

Scottsboro Boys exonerated

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By Danielle Wallingsford

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Governor Robert Bentley visited Scottsboro Friday for a ceremonial signing of legislation that will exonerate the Scottsboro Boys.

The governor officially signed Senate Bill 97, legislation that allows for posthumous pardons, on April 11 so it could meet its deadline. The defendants known as the Scottsboro Boys still have to be officially pardoned by the Alabama Board of Pardons and Paroles. The governor also signed House Joint Resolution 20, a resolution sponsored by Representative John Robinson that formally exonerates the Scottsboro Boys.



The ceremony took place at the Scottsboro Boys Museum and Cultural Center. Sheila Washington, who founded the museum, originally spearheaded efforts to pardon the Scottsboro Boys. On Friday she said, “This is another historical movement. Textbooks are going to have to be rewritten.”

Washington said that she does not understand why it took this long for justice to occur. “This is not a pretty case to talk about. When you talk about nine black boys that were supposed to have raped two white girls, nobody really wanted to get tainted with it. I wonder why civil rights leaders let them down,” she said.

She added that the Scottsboro Boys cases set precedence for African Americans to serve on juries. “Today, I can say this is not just a black case, it’s a case for human rights,” she said.

Governor Robert Bentley said that this legislation was a long time coming. “It’s never too late to do the right thing. I’m so proud to be in Scottsboro to sign the bill, and resolution, to correct the injustices that were carried out against these young men called the Scottsboro Boys.”

Bentley said that some might ask the importance of exonerating people who have already passed on. “My answer is this,” he said. “We need to right the wrongs that have been done in the past. We should never ignore history. It is important to confront our history and secure justice whenever we can.”

“We cannot take back what happened, but we can make it right by moving forward, and that’s why I’m signing this legislation,” Bentley said.

The governor said that the occasion was a result of a bipartisan legislation. Neither the resolution nor the bill saw any opposition in Montgomery.

Senator Arthur Orr of Decatur, who sponsored SB 97, said that pardoning the Scottsboro Boys is a great step in history. “It’s a solemn day, but it’s also a joyful day because our state is a different state than it was 80 years ago,” he said. “We still have miles to go before we sleep, as the poet says, but we can learn from history. We can learn from this event. We know what was said some years ago, ‘injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.’ We need to right this injustice and go forward as a people in this state, showing our commitment to justice everywhere across our great state and our great country,” Orr said before the governor signed the bill.

Catherine Schreiber, producer of Broadway musical *The Scottsboro Boys*, also attended the event and said that seeing the Scottsboro Boys exonerated was a highlight of her life. “The passage of the Scottsboro Boys Act in Alabama proves that people have not forgotten and that justice can be achieved,” she said.

Schreiber recited lyrics sang by Haywood Patterson's character in the Broadway play. "Maybe times will turn, I pray so. Maybe someday I'll get lucky. Someone's going to say 'Alright son. Take the train. Go back home. Hop a freight and go back home.'"

"Today, Haywood Patterson is finally free to go back home," Schreiber said.

Clarence Norris was the only Scottsboro Boy to receive a pardon during his lifetime. His son, Clarence Norris, Jr. of Macon, Ga., attended Friday's ceremony. Norris said the exoneration of his father was overwhelming. "It's very emotional. This day means that these guys are not only pardoned, but exonerated. They are not guilty at all. Even though they have gone on, their names are cleared."

He said that if he could see his father today he would say, "I love you. I'm sorry you had to go through this. Today, I hope you are at peace."