

BACK TO  
BIRMINGHAM

Richard Arrington, Jr.,  
and His Times

Jimmie Lewis Franklin

The University of Alabama Press  
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Back to Birmingham: Richard Arrington, Jr. and His Times, Jimmie Lewis Franklin, University of Alabama Press, 1989, 0817304355, 9780817304355, 363 pages. In 1979 the city that had once used dogs and fire hoses to crush protest demonstrations elected a black mayor, Richard Arrington, Jr. Franklin (history, Vanderbilt) relies heavily on primary sources, personal interviews, and newspapers to tell his story. Annotation(c) 2003 Book News, Inc., Portland, OR (booknews.com).

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Birmingham's first magic century: were you there? , Bertha Bendall Norton, 1971, History, 392 pages. .

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A History of Birmingham and Its Environs: A Narrative Account of ..., Volume 1 A Narrative Account of Their Historical Progress, Their People, and Their Principal Interests, George M. Cruikshank, 1920, History, . .

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The Race Card Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality, Tali Mendelberg, 2001, Political Science, 307 pages. Did George Bush's use of the Willie Horton story during the 1988 presidential campaign communicate most effectively when no one noticed its racial meaning? Do politicians ....

This is Birmingham The Story of the Founding and Growth of an American City, John C. Henley, 1969, History, 124 pages. .

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A. G. Gaston administration affirmative action Alabama appointment Arthur Shores ballot became Bell Birmingham Birmingham City Birmingham City Council Birmingham police Birmingham Post-Herald black community black leaders black mayor black vote blacks and whites Block 60 Bonita Carter campaign candidacy candidates church citizens city council city hall city's civil-rights coalition committee contest councilman crime criticism David Vann decision Democratic downtown economic election Fairfield force Frank Parsons interview issue Jefferson County John Katopodis Katopodis's knew Lamonte Langford large number Larry Langford Livingston ment Miglionico Miles Miles College mingham Myers organization percent persons police brutality police department policemen political politician polls position Post-Herald president problems programs race racial Richard Arrington rington role runoff Sands segregation shooting social South southern Sumter tion took Vann's victory voters wanted white vote Willie Davis wrote Yarbrough young

Richard Arrington Jr. (born October 19, 1934 in Livingston, Alabama) was the first African American mayor of the city of Birmingham, Alabama (U.S.), serving 20 years, from 1979 to 1999. He replaced David Vann and, upon retiring after five terms in office, installed then-City Council president William A. Bell as interim mayor. Bell went on to lose the next election to Bernard Kincaid.

Arrington's father moved his family to the steel-town of Fairfield from rural Sumter County, Alabama when Richard Jr. was five years old to take a job with U.S. Steel. The steady work was an improvement over sharecropping, but Richard Sr. still had to supplement the family income by working off-hours as a brick mason.

His parents emphasized self-reliance, choosing to rent a home rather than stay in workers' housing and shopping at a black-owned cooperative store rather than accept credit at the company commissary. Richard's mother, Ernestine, kept the table filled with home-grown vegetables and made sure that her children made use of the opportunities given them through church and school.

Richard, while still a teenager, served as secretary of the Sunday School at Crumbey Bethel Primitive Baptist Church. Soon he was Sunday School superintendent, a member of the choir, and eventually elected to the Board of Deacons. He was also a standout student at Fairfield Industrial High School, where he had first decided to study tailoring. With those classes full, he instead learned dry cleaning, graduating in 1951 at the age of 16 he took a job at a cleaner and applied to Fairfield's Miles College.

Arrington majored in biology at Miles and excelled in the classroom and as a leader, rising to the presidency of his chapter of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. He was also an officer in the Honor Society and the Thespian Club. In his third year of college, while still living at home, he married Barbara Jean Watts. He graduated cum laude in 1955 and took a position as a graduate assistant at the University of Detroit in Detroit, Michigan. While there he first experienced an integrated social environment and gained the perspective necessary to effectively critique the established segregation of his home town. He earned a master's degree in 1957 and returned to Miles as an assistant professor of science where he taught for six years before entering the University of Oklahoma doctoral program in zoology in 1963, in the midst of monumental clashes between African-American protesters and city authorities in Birmingham. He earned his doctorate at Oklahoma in 1966, completing a dissertation on the "Comparative Morphology of Some Dryopoid Beetles", and, at the urging of President Lucius Pitts, returned to Miles as acting dean and director of the summer school. He was quickly promoted to chair of the Natural Sciences Department and eventually was named Dean of the College.

In 1971 Arrington began campaigning for election to the Birmingham City Council with the pledge to make Birmingham " a city of which all her people can be proud." He placed third among 29 at-large candidates and faced five opponents in a runoff election for three remaining seats. He won his seat easily, becoming, after Arthur Shores (who had been appointed to a vacant seat by Mayor George Siebels in 1968), the second African American to serve on the council. After two years of quiet service, he introduced an ordinance requiring city departments to formulate hiring plans that included affirmative action goals and to contract business to companies that hired minorities. With opposition in the business community, the latter action failed, but the departmental hiring ordinance made it out of council to be vetoed by Siebels. Revised proposals that established recruitment programs and prohibited contracting with openly discriminatory firms, were later passed. His next major controversy was to push for a formal investigation of the shooting of an African American suspect while he was under police custody. The hearing was inconclusive, but opened the door to a more serious look at police procedure.

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In 1971, Arrington was invited by a group of young African-Americans to consider running for mayor of Birmingham. He declined, but did agree to run for City Council. During his campaign, he pledged to make Birmingham "a city of which all her people can be proud." He campaigned with the endorsement of the Progressive Democrats of Jefferson County, his funding came primarily from white supporters of Miles College. In the general election, he placed third among 29 at-large candidates. He came about 3,000 votes shy of avoiding a run-off in an election where as many as 16,000 votes were invalidated, mostly from African-American precincts.

In the run-off, Arrington faced five opponents for three remaining seats. He won his seat easily, becoming, the first African-American elected to that office in Birmingham. Attorney Arthur Shores was the first to take a seat in the Council, but had been appointed to a vacant seat by George Seibels in 1968.

In 2009 Arrington began to re-engage with Birmingham politics. He moved his voting registration from his Hoover home to the home he still kept in Vinesville. In March he and Earl Hilliard formed a "New Jefferson County Citizens Coalition" to support candidates for the 2009 Birmingham City Council election. The failure of his slate to generate voter support and the presence of other strong candidates convinced Arrington not to throw his hat in the ring for the 2009 Birmingham mayoral election.

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