/id/200574/rec/1>.

Furnishings Plan

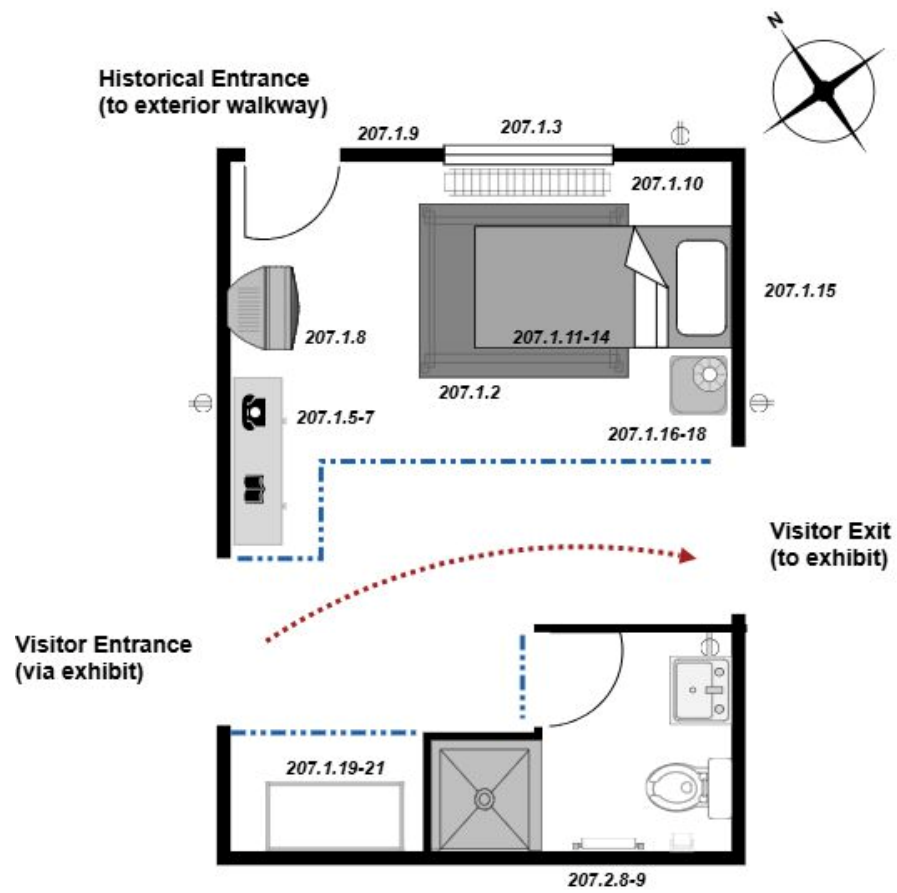
Floor Plans

The following floor plans are based on the dimensions, construction drawings, and archival photographs of these spaces. However, as it is impossible to tell the exact dimensions of the furniture, an accurate scale can only be estimated, not guaranteed. Suggested visitor circulation pathways and barrier placement are noted in red and blue, respectively. Electrical outlets are symbolically notated when known.

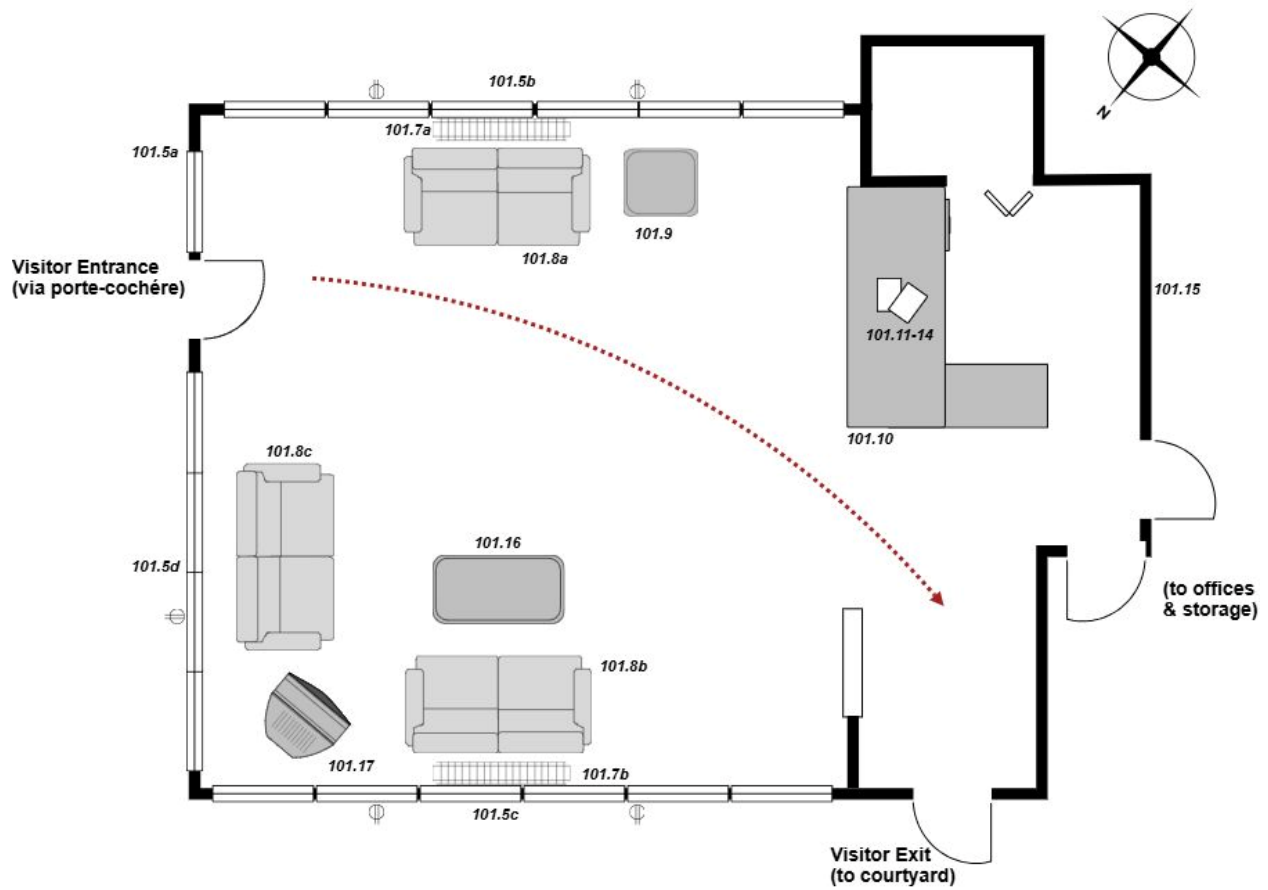
War Room Suite, Room 209



Typical Guest Room, Room 207



Lobby



List of Recommended Furnishings

All recommended furnishings will date to the primary period of interpretation, June 1954–May 1963.

The acquisition and potential accession of these furnishings should follow the guidelines for purchasing, accessioning, and use of collections in historic furnished structures as cited in the NPS Museum Handbook. At minimum, furnishings acquired by donation, purchase, or trade should be in good condition, be able to tolerate an exhibit environment, and enhance the interpretive story and historical setting.

War Room Suite, Room 209

Located in the southwestern corner of the second floor of the A.G. Gaston Motel, the War Room suite, historically identified as Room 30, was the motel's primary suite. Its relatively large square footage, compared to other guest rooms, allowed civil rights leaders to confer and strategize in private.

Visitors will enter the historically furnished bedroom and sitting area through the suite's former bathroom. Bathroom fixtures and some duplicative furnishings historically placed in the northeastern portion of the suite have been omitted to allow for a more accessible visitor pathway. A barrier with interpretive labels will separate visitors from the furnished section of the suite.

HFR #	OBJECT AND LOCATION	EVIDENCE	RECOMMENDATION
209.1	Ceiling light , star-shaped, 2 (center of sitting room and bedroom)	Figure 8a-b	Acquire replicas in coordination with construction team. ⁹²
209.2	Carpet , zig-zag pattern	Figure 8a-b	Acquire replica or fabricate in coordination with construction team.
209.3a-d	Curtains , floral pattern front, white backing, 62 inches in length, 4 (northeastern and southeastern window exposures)	Figures 8a, 9a-b, 10	Fabricate from a period-appropriate fabric.
209.4	Painted walls , cream	Paint Analysis Figure 8a-b, 9a-b	Paint using modern equivalent in coordination

⁹² Joss & Main's Putnam Glass Semi Flush Mount presents one option.

			with construction team.
209.5a-b	Fan coil , metal, blue (under larger northeastern and southeastern windows)	<i>Final Construction Drawings</i> , A401 Figure 9a-b	Fabricate in coordination with construction team.
209.6	Sofa , dark jacquard upholstery and arms, squat square legs (northeastern wall)	Figure 9a.	Acquire vintage and reupholster.
209.7a-b	End table , glass tray top, maple frame with lower shelf and double-bar enclosures, 2 (northeastern and southwestern walls)	Figure 8a-b, 9a-b	Acquire vintage.
209.8a	Table lamp , electric, cone-shaped base with structural indents, white drum lampshade with thin, whip-stitched rope or leather border, 2 (on end tables)	Figure 8a-b, 9a-b	Acquire vintage base. Acquire replica or fabricate shade as vintage shades do not age well.
209.9	Telephone , potentially Rotary Western Electric (on northeastern end table)	Figure 9a <i>Ebony</i> , June 1962, 113 Kix, <i>Prepared to Die</i> , 257 McWhorter, <i>Carry Me Home</i> , 399	Acquire vintage.
209.10	Dial television , potentially RCA Kent or 21-2-503N model, on dark stand with two swing doors (eastern corner)	Figures 9a	Acquire vintage.
209.11	Desk chair , wood frame with pulled leather upholstery and metal button fasteners (southeastern wall, east of desk)	Figures 8a, 9a, 10	Acquire vintage.
209.12	Desk , glass top, wooden frame, horizontal and side drawers, open square support on right (perpendicular to center of southeastern wall)	Figures 8a, 9a-b, 10	Acquire vintage.
209.13	Desk lamp , metal base, white tapered drum lampshade with star pattern (on desk)	Figures 8a, 9a-b	Acquire vintage base. Fabricate lampshade.
209.14a-d	Document , <i>Letter from the Birmingham Jail</i> , hand-written across multiple pieces of paper (on desk)	Kix, <i>Prepared to Die</i> , 147–159	Fabricate.
209.15	Trash can , circular, tan (southeastern wall, south of desk)	Figure 9a-b.	Acquire vintage.
209.16	Club chair , tufted upholstery, maple arm accents and legs, metal button fasteners, (southern corner)	Figures 8a, 9b	Acquire vintage.
209.17	Ashtray , standing with curved arm ending in a knob, chrome (southern corner)	Figures 8a-b, 9b	Acquire vintage.
209.18a-b	Cigarette , 2 (in ashtray)	Kix, <i>Prepared to Die</i> , 113–120 Mayor. <i>When the Children Marched</i> , 46	Acquire replicas.
209.19	Coffee table , glass-top, maple frame with elongated ovals cut out of angled legs and star-like	Figures 8a-b, 9b	Acquire vintage or fabricate.

	square cut out of center on each side (southwestern wall in front of sofa) ⁹³		
209.20a-b	Cup and saucer , white ceramic with dark rim border (on coffee table)	Figure 13	Acquire vintage. ⁹⁴
209.21a	Plate , white ceramic with dark rim border (on coffee table)	McWhorter, <i>Carry Me Home</i> , 399	Acquire vintage. ⁹⁵
209.21b	Steak dinner (on plate)	McWhorter, <i>Carry Me Home</i> , 399	Acquire prop.
209.21c	Silverware , plain (on plate)	Figure 13	Acquire replica.
209.22a-c	Daybed , Herman Miller George Nelson design, 3 (southwestern wall, 2 perpendicular on either side of dividing curtain)	Figures 8a-b, 9b	Acquire similar from manufacturer. ⁹⁶
209.23	Framed print , after St. Denis Gate by Johannes Schiefer, frame potentially plastic (southwestern wall above daybed)	Figures 8a-b, 9b	Acquire replica or fabricate.
209.24	Curtain , subtle horizontal stripe texture, 94 inches in length (perpendicular to southwestern wall, dividing sitting room and bedroom)	Figures 8b, 9b	Fabricate from period-appropriate fabric.
209.25	Dresser , wood, eight drawers with lipped handles on left, cabinet door on right (western corner)	Figure 8b	Acquire vintage.
209.26a-b	Table lamp , cone-shaped with circular base, 2 (on dresser)	Figure 8b	Acquire vintage. ⁹⁷
209.27	Vanity tray , rectangular, likely plastic (on dresser)	Figure 8b	Acquire vintage.
209.28	Water glass , glass, slightly concave base (on vanity tray)	Figure 8b	Acquire replica.
209.29	Water pitcher , glass (on vanity tray)	Figure 8b	Acquire replica. Metal also acceptable as seen in courtyard press photos.
209.30	Framed mirror , rectangular, mahogany frame (above dresser)	Figure 8b	Acquire replica or fabricate.

Typical Guest Room, Room 207

The typical guest room within the A.G. Gaston Motel provided single or double occupancy to travelers to Birmingham. Its historic furnishings will give visitors a sense of time and place as they pass between the exhibit spaces.

⁹³ Identical table seen in social media post by Time Worn Furniture, February 20, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLiRLhBAE-X/>.

⁹⁴ Dishware in the Lenox Moonspun Design on Replacements.com may be one option.

⁹⁵ Dishware in the Lenox Moonspun Design on Replacements.com may be one option.

⁹⁶ The contemporary Nelson Daybed (item no. 100620894) with back bolster, hairpin legs, and plain, light upholstery from Herman Miller is recommended.

⁹⁷ A Ward & Goldstone Bakelite lamp with a Poole Pottery Helios shade is a similar option.

Visitors will enter and exit the typical guest room through new passageways near the back of the room. Because this limits the available space, some historic furnishings have been omitted. Additionally, a throw rug has been included instead of wall-to-wall carpeting to demonstrate the room's transition from tile to carpet flooring. A barrier with interpretive labels will separate visitors from the furnishings but still allow them to look into the bathroom.

HFR #	OBJECT AND LOCATION	EVIDENCE	RECOMMENDATION
207.1.1	Floor tile , 9x9 square asphalt tile	<i>Historic Structure Report</i> , 14	Acquire replica or fabricate in coordination with construction team.
207.1.2	Throw rug , dark	Figure 9a <i>Ebony</i> , June 1962, 113	Acquire replica or fabricate in coordination with construction team.
207.1.3	Curtains , floral pattern front, white backing, 56.5 inches in length (northeastern window exposure)	Figures 1, 9a	Fabricate from a period-appropriate fabric.
207.1.4	Painted walls , pink beige	Paint Analysis Figure 9a	Paint using modern equivalent in coordination with construction team.
207.1.5	Dresser (northwestern wall)	Mayor, <i>When the Children Marched</i> , 127–133	Acquire vintage.
207.1.6	Guidebook , <i>Negro Traveler's Green Book</i> , 1956-1962 edition (on dresser)	Common accessory for Black guests of this time.	Acquire replica or fabricate.
207.1.7	Telephone , potentially Rotary Western Electric (on dresser)	Figure 1, 9a <i>Ebony</i> , June 1962, 113 "Mary Garin-Painter."	Acquire vintage.
207.1.8	Dial television , dials to right of monitor (northwestern wall)	Mayor, <i>When the Children Marched</i> , 127–133	Acquire vintage.
207.1.9	Wall radio (northeastern wall)	Figure 9a	Acquire vintage.
207.1.10	Fan coil , blue (under northeastern window)	Figures 1, 9a	Fabricate in coordination with construction team.
207.1.11	Single bed , flat headboard and footboard, light wood (southeastern wall)	Figure 1, 9a "Mary Garin-Painter."	Acquire vintage or replica. Single recommended due to space constraints.
207.1.12	Mattress , Spring Air (on bed frame)	<i>Birmingham News</i> , June 26, 1954, 28	Acquire replica. 20
207.1.13	Bedsheets , cotton, white (on bed)	Figure 2	Acquire replica. May omit if won't be seen under bedspread.
207.1.14	Bedspread , crisscross pattern, multicolored (on bed)	Figure 1, 9a "Mary Garin-Painter."	Acquire replica or fabricate.
207.1.15	Framed print , portrait orientation, unknown subject, 2 (southeastern wall above bed)	Figure 1, 9a "Mary Garin-Painter."	Acquire pair of period-appropriate prints.
207.1.16	Nightstand , top drawer and bottom open shelf, dark wood frame, light drawer face (southeastern wall, south of bed)	Figure 1, 9a "Mary Garin-Painter."	Fabricate.
207.1.17	Table lamp , figural base,	Figure 1, 9a	Acquire vintage.

	cylindrical lampshade (on nightstand)	“Mary Garin-Painter.”	
207.1.18	Ashtray , square, glass with circular center, inset with motel branding (on nightstand)	Figure 14	Acquire replica and fabricate branding or fabricate all.
207.1.19	Hat Rack (western closet space)	<i>Historic Structure Report</i> , 14	Acquire vintage.
207.1.20	Clothes Rod (western closet space)	<i>Historic Structure Report</i> , 14	Acquire replica.
207.1.21	Luggage Rack (western closet space)	<i>Historic Structure Report</i> , 14	Acquire vintage.
	Bathroom		
207.2.1	Ceiling light , Kirlin 1207 (center)	<i>Historic Structure Report</i> , 29	Acquire similar from manufacturer in coordination with construction team.
207.2.2	Floor tile , miniature square tile in shades of tan, cream, and brown	Figure 11	Acquire replica in coordination with construction team.
207.2.3	Wall tile , square peach tile with maroon tile trim (3/4 length in shower, 1/2 length from floor all walls)	Figures 8b, 12	Acquire replica in coordination with construction team. ⁹⁸
207.2.4	Painted walls , cream	Paint Analysis Figure 8b	Paint using modern equivalent in coordination with construction team.
207.2.5	Sink , wall-mounted (eastern corner)	<i>Historic Structure Report</i> , 27	Install period-appropriate option in coordination with construction team.
207.2.6	Soap , branded (on sink)	Common practice	Fabricate. ⁹⁹
207.2.7	Toilet (southern corner)	<i>Historic Structure Report</i> , 27	Install period-appropriate option in coordination with construction team.
207.2.8	Towel rack , metal (southwestern wall)	Figure 8b	Acquire vintage or replica.
207.2.9	Towels , cotton, white (on towel rack)	Figure 8b	Acquire replicas.
207.2.10	Shower , Fiat No. 27, prefabricated (western corner)	<i>Historic Structure Report</i> , 27	Install period-appropriate option in coordination with construction team.
207.2.11	Curtain rod , chrome, cylindrical (shower opening)	Figure 8b	Install period-appropriate option in coordination with construction team.
207.2.12	Shower curtain (on curtain rod)	Common practice	Acquire replica.

Lobby, Room 101

As in the past, the lobby of the A.G. Gaston Motel will be the entry point for visitors and will serve numerous NPS functions. As such, it cannot be historically furnished with original furnishings; however, the key furnishings listed below should contribute to the maintenance of a

⁹⁸ Clay Squared Bullnose-Mid Century tiles may be a contemporary option.

⁹⁹ Can fabricate based on motel soap bars held at the Henry Ford Museum.

historic atmosphere. To allow for maximum visitor circulation around the front desk, the television has been moved from its historic position in the southern corner to the northern corner, replacing one end table.

HFR #	OBJECT AND LOCATION	EVIDENCE	RECOMMENDATION
101.1a-e	Recessed lighting , Kirlin #1208, 5 (each corner of ceiling and behind reception desk)	<i>Historic Structure Report</i> , 29–30	Acquire similar from manufacturer in coordination with construction team.
101.2	Recessed lighting , Kirlin #1212 (center of ceiling)	<i>Historic Structure Report</i> , 30	Acquire similar from manufacturer in coordination with construction team.
101.3a-b	Recessed lighting , Kirlin #568, 2 (above reception desk)	<i>Historic Structure Report</i> , 30	Acquire similar from manufacturer in coordination with construction team.
101.4	Flooring , checked asphalt tile	<i>Historic Structure Report</i> , 27 Figure 8b	Refinish in coordination with construction team.
101.5a-d	Curtains , sheer, cream or light green, 3 (ceiling to window ledge on northwestern, northeastern, and southeastern window exposures)	Figures 2, 8b	Fabricate using period-appropriate fabric.
101.6	Wall boarding , tongue and groove, light brown stain (southwestern wall)	Figure 9b	Stain and refinish.
101.7a-b	Fan coil , metal, blue (under southeastern and northwestern windows)	<i>Final Construction Drawings</i> , A400	Fabricate in coordination with construction team.
101.8a-c	Sofa , dark upholstery, maple armrests, and angled pin legs, 3 (southeastern, northwestern, and northeastern walls)	Figures 1, 9b	Acquire vintage and upholster if needed. ¹⁰⁰
101.9	End table , two-tier, rectangular, angled pin legs, maple, 2 (southeastern wall)	Figure 9b	Acquire vintage. ¹⁰¹
101.10	Reception desk , L-shaped, narrower base, fir wood with Formica top (perpendicular to southeastern brick column)	<i>Historic Structure Report</i> , 13, 27 Figure 9b	Fabricate.
101.11	Stationary , motel letter given to guests (framed on desk)	Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, A.G. Gaston Display	Fabricate.
101.12	Matchbooks , featuring colorized motel branding (on desk)	"A.G. Gaston Motel (2 Matchbooks.)"	Fabricate.
101.13a-c	Room Keys , diamond-shaped, plastic keychain, 3 (on or hanging behind desk)	Common practice.	Fabricate. ¹⁰²
101.14	Framed picture , of either A.G. and Minnie Gaston or motel	Sutton, <i>A.G. Gaston Motel</i> , 37	Fabricate.

¹⁰⁰ Jens Risom sofas may be an appropriate option.

¹⁰¹ Two-tier designs like those by Heywood Wakefield would be appropriate.

¹⁰² Can fabricate based on motel room keys held at the Henry Ford Museum.

	grand opening (on or hanging behind desk)		
101.15	Framed print , natural subject matter, dark frame (southwestern wall, behind desk)	Figure 9b	Acquire vintage.
101.16	Coffee table , rectangular, four pin legs, maple (in front of northwestern sofa)	Figure 1 “Mary Garin-Painter.”	Acquire vintage. ¹⁰³
101.17	Dial television , potentially RCA Kent or 21-2-503N model, on dark stand with two swing doors (northern corner)	Figure 9b	Acquire vintage.

Courtyard

The courtyard has already been primarily restored to its 1963 conditions. Furnishings important to the historical atmosphere of the courtyard are included below, whether or not they have already been acquired and placed.

HFR #	OBJECT AND LOCATION	EVIDENCE	RECOMMENDATION
001.1a-dd	Door numbers , square, vinyl, adhesive (on top center of guest room doors, beginning at first floor near lobby, ending with War Room door as “30”)	Figure 7	Acquire replicas.
001.2	Paving , brick (patio)	Figure 6	No action needed; already installed.
001.3	Edging , triangular brick (around flower bed)	Figure 6	No action needed; already installed.
001.4a-b	Patio table , four legs form central column before splitting at base, metal, white, 2 (patio)	Figures 1, 6	No action needed; replicas already installed.
001.5a-h	Patio chairs , metal with punched pattern on chairback, rounded arms curve to form base, white, 8 (around patio tables)	Figure 6	No action needed; replicas already installed.
001.6a-b	Patio table umbrella , scalloped, fringed edges, potentially green, 2 (inset in patio tables)	Figure 1, 5, 9a-b	Acquire replica. ¹⁰⁴
001.7	Birdbath , circular, stone, white	Figure 7	No action needed; replica already installed.

¹⁰³ One similar design to consider is the Maple Bench Coffee Table by Paul McCobb Planner Group.

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.wellappointedhouse.com/collections/outdoor-umbrellas-stands/products/green-outdoor-crank-umbrella-with-white-fringe>

Related Media

Visitors will primarily encounter the historical period rooms in the A.G. Gaston Motel through a self-guided experience. For this reason, NPS may install additional media beyond the furnishings to enhance and enrich the experience, such as interpretive panels and audio stations. Any exhibit elements should seek to provide accessibility without compromising the mid-century atmosphere. If utilizing audio, we recommend one audio station per historic space. This will minimize sound overlapping and visitor distractions.

Potential media elements for each historically furnished room are suggested below, which NPS should consider in tandem with a full interpretive plan.

War Room Suite, Room 209

The War Room suite should reflect its role as a workspace for civil rights leaders during their stay in Birmingham. Interpretive media should emphasize the impact that these leaders, discussions, and strategies had on the Birmingham community and the larger civil rights movement. Content panels on reader rails can highlight the archival photographs of press conferences within the suite and how King's *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* was transcribed for publication in this room. One panel should also highlight the use and practicality of the daybeds as visitors will surely ask "Where's the bed?" Additional content in the northern corner of this space can include larger interpretive wall panels and audio content from civil rights leaders' oral histories discussing Project C and the Birmingham Campaign.

Typical Guest Room, Room 207

The guest room should emphasize the standard experience for Black travelers in Birmingham during the 1950s and 60s. Interpretive content before the guest room and reader rail panels within it could feature information on segregated facilities in Birmingham in contrast to the A.G. Gaston Motel, travel during this period as a Black American, and notable guests of the motel. If including photographs of the latter, it is recommended the images are as close to the period of interpretation as possible. One panel may also include interpretive text on how carpet was eventually installed over the room's tiles to keep the motel's "deluxe" reputation, as demonstrated by the throw rug. Audio content of popular music from the 1950s and early 1960s could also be played by speakers near the room's radio.

Lobby, Room 101

Additional media within the lobby should provide orientation and introduce visitors to the site's interpretive themes. Panels could discuss A.G. Gaston's entrepreneurship and various businesses, the site's relationship with other locations within the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument, or an overview of the Birmingham Civil Rights Movement. Images could highlight the motel's grand opening or the Gastons as proprietors. Multimedia content may show historical

news coverage of the civil rights movement in Birmingham or A.G. Gaston's own mindset through one of his oral histories.

Courtyard

NPS rangers have previously offered visitors handheld photographs of scenes from the civil rights movement which occurred in the motel's courtyard during tours. As the primary method of visitation will transition to a self-guided experience in the future, these assets could be converted into static panels with interpretive text located on the patio tables or throughout the courtyard. These panels should highlight the press conferences and speeches that occurred in the courtyard, and the demonstrators and press who gathered there. Additionally, the panels could be numbered to guide guests on how to circulate through the site and proceed to the second-floor exhibits.

Collections Care, Maintenance, and Security

As the motel lacks furnishings original to the property, the site does not need an in-depth conservation strategy. However, all items in the furnished period rooms, whether vintage examples or replicas, should be cared for according to best standards and practices. This means maintaining a safe, secure, and environmentally stable area. The motel lacks a multi-layer building envelope, meaning many, if not all, of the historic period rooms and exhibition spaces have at least one external wall. This makes maintaining and monitoring conditions especially important.

Preventive Conservation

Birmingham's extreme temperature, high relative humidity, and strong light levels have the potential to attract dust, accelerate mold growth, soften wax, and distort materials, especially wooden furniture. NPS should use environmental data loggers and the motel's HVAC system to monitor and maintain a stable temperature around 70°F and relative humidity of 40–60%. While HVAC systems generally have built-in infrastructure to issue alerts when there are extreme changes in temperature and relative humidity, data loggers will allow staff to specifically monitor the exhibition and historic period rooms.¹⁰⁵ All efforts should seek to maintain a steady environment and prevent rapid fluctuations, even within the above ranges. If a rapid change in temperature or relative humidity occurs, perhaps due to system malfunction, staff should monitor furnishings for condensation and warping. It is advisable that dehumidifiers be kept onsite to help manage relative humidity in exhibit areas in case of emergency.

Light can be particularly damaging to furnishings, finishes, paper, and textiles. NPS park rangers should use light meters to regularly measure and monitor the light levels in the historic period rooms.¹⁰⁶ Natural lighting conditions essential for the site's operations may be mitigated through the installation of ultraviolet (UV) filters on the glass windows. Closing blinds and curtains when the site is closed will further reduce the risk of prolonged light exposure. NPS should also monitor artificial light exposure and seek to maintain a balance between visitor needs and preventive conservation. This may include installing motion-sensitive lights for the historic period rooms.

NPS should implement a regular housekeeping schedule to keep rooms free of dust and debris. Furnishings can be dusted using a soft cotton cloth or brush. This will prevent the build-up of

¹⁰⁵ There are several data loggers on the market which NPS can invest in. Those manufactured by Onset (<https://www.onsetcomp.com>) or Conserv (<http://conserv.io/>), which offer data collection services via a subscription model, are popular within the heritage industry.

¹⁰⁶ Hand-held light meters can be purchased from museum vendors such as Gaylord Archival and Talas. Some, such as the ELSEC 765 are multi-functional, measuring UV light, visible light, temperature, and relative humidity.

particles which can attract mold and insects and hasten corrosion. Additionally, staff should stress to guests that food and drink are not allowed within the exhibit spaces and historic period rooms. Any food waste accumulated in NPS's office downstairs should be disposed of daily.

These policies should be incorporated into a wider integrated pest management (IPM) plan to reduce any potential damage from insects, mice, mold, or other pests, and minimize any adverse effects from widespread chemical pesticides. An effective IPM will seek to avoid conditions that attract pests, block pest entry, detect pest activity, respond effectively to an infestation, and provide steps for recovery. Common IPM strategies that NPS can implement at the A.G. Gaston Motel include:

- Active environmental monitoring
- Active housekeeping procedures to decrease pest attractants and shelters
- Sealed barriers to the outdoors
- Sticky traps at select locations to detect problems, especially during periods of seasonal change
- Visual inspection of historic and exhibition spaces and objects for signs of pest activity
- Quarantine, seal, and/or freeze any incoming objects to kill any active insect activity before introducing them to the larger exhibition space
- Identifying a trusted pest control agent that can provide a targeted and appropriate response when needed.

It is generally not advisable to use pesticides around historic furnishings. Pesticides have the potential to damage historic furnishings by instigating staining, discoloration, and the deterioration of metal, paper, and plastics. However, if necessary, staff should consult with the NPS Pesticide Use Proposal System to identify non-prohibited pesticides and remove furniture from spaces undergoing active mitigation. Additional guidelines regarding IPM can be found in the NPS Museum Handbook (Part I, Chapter 5).

Security

Thieves and vandals can also pose a risk to the site and its historic contents. According to the *Final Construction Drawings*, multiple intrusion detection and video surveillance systems will be installed on the property to ensure both visitor and park safety. The War Room suite, typical guest room, and lobby will all have at least one fixed, single sensor camera and glass break detection monitors.¹⁰⁷ NPS may choose to install additional 360-degree cameras to monitor interior spaces and ensure the safety of both the guests and furnishings. Barrier systems in the War Room suite and typical guest rooms will also reduce the likelihood of accidental and deliberate physical interaction with the furnishings.

Additionally, NPS staff should secure the building and all rooms within it when not in use and have security and emergency management plans in place.

¹⁰⁷ NPS, *Final Construction Drawings*, 107-108.

Illustrations

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Advertisement for the grand opening of the A.G. Gaston Motel, June 30, 1954, *Birmingham News*, pg. 6.

Figure 2. Martin Luther King Jr. addresses crowd from balcony of A.G. Gaston Motel, 1963, Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture, 2015.129.19. Photo by James Karales, Estate of James Karales, courtesy of Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York.

Figure 3. Civil rights demonstrators gather with Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph David Abernathy in the courtyard of the A.G. Gaston Motel, April 6, 1963, Alabama Department of Archives and History, BN0004099_27. Donated by Alabama Media Group. Photo by Ed Jones or Robert Adamas, *Birmingham News*.

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Figure 5. R.A. Hester and A.G. Gaston in the A.G. Gaston Motel courtyard, June 1954, Alabama Department of Archives and History, BN00047134. Donated by Alabama Media Group. Photo by Edouard Bruchac, *Birmingham News*.

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Figure 8a-b. Two interior views of the primary suite at the A.G. Gaston Motel, June 1954, Alabama Department of Archives and History, BN0001238. Donated by Alabama Media Group. Photo by Lewis Arnold, *Birmingham News*.

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Earnings tax proposed to ease school crises**

BY LYNN LILLISTON, News staff writer

A city earnings tax, which had been proposed as a way to solve the school money problem, was today rejected by the City Board of Education and City Commission.

The Citizens Advisory Committee to the Public Schools, which had been set up to study the problem, had recommended the tax. It would have been levied on the earnings of all persons who lived in the city of Birmingham.

ADDITIONAL REVENUE: School and revenue tax is proposed for a \$1 million deficit of the city.

The 1954-55 school budget for the city of Birmingham is \$11,000,000. The city's income for the year is \$10,000,000. The deficit is \$1,000,000.

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**GLASS for the
A. G. GASTON
MOTEL**

Formed By
UNEEEDA
GLASS CO.

2310 2nd Ave. S.

July 4th Special

ACE BEAUTY SALONS

\$5.00

ACE BEAUTY SALONS

1234 5th Ave. S.

Save this ad!

NEW LOCATION . . . Darling Shop Bldg.

A Great Manicure Purchase

\$8.50

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**We Are Proud To Be
GENERAL CONTRACTORS and DESIGNERS
of the**

A. G. Gaston Motel

We Congratulate

ALABAMA'S FINEST and BIRMINGHAM'S
ONLY MOTEL FOR NEGROES

**STEEL CITY
CONSTRUCTION COMPANY**

General Contractors
STANLEY B. ECHOLS, Architect
Birmingham, Ala.

**The Nation's NEWEST and . . .
... Finest Motel For NEGROES!**

THE A. G. GASTON MOTEL, 1508-10 FIFTH AVE., NORTH

**THE PUBLIC IS CORDIALLY INVITED
TO ATTEND OPEN HOUSE CEREMONIES!**

On Thursday, July 1, 1954, at 6:30 P. M., the A. G. Gaston Motel will be formally dedicated and opened for service. The Honorable James W. Morgan, Mayor of the City of Birmingham, will perform the dedicatory ceremony. You are cordially invited to attend the ceremonies and to inspect the beautiful air-conditioned motel that has already gained state and national acclaim.

- Completely air-conditioned
- Gas heat from a central heating system
- Thirty-two units (large and small suites)
- Double and single accommodations
- Spacious lobby
- Completely equipped cafeteria
- Convenient, spacious parking court
- Automatic musical vending device in each unit
- For reservation call 4-4631 or write Mr. George C. Small, Mgr., A. G. Gaston Motel, P. O. Box 2621, Birmingham, Ala.

A. G. GASTON MOTEL
1508-10 5TH AVE., NORTH
PHONE 4-4631

Figure 2 Martin Luther King Jr. addresses crowd from balcony of A.G. Gaston Motel, 1963, Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture, 2015.129.19. Photo by James Karales, Estate of James Karales, courtesy of Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York.



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