

Baylor reckons with ‘painful information’ about founders

March 17, 2021

As a commission created to examine Baylor University’s history examined some of its early leaders’ views on race, participants wrestled with “painful information” about the school’s founders.

The three co-chairs of the Commission on Historic Campus Representations joined Baylor President Linda Livingstone for the third and final [online forum](#) in the “Perspectives on Our History” series, held prior to the public release of the commission’s report on March 23.

Co-chair Alicia D.H. Monroe, provost and senior vice president of the Baylor College of Medicine, described how the commission’s work was “bathed in prayer” and guided by a desire to follow God’s leadership and be “salt and light,” as well as be rigorously honest and authentic.

“We all learned together. We all became students of history,” Monroe said in the March 16 online forum.

Commission members reviewed primary sources and historical analysis about Baylor University’s founders, particularly Judge R.E.B. Baylor, Pastor William Tryon and Pastor James Huckins, she noted.

“It was hard to read. It was painful information,” she said, comparing it to an adult who learns beloved grandparents were fallible human beings.

Current historical presentation ‘very

incomplete'

Co-chair Walter Abercrombie, associate athletics director for the Baylor "B" Association of the university's lettermen, noted the process allowed him personally to grapple with the "great wrongs" committed by early Baylor leaders and find a sense of peace regarding the good they accomplished.

"They weren't all bad men. They did some bad things. ... I found a place of peace but a determination to make sure that we educate and that we move forward in a very positive way together as an American society and as the Baylor Family," Abercrombie said.

Co-chair Gary Mortenson, dean of the Baylor School of Music, noted he walked around the Baylor campus and read the text of all the plaques and the inscriptions on every monument, and he concluded the story as it is told now "is very incomplete."

"Some contextualization would go a long way toward creating better balance in historical understanding on the campus," Mortenson said.

Last summer, Baylor's board of regents passed a [resolution](#) acknowledging the university's founders and most of its initial trustees were slaveholders, and other early leaders supported the Confederacy.

Regents then created the [Commission on Historic Campus Representations](#) to review Baylor's history and offer recommendations on how to present it honestly, including how the university deals with on-campus statues, monuments and buildings that recognize individuals linked to racial injustice.

‘Reckoning must always precede reconciliation’

In the March 16 online discussion, Mark Rountree, chair of Baylor’s board of regents, pointed to motivating factors that prompted regents to its resolution about racial injustice and create the commission—Baylor’s Christian mission and the awareness that “reckoning must always precede reconciliation.”

“Our board concluded that if we were going to and wanted to foster racial reconciliation at Baylor in the present, we needed to first reckon with instances of racial injustice in Baylor’s past,” Rountree said, adding the board recognizing the process could be “uncomfortable.”

“We knew it could be haunting to reckon with sins of the past. But because of the gospel, we also knew it could be holy.”