

ALABAMA

Hello. I'm Jennifer Hall Godfrey, the Public Affairs Officer at the United States Mission to International Organizations in Vienna, Austria. I'm happy to introduce you to the state of Alabama.

Like many of our states, the name "Alabama" comes from the name of a local Native American tribe. It is a beautiful state. Peach and pecan trees and blackberry bushes grow wild in Alabama's fields of rich soil and red clay. The state's chicken, cattle, cotton, and soybean farms provide work for many. Hunting and fishing are popular pastimes, and Alabama's coastline along the Gulf of Mexico has beautiful sandy beaches and emerald waters, making it a popular vacation spot.

Alabama has a significant history in the U.S. Civil War. During that war, Alabama was one of the original seven states of the "Deep South" to secede from the Union. Montgomery, Alabama, became the capital of the Confederate States of America, and Jefferson Davis, the Confederate president, resided there.

Long after the South lost the Civil War, racial tensions remained high in the United States, into the mid-20th century, including in Alabama. In 1955, an African-American woman named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus to a white passenger. This act of civil disobedience was the spark for what became known as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, during which African-Americans refused to ride public buses. The boycott lasted more than a year and hurt the city transit system financially. It ended in 1956, when the United States Supreme Court upheld the decision of a Montgomery federal court to strike down Alabama's bus segregation laws.

A pastor at a Montgomery church, Martin Luther King, Jr., was a leader in the bus boycott. He went on, of course, to play a prominent role in the American civil rights movement. The attention he brought to segregation, including his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This act outlawed major forms of discrimination against minorities and women.

Even so, many African-American voters were still unable to register to vote. In 1965, Dr. King led a march in Alabama from Selma to Montgomery to draw attention to the issue. Alabama state police held the marchers back at Selma, using whips, night sticks, and tear gas. The TV coverage of the violence outraged many Americans, and President Lyndon Johnson sent U.S. Army troops and the Alabama National Guard to protect the protestors. The 2,000 men and women participating in the march were joined in Montgomery by 50,000 supporters gathered at the capitol to hear Dr. King speak. "No tide of racism can stop us," he said.

As a result of the march, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, which banned literacy tests and other requirements that had been used to prevent African-Americans from voting.

While Alabama's motto – "We Dare Defend Our Rights" – was chosen before the civil rights movement reached its apex, it became all the more meaningful for Alabama as a result of the civil rights movement.

Alabama today is home to a diverse population of almost 5 million with a wide variety of interests. The Alabama Shakespeare Festival is one of the largest in the world, with more than 400 performances every year. Montgomery's Museum of Fine Arts houses paintings by American novelist and painter Zelda Fitzgerald, who grew up in Montgomery. Huntsville is home to the U.S. Space and Rocket Center and the visitor center for NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center.

Tuskegee hosts the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site, the training facility for the first African-American military aviators in the United States armed forces. Monroeville is the birthplace of two great 20th-century American authors, Truman Capote and Harper Lee. Every year Monroeville hosts a performance of "To Kill a Mockingbird," Harper Lee's classic "Southern Gothic" story.

In Alabama you can visit Mobile, the birthplace of baseball great Hank Aaron, or take in an American football game, enjoying the historic competition between Alabama's two biggest universities, the University of Alabama and Auburn University.

In Alabama's largest city, Birmingham, you can visit Vulcan, the largest cast iron statue in the world, which honors the city's history in the iron and steel industries. Birmingham is also home to the Alabama Jazz Hall of Fame, where you can learn about legendary jazz greats with Alabama ties, including Nat King Cole, Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton, and Erskine Hawkins.

I hope you've enjoyed learning a little bit about Alabama. From history to sports, science and technology to the arts, farming to fishing on the Gulf Shores, Alabama is a remarkable state.