

Creating the Greatest in Public History:
The History of the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, Kentucky (1992-2005)

A Thesis Submitted to the Committee on Graduate Studies
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Abstract

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This thesis concerns the history of the Muhammad Ali Museum and Education Center (MAC) from 1992 to 2005. The MAC originated from the vision of Paul Bather, a local politician in Louisville, who proposed building it in 1992, incorporated it, and formed its Board of Directors in 1994. The planning of the MAC involved collaboration among Ali and his wife, Lonnie Ali, community leaders, local politicians, and architectural and design firms. This thesis will identify how Louisville's government helped create the MAC and how that connected to its larger efforts at boosting tourism in downtown Louisville from the late 1980s to the 2000s. It will also consider Lonnie Ali's involvement in creating the MAC, how the museum and cultural centre depicted the boxer, and how those parts of its history connect to the boxer's media portrayal since the late 1980s.

Keywords: Muhammad Ali Center, Muhammad Ali Museum and Education Center, Paul Bather, Lonnie Ali, Muhammad Ali, Louisville, Downtown Louisville, Jerry Abramson, 1996 Olympics

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Introduction

The Muhammad Ali Museum and Education Center (MAC) is a museum and cultural centre about Muhammad Ali's life, boxing career, humanitarian work, activism, and philanthropy.¹ Its purpose is to share Ali's six principles of confidence, conviction, dedication, respect, spirituality, and kindness.² It is located on West Main Street in downtown Louisville, Kentucky.³ Scholars have analyzed several facets of the MAC, including the impact of Louisville's government and Ali's public image on the museum and cultural centre. Scholars have also analyzed how the MAC interpreted segregation, inspired political activism in Louisville, and presented Ali's principles. But none have drawn on the extensive primary source material available on the MAC from *Courier-Journal* databases, the University of Louisville Archives & Special Collections, Louisville Metro Records Management & Archives, and the Muhammad Ali Center Collections & Archive. This thesis will analyze why Louisville's government helped build the MAC, Lonnie Ali's role, and why the MAC's planners romanticized Ali's legacy and presented him as a role model. This introductory chapter will provide an overview of the MAC, summarize key scholarly arguments, describe the primary sources used for this thesis, and explain the thesis structure.

¹ The "Muhammad Ali Museum and Education Center" is the legal name for the museum and cultural centre. It is the name used for contracts, invoices, orders for goods or services, and tax filings since 2000. The "Muhammad Ali Center" is a trade name the MAC uses for advertising and sales purposes. The name "Muhammad Ali Center" first appeared in a *Courier-Journal* article by Rick McDonough on April 12, 1997, about Louisville Aldermen Steve Magre and Don Johnson wanting to put the MAC inside a proposed 35,000-seat basketball arena in Louisville. Newspapers and ads used the name "Muhammad Ali Museum and Education Center" from 1994, when Louisville Alderman Paul Bather incorporated the MAC, to 1997.

² "About the Ali Center," Muhammad Ali Center, accessed March 8, 2025, <https://alicenter.org/about-the-center/>.

³ "About the Ali Center."

The museum portion of the MAC occupies the fourth and fifth floors of the building, with the visitor experience beginning on the fifth floor and ending on the fourth. The fifth floor features an orientation theatre that shows a short documentary about the role Ali's six principles played in his athletic and humanitarian achievements.⁴ The fifth floor also features "Journeylines," a timeline of Ali's life and career.⁵ The fifth floor centres on six stations, with each of them dedicated to one of Ali's six principles. These six stations feature audiovisual material and walls of text that quote Ali, his fans, friends, and family on how the boxer lived by those six principles.⁶ The museum's fourth floor includes "Ali, All the Time," a collection of television viewing booths showing Ali's most famous fights, and "Lighting the Way Theater," a small movie theatre showing the boxer's appearance at the 1996 Olympics.⁷ The MAC received the "Best Museum Environment" award from *Event Design Magazine's* Silver Design Awards in 2006 and the "Best Cultural Attraction" award from the State of Kentucky in 2011.⁸ In 2020, the U.S. Civil Rights Trail Marketing Alliance, a collaborative group of U.S. tourism departments that add sites to the Civil Rights Trail—a collection of sites related to the civil rights movement—added the MAC to the trail.⁹ The museum of the MAC has received numerous awards, and its addition to the Civil Rights Trail solidifies it as an institution that connects Ali's legacy to the civil rights movement.

⁴ Michael Brandon McCormack, "Fighting Injustice and Intolerance: Re-Presentations of Race and Religion at the Muhammad Ali Center," *Religions* 8, no. 11 (2017): 6, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8110241>.

⁵ McCormack, "Fighting Injustice and Intolerance," 6.

⁶ Robert Stephen GoForth, "Interactivity in Louisville Museums" (PhD diss., University of Louisville, 2013), 36, <https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/509>.

⁷ Mary Rosner and Scott Rogers, "Striking Combinations: Transformation and Dissonance at the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, Kentucky," *The Popular Culture Studies Journal* 5, no. 1 & 2 (2017): 35, https://www.mpcaaca.org/_files/ugd/5a6d69_3b79ecffa28943828f3e3b92b7667d97.pdf#page=32.

⁸ Rosner and Rogers, "Striking Combinations," 27.

⁹ Adrian Sainz, "New Sites Added to U.S. Civil Rights Trail," *Courier-Journal*, February 14, 2020, <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/2020/02/14/u-s-civil-rights-trail-muhammad-ali-center-louisville-added/4758930002/>.

The MAC also hosts community programs, such as the Muhammad Ali Center Council of Students (MACCS), and events, including the Muhammad Ali Humanitarian Awards, the Ali Festival, and the “Daughters of Greatness Breakfast Series.” The MACCS is a youth-led program focusing on social justice and leadership.¹⁰ The annual Muhammad Ali Humanitarian Awards pay tribute to and award those dedicated to securing peace, social justice, and human rights.¹¹ Previous recipients include activists like Heather Heyer, actors like Michael J. Fox and Patricia Arquette, politicians like Jimmy Carter, and athletes like Shaquille O’Neal and Jim Brown.¹² The Ali Festival is an annual festival in Louisville that celebrates Ali’s life and career.¹³ It features festivities focused on fitness, art, history, community service, and family activities.¹⁴ The “Daughters of Greatness Breakfast Series” honours women for their past contributions to philanthropy, activism, and social justice.¹⁵ Officials from the MAC have emphasized that its community events and programs demonstrate how the MAC is more than a museum. Lonnie, Ali’s wife and a key figure in creating the MAC, told the *New York Times* on November 18, 2005, that she and her husband wanted the MAC to be more than just a place that housed artifacts.¹⁶ Michael J. Fox, the President of the MAC from 2000 to 2007, also told the *Courier-Journal* on November 19, 2005, that museums revolve around objects, while the MAC revolves around ideas.¹⁷ Despite being known as a museum, the community programs and events

¹⁰ “Youth Leadership Programs,” Muhammad Ali Center, accessed March 13, 2025.

<https://alicenter.org/our-work/chj/youth-leadership/>.

¹¹ “The Muhammad Ali Humanitarian Awards,” Muhammad Ali Center, accessed March 12, 2025,

<https://alicenter.org/our-work/programs/maha/>.

¹² “Muhammad Ali Humanitarian Awards.”

¹³ “Ali Festival,” Muhammad Ali Center, accessed March 13, 2025, <https://alicenter.org/our-work/programs/ali-festival/>.

¹⁴ “Ali Festival.”

¹⁵ McCormack, “Fighting Injustice and Intolerance,” 17.

¹⁶ James Dao, “Shrine for Louisville’s Prodigal Slugger,” *New York Times*, November 18, 2005, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/shrine-louisvilles-prodigal-slugger/docview/433203281/se-2>.

¹⁷ Sheldon Shafer, “Center Will Revolve Around Ideas,” *Courier-Journal*, November 19, 2005, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/november-19-2005-page-44/docview/2887448807/se-2>.

of the MAC show that it is also an institution dedicated to promoting youth leadership, humanitarian work, activism, and social justice.

The MAC is in downtown Louisville, an area known for its tourist attractions. The MAC is part of Museum Row, a collection of museums on West Main Street.¹⁸ Museum Row features history museums like the Frazier History Museum and other sports museums like the Louisville Slugger Museum & Factory.¹⁹ Museum Row also features art museums like the KMAC Museum and the 21c Museum Hotel, art venues like the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts, and science museums like the Kentucky Science Center.²⁰ Downtown Louisville features sports and entertainment venues, including the KFC Yum! Center and Slugger Field.²¹ It has parks like Louisville Waterfront Park, an 83-acre public park next to the Ohio River, and the Dave Armstrong Extreme Park, one of the largest skate parks in the U.S.²² It also features Fourth Street Live!, an entertainment and retail square on Fourth Street.²³ While Louisville offers tourist attractions outside the downtown area, including Churchill Downs, the home of the Kentucky Derby, most are located downtown.²⁴ In 2023, Louisville’s tourism generated \$4.2 billion.²⁵ This represented a significant part of tourism in Kentucky, an industry that generated \$13.8 billion

¹⁸ GoForth, “Interactivity in Louisville Museums,” 40.

¹⁹ GoForth, “Interactivity in Louisville Museums,” 40.

²⁰ “Attractions,” Museum Row on Main, accessed March 13, 2025, <https://museumrowlouisville.com/about>.

²¹ Marcus Green, “Arena Gets Six More Sponsors,” *Courier-Journal*, May 11, 2010, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/arena-gets-six-more-sponsors/docview/241678812/se-2>.

²² Sara Cunningham, “Skaters Soar in Vying for Gravity Title,” *Courier-Journal*, June 20, 2003, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/headline-skaters-soar-vying-gravity-title/docview/241093949/se-2>.

²³ Sheldon Shafer, “It’s Fourth Street Live Time,” *Courier-Journal*, July 17, 2003, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/july-17-2003-page-42-52/docview/2868388188/se-2>.

²⁴ Gege Reed, “Exhibits,” *Courier-Journal*, March 11, 2023, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/exhibits/docview/2785545541/se-2>.

²⁵ Joseph Garcia, “Kentucky Sets Another Record Year for Tourism in 2023; How Much Money Came from Louisville,” *WHAS 11*, June 10, 2024, <https://www.whas11.com/article/news/local/louisville-tourism-economic-impact-kentucky-2023-money/417-28442668-8a08-4887-956e-5092ac3a5d4a>.

that year.²⁶ The MAC is one of many tourist attractions in downtown Louisville that contribute to both the city and the state economies.

Secondary sources have analyzed key themes in the development and purpose of the MAC. Cultural studies scholar Leslie Hahner pointed out that Louisville's government supported building the MAC in the downtown area during the early 2000s.²⁷ According to Hahner, this support stemmed from their desire to attract more tourists and business officials to downtown Louisville.²⁸ Hahner referenced an *Associated Press* article from June 8, 2002, stating that Louisville's government gave \$10 million to the MAC and helped build the Muhammad Ali Center Garage, the name used for the parking garage at the museum and cultural centre.²⁹ Hahner also referenced a preliminary copy of the *2002 Louisville Downtown Development Plan* that highlighted the city's involvement in creating condominiums, apartments, hotels, entertainment districts, and museums in downtown Louisville.³⁰ Hahner interpreted the local political support for the MAC and other downtown development projects as part of a broader issue with urban planning in Louisville.³¹ Hahner argued that the city focused on attracting tourists to the downtown area while neglecting impoverished neighbourhoods such as the West End.³² In 1999, the West End had an unemployment rate three times higher than the rest of the city and salaries less than half the regional average.³³ According to a study conducted by the city that same year, 42.9 percent of West Louisvillians lived below the poverty line, compared to

²⁶ Garcia, "Kentucky Sets Another Record Year for Tourism in 2023."

²⁷ Leslie Hahner, "From the Louisville Lip to the Champ: The Muhammad Ali Center and Planning with Memory Politics," *Poro* 4, no. 1 (2005): 85, <https://doi.org/10.13008/2151-2957.1032>.

²⁸ Hahner, "From the Louisville Lip," 85.

²⁹ Hahner, "From the Louisville Lip," 84.

³⁰ Hahner, "From the Louisville Lip," 85.

³¹ Hahner, "From the Louisville Lip," 87.

³² Hahner, "From the Louisville Lip," 87.

³³ Hahner, "From the Louisville Lip," 87.

14.3 percent in other parts of Louisville.³⁴ Hahner contributed to the scholarly literature on the MAC by pointing out how Louisville's government helped create the museum and cultural centre, while criticizing the government's urban development plans.

Local scholars James Throgmorton and Catherine Fosl criticized the MAC for its superficial depiction of segregation in Louisville. Before identifying how the Fosl and Throgmorton analyzed the MAC, it should be noted that Louisville had been a segregated city, but the city positioned itself as different from other parts of the South when it came to race.³⁵ Local historian George Wright described racism in Louisville as "polite," where the white population remained polite to the black population as long as they "accepted their place" and did not share the same facilities.³⁶ The "politeness," according to Wright, allowed local whites to say that they were different from other parts of the South, while also signalling to black Louisvillians that they should be appreciative of the treatment they received.³⁷ Wright explained that after the passage of the 1875 Civil Rights Act, a piece of legislation that allowed races equal access to public facilities, local Black leaders advised members of their community to avoid entering white establishments because they may offend white patrons.³⁸ Also, in the 1910s, when black leaders in the city believed that they should be grateful because the city constructed public facilities for them, including swimming pools.³⁹ Louisville's "polite" racism created a dynamic where white residents showcased a superficial distinction from other southern regions, while reminding black Louisvillians to remain grateful for limited concessions made towards equality.

³⁴ Hahner, "From the Louisville Lip," 87.

³⁵ George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Louisiana University State Press, 1985), 1.

³⁶ Wright, *Life Behind a Veil*, 4.

³⁷ Wright, *Life Behind a Veil*, 4.

³⁸ Wright, *Life Behind a Veil*, 5.

³⁹ Wright, *Life Behind a Veil*, 5.

While recounting his experience visiting the “Conviction” station at the MAC, Throgmorton described how he entered a recreated lunch counter with a recorded voice shouting that the restaurant refused to serve Black people.⁴⁰ He wrote:

At one point, I walked into a room that had been configured to look like a lunch counter. As soon as I entered, a recorded voice said something like, ‘Hey, what are you doing here? You know we don’t allow your kind in here.’ I froze. A few seconds later, the voice said something like, ‘Move it!’ I felt a twinge of fear and rejection. But of course, I am not African American, and I have no embodied memory of what it must have felt like to be so rejected. Just a minute or two later, an African American woman entered with three young children. Two of them leaped onto the soda fountain stools and immediately heard the recorded voice say, ‘Hey, what are you doing here?’ ‘What’s that about, momma?’ one of the young boys asked. She replied, ‘A long time ago...,’ and she proceeded to narrate her story about how people like her had been treated in Louisville 50 years ago.⁴¹

Throgmorton acknowledged this as an effective depiction of segregation because the audio at the lunch counter made him feel rejected.⁴² However, he noted that it did not evoke the same memories as the mother who shared her story with her children.⁴³ Fosl criticized the MAC for ignoring the impact that Jim Crow laws had on Ali’s life.⁴⁴ Fosl explained that the museum of the MAC ignored Ali’s early years in the West End of Louisville, particularly how the city’s racial dynamics shaped his everyday life.⁴⁵ Throgmorton and Fosl contributed to the scholarly literature on the MAC by criticizing the conviction station for giving visitors, particularly white visitors, a false idea of how Black Americans experienced segregation.

⁴⁰ James A. Throgmorton, “Inventing the Greatest: Crafting Louisville’s Future Out of Story and Clay,” *Planning Theory* 6, no. 3 (2007): 250, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095207082033>.

⁴¹ Throgmorton, “Inventing the Greatest,” 250.

⁴² Throgmorton, “Inventing the Greatest,” 250.

⁴³ Throgmorton, “Inventing the Greatest,” 250.

⁴⁴ Catherine Fosl, “Marketing Muhammad Ali: Louisville’s Newest Museum Center,” *Ohio Valley History* 6, no. 2 (2006): 9-10, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/573077>.

⁴⁵ Fosl, “Marketing Muhammad Ali,” 9-10.

In contrast to Hahner, Fosl, and Throgmorton, sports historian Michael Ezra analyzed how the MAC portrayed Ali. Ezra argued that the MAC presented Ali as a moral authority by citing the *MAC Purpose/Mission Statement* and its exhibits. The *MAC Purpose/Mission Statement* stated that the MAC will “preserve and share the legacy and ideals of Muhammad Ali, to promote respect, hope, and understanding, and to inspire adults and children everywhere to be as great as they can be.”⁴⁶ The museum featured “hagiographic exhibitions,” including interviews with celebrities like James Earl Jones, Maya Angelou, and Dustin Hoffman.⁴⁷ These celebrities, according to Ezra, complimented Ali as a person and condemned the Americans who vilified him for not serving in the Vietnam War in the 1960s.⁴⁸ Ezra saw the MAC’s portrayal of Ali as a distortion of the boxer’s past because it ignored his advocacy of Black supremacy and opposition to racial integration during the 1960s.⁴⁹ Also, the museum did not reference any of Ali’s statements about Joe Frazier being a “gorilla” and an “Uncle Tom” while promoting their 1975 fight in Manila, Philippines, known as the “Thrilla in Manila.”⁵⁰ From analyzing how the MAC depicted Ali’s life and career, Ezra believed that the museum neglected the controversial and complex parts of his past.

Ezra used the *Respect* station as an example of the MAC neglecting more controversial parts of Ali’s past. The text for the “Respect” station said that:

“[Ali’s] public views on ‘white devils,’ Black superiority... were anything but respectful. His loudmouth antics sold fight tickets but insulted opponents and many fans who didn’t appreciate his cruel sense of humor. Did Ali believe everything he said?”

⁴⁶ Michael Ezra, *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon* (Temple University Press, 2009), 187.

⁴⁷ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 187.

⁴⁸ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 189.

⁴⁹ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 190.

⁵⁰ Mark Kram, *Ghosts of Manila: The Fateful Blood Feud Between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier* (Harper Collins, 2009), 231.

People close to him say he didn't, and back their claims with examples. Muhammad Ali's journey of respect was one of personal growth, change, and maturation."⁵¹

Ezra explained that while this quote acknowledged that Ali made controversial statements in the past, it never mentioned what the statements were.⁵² The museum of the MAC never showed any texts or film footage of Ali's past views on Black superiority or how he promoted his fights. Instead, as pointed out by Ezra, they dismissed Ali's past remarks by suggesting that he "didn't mean them, and now he is above such things...[,] and they are no longer relevant."⁵³ The "Respect" station featured a video of Billy Crystal stating that Ali's remarks about race "came out of a side of him that wasn't fully formed yet."⁵⁴ Crystal added that Ali "probably regrets some of that now, and I admire that too."⁵⁵ The "Respect" station acknowledged that Ali made controversial remarks in the past, but downplayed the political implications behind them and viewed them as part of his growth.

Ezra connected the MAC's depiction of Ali to its support from celebrities and corporations. They supported building the museum and cultural centre because of the renewed public interest in Ali after the 1996 Olympics. Ezra referenced the MAC's National Advisory Board that promoted the museum and cultural centre to national media outlets and corporate donors.⁵⁶ The National Advisory Board included celebrities like Dick Ebersole, Angelina Jolie, Billy Crystal, and Bob Costas.⁵⁷ The MAC received corporate donations from Ford Motor Company, General Electric, and Yum! Brands.⁵⁸ Ezra stated that Ali became a corporate

⁵¹ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 190.

⁵² Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 190.

⁵³ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 190.

⁵⁴ McCormack, "Fighting Injustice and Intolerance," 10-11.

⁵⁵ McCormack, "Fighting Injustice and Intolerance," 10-11.

⁵⁶ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 186-87.

⁵⁷ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 186-87.

⁵⁸ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 186.

commodity after the 1996 Olympics.⁵⁹ He explained that after the 1996 Olympics, Ali started appearing in commercials and television shows, had more books written about him, and more documentaries and films made about him.⁶⁰ Much like the MAC, these pieces of popular media presented Ali as a role model and sanitized his past by focusing on parts that Americans remembered fondly, such as his opposition to the Vietnam War.⁶¹ In a 2012 interview for *Comcast Newsmakers*, Ezra stated that popular media sanitized Ali's past while leaving out "the rough edges."⁶² Ezra contributed to scholarly literature on the MAC by linking the narrative and design of the museum and cultural centre to portrayals of Ali in books, documentaries, films, television shows, and commercials from the late 1990s and early 2000s.

While Ezra criticized the MAC for sanitizing Ali, cultural studies scholar Michael Brandon McCormack emphasized its role in promoting the boxer's anti-imperialist and religious convictions and raising awareness about issues concerning Black and Muslim women. Ali opposed the Vietnam War because it went against his religious convictions and his belief that the war did not improve the lives of Black Americans.⁶³ Ali told the *Black Scholar*, a Black studies journal, in 1970 that he did not want to fight his "Asian brothers... [because] they never lynched you, never called you nigger, never put dogs on you, never shot your leaders."⁶⁴ McCormack referenced "Shining a Light: An International Photography Exhibit," an annual exhibition that

⁵⁹ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 192-93.

⁶⁰ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 192-93.

⁶¹ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 186.

⁶² Michael Ezra, "Comcast Newsmakers - Michael Ezra," interview by Jack Hanson, *Comcast Newsmakers*, CSUSonoma, February 12, 2012, YouTube video, 1:31-2:24, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InO8zt8OxZA&t=2s>.

⁶³ Michael Brandon McCormack, "'I'm a Muslim... What's Wrong with That?': Representational Interventions in Islamophobia at the Muhammad Ali Center," *Journal of Africana Religions* 7, no. 1 (2019): 154-56, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jafireli.7.1.0152>.

⁶⁴ Muhammad Ali, "The Black Scholar Interviews: Muhammad Ali," *The Black Scholar* 1, no. 8 (1970): 32, <https://doi.org/10.5816/blackscholar.42.2.0014>.

brought attention to the plight of immigrant and refugee women.⁶⁵ McCormack noted that the women displayed in the exhibit were of Muslim and/or African descent.⁶⁶ McCormack viewed the MAC as important for inspiring political action.⁶⁷ McCormack referenced a protest that occurred at the MAC on January 31, 2017, in response to President Donald Trump's proposed travel ban on seven Muslim-majority nations—Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen.⁶⁸ McCormack also viewed the MAC as important for cultural studies because it represented how museums addressed issues of cultural difference and sociopolitical conflict to promote social justice.⁶⁹ By identifying how the MAC presented Ali, as well as issues concerning women of colour, McCormack explained how the MAC contributed to political activism and cultural studies.

Cultural studies scholars Mary Rosner and Scott Rogers researched visitors' reflections on the MAC. They gathered 243 comments about the MAC from its guest book, Yelp, and TripAdvisor.⁷⁰ From this research, Rogers and Rosner found that most visitors expressed a deeper reverence for Ali as a larger-than-life athlete and celebrity, rather than a desire to adopt his principles, despite the latter being the stated purpose of the MAC.⁷¹ They connected their research findings to how the audio and visual materials, as well as the walls of text at the MAC, made it difficult for visitors to remember and reflect on the exhibit.⁷² Much like Ezra, Rosner and Rogers argued that the design of the MAC shared similarities to the books, commercials, and

⁶⁵ McCormack, "I'm a Muslim," 157.

⁶⁶ McCormack, "I'm a Muslim," 157.

⁶⁷ McCormack, "I'm a Muslim," 153.

⁶⁸ McCormack, "I'm a Muslim," 152.

⁶⁹ McCormack, "Fighting Injustice and Intolerance," 1.

⁷⁰ Rosner and Rogers, "Striking Combinations," 31.

⁷¹ Rosner and Rogers, "Striking Combinations," 34-36.

⁷² Rosner and Rogers, "Striking Combinations," 34-36.

documentaries about Ali after the 1996 Olympics.⁷³ Rosner and Rogers also argued that the flaws of the MAC represented a broader problem with museums.⁷⁴ They believed museums prioritized making visitors comfortable at the expense of challenging their assumptions and sharpening their critical thinking skills.⁷⁵ Rosner and Rogers found that the museum did not instill Ali's principles in its visitors, and connected their findings to its design and trends in popular culture and museums.

Hahner, Fosl, Throgmorton, McCormack, Ezra, Rogers, and Rosner made relevant contributions to the literature on the MAC, but they did not draw on a variety of primary sources related to the museum and cultural centre. ProQuest has three databases for the *Courier-Journal*: *The Courier-Journal Historical*, *The Courier-Journal*, and *U.S. Newsstream*. *The Courier-Journal Historical* has scanned articles from 1830 to 2000.⁷⁶ *The Courier-Journal* has scanned articles from 1999 to the present.⁷⁷ *U.S. Newsstream* has transcribed *Courier-Journal* articles from 1999 to the present.⁷⁸ *U.S. Newsstream* also has transcribed and scanned articles from the *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *CNN Newswires*, and the *Huffington Post*.⁷⁹ The University of Louisville's Archives & Special Collections has brochures, press releases, and newsletters.⁸⁰ The Louisville Metro Records Management & Archives has eight files related to the MAC from 1998 to 2002.⁸¹ These eight

⁷³ Rosner and Rogers, "Striking Combinations," 34-36.

⁷⁴ Rosner and Rogers, "Striking Combinations," 25.

⁷⁵ Rosner and Rogers, "Striking Combinations," 25.

⁷⁶ ProQuest, "Courier-Journal Historical," accessed July 4, 2025, <https://about.proquest.com/en/customer-care/tools-resources/hnp-the-courier-journal/>.

⁷⁷ ProQuest, "Courier-Journal," accessed July 4, 2025, <https://about.proquest.com/en/products-services/aps/>.

⁷⁸ ProQuest, "U.S. Newsstream," accessed July 4, 2025, https://about.proquest.com/en/products-services/nationalsnews_shtml/.

⁷⁹ ProQuest, "U.S. Newsstream."

⁸⁰ Muhammad Ali Center, Undated File — Box 44, Folder: 101, University of Louisville Archives & Special Collections, University of Louisville.

⁸¹ Muhammad Ali Center Files, Louisville Metro Records Management & Archives, Louisville Metro Government, Louisville, Kentucky.

files include contract agreements between the Parking Authority of River City (PARC) and the MAC for the construction of the Muhammad Ali Center Garage, letters from government officials, press releases, a list of board members, newsletters, and scanned newspaper articles.⁸² *Ancestry's Historical Newspapers Collection* has *Courier-Journal* articles from 2002; the other *Courier-Journal* databases are missing a large quantity of editions from that year.⁸³ These primary sources document how the MAC's planners created the museum and cultural centre from 1992 to 2005. Louisville Alderman Paul Bather first proposed building the MAC in 1992, and the museum and cultural centre opened on November 19, 2005.⁸⁴ Hahner, Ezra, McCormack, Rogers, and Rosner did not use the wide range of online databases and archives that contain primary sources on the MAC, and this thesis will contribute to the scholarly literature by drawing on those sources.

This thesis will have five chapters explaining the origins and planning of the MAC, and analyze how Louisville's government, Lonnie, and Ali's portrayal in popular culture affected this piece of history. The first two chapters will explain how the MAC created its museum and cultural centre in Louisville, Kentucky, from 1992 to 2005. These chapters will identify the role Louisville's government played in creating the MAC, Lonnie's involvement in its development, and how MAC officials and advertisements portrayed Ali. The third chapter will connect the role that Louisville's government had in creating the MAC to its involvement in developing other tourist attractions from the late 1980s to the early 2010s. This chapter will argue that Louisville's government helped create the MAC because of its efforts to redevelop downtown Louisville from the late 1980s to the early 2010s. The fourth chapter will argue that Lonnie helped create

⁸² Muhammad Ali Center Files.

⁸³ Ancestry, "The Courier-Journal," accessed July 4, 2025, <https://www.newspapers.com/paper/the-courier-journal/845/?locale=en-CA>.

⁸⁴ Shafer, "Center Will Revolve."

the MAC because of her efforts at protecting Ali's public image from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. The fifth chapter will connect the MAC's portrayal of Ali to the books, newspaper articles, and commercials about him from the late 1990s and early 2000s. This chapter will argue that these pieces of popular media sanitized Ali's legacy and provided insight into the sanitization of the civil rights movement since the 1980s.

Chapter One: Origins

Bather laid the groundwork for planning the MAC. Bather recruited individuals for the MAC Board of Directors during the summer of 1993 and secured \$30,000 from the Louisville Board of Aldermen that October to launch the project.¹ Bather incorporated the MAC as a private non-profit organization on February 16, 1994, with him as the organization's President.² Before Bather, Ali's father, Cassius Clay Sr., was the only person who attempted to build a museum about the boxer.³ However, Bather did not influence other aspects of planning because he severed his ties to the board in May 1995, years before the MAC's planners selected their preferred site, worked on designing the building, and started fundraising.⁴ This chapter will analyze why Bather proposed the MAC by identifying comments he made to the *Courier-Journal* in 1992 and the *Louisville Defender* in 1995. It will explain why those comments were significant and how they connect to his role as a city official and his relationship with Ali. This chapter will also analyze how Bather did not influence the location choice, exhibit design, and fundraising efforts for the MAC by referencing *Courier-Journal* articles from 1995 about Ali and Lonnie recreating the MAC Board of Directors. Also, *Courier-Journal* articles from 1995 to

¹ Sheldon Shafer, "Local Group Planning to Salute Life of Muhammad Ali," *Courier-Journal*, March 22, 1994, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/march-22-1994-page-12-188/docview/1873355347/se-2>.

² Shafer, "Local Group."

³ Cassius Clay Sr. proposed building the Cassius Marcellus Clay Sr Gallery in 1981. Clay Sr. wanted it to include artifacts from Ali's childhood and boxing career. Michel Marriott reported in the *Courier-Journal* on June 16, 1981, that Clay Sr bought an abandoned house in the West End of Louisville for \$2,000 and paid \$32,000 in renovations to build the museum. Clay Sr told Marriott that he wanted the museum to include the bed Ali slept on as a baby, the sofa, and chairs he grew up with, and the icebox that he sat on while watching his mother prepare breakfast. However, Vincent Crowdus reported in the *Courier-Journal* on June 14, 1982, that Clay Sr put plans for the museum on hold because of his declining health. On February 8, 1990, Clay Sr suffered a heart attack in the parking lot of a Louisville department store and passed away at the age of 77. Clay Sr proposed the Cassius Marcellus Clay Sr Gallery to display objects from Ali's life, but he never made it beyond the proposal stage because of his health issues.

⁴ Sheldon Shafer, "Bather Resigns as President of Ali Museum," *Courier-Journal*, June 27, 1995, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/june-27-1995-page-1-39/docview/1873485655/se-2>.

1997 about how the new board withdrew from agreements that Bather had made. These agreements were the continued operation of a temporary exhibit at the Louisville Galleria, a mall in the downtown area, from 1995 to 1998, and the purchase of an Ali memorabilia collection from Ronnie Paloger, a collector of sports and historical artifacts.⁵ While Bather proposed and incorporated the MAC, he did not influence other aspects of its planning. After Bather's resignation, those involved in planning the MAC withdrew from agreements that he had made.

Bather gave two reasons for proposing the MAC, with one of them being his desire to diversify the tourist attractions in downtown Louisville. Bather told the *Courier-Journal* on April 24, 1992, that he wanted to open a museum about Ali in a former tobacco warehouse on West Main Street.⁶ The Downtown Development Corporation, a non-profit group focused on downtown development, owned the tobacco warehouse.⁷ Bather explained that downtown Louisville had "The Museum of History and Science [later known as the Kentucky Science Center], numerous arts organizations' offices and other arts-related activities... [but] to round out the mix... [there should be] a facility related to sports or to African American heritage."⁸

Bather's statements reflected his broader interests in downtown development. Bather served on a policy committee formed by Mayor Jerry Abramson in 1988 that created the 1990 *Louisville*

⁵ PJ Kinsella, "From Ali to Jordan to Nadal: The Extraordinary Collections of Ronnie Paloger," *Robert Edwards Auctions*, September 29, 2023, <https://collectrea.com/stories/post/from-ali-to-jordan-to-nadal-the-extraordinary-collections-of-ronnie-paloger>.

⁶ Bather wanted to open the MAC at the tobacco because the Louisville Ballet and Kentucky Opera, a ballet school (now known as the Louisville Ballet), declined the Downtown Corporation's offer to move their headquarters from Bardstown Road. Shafer reported in the *Courier-Journal* on September 20, 1990, that the city offered the tobacco warehouse to the Louisville Ballet. However, Shafer reported in the *Courier-Journal* on June 9, 1992, that the Louisville Ballet and Kentucky Opera did not have the money to purchase the building. The Louisville Ballet and Kentucky Opera moved their headquarters to East Main Street, where the building remains today. Shafer also reported in the *Courier-Journal* on April 24, 1992, that Barry Alberts, the Director of the Downtown Development Corporation, only supported building the MAC conceptually because Bather only proposed the museum and cultural centre at that point. Alberts did explain that if Bather goes beyond the proposal stage, he will allow him to use parts of the tobacco warehouse for the MAC.

⁷ Sheldon Shafer, "Museum Proposed to Honor Native Son Ali," *Courier-Journal*, April 24, 1992, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/april-24-1992-page-13-62/docview/1873018454/se-2>.

⁸ Shafer, "Museum Proposed."

Downtown Development Plan, a document that guided downtown policies for Louisville's government throughout the 1990s.⁹ In 1991, Bather and the Metro Parks Department, a government agency that developed parks in Louisville, founded the Muhammad Ali Youth Association.¹⁰ The Muhammad Ali Youth Association offered children the chance to participate in basketball, baseball, and soccer leagues in downtown Louisville.¹¹ Based on the 1992 *Courier-Journal* article and his role in downtown development projects, Bather proposed the MAC to further developments in downtown Louisville.

Second, Bather wanted Ali to feel welcomed and appreciated by the city because of their friendship and the influence that the boxer had on his life. Bather told the *Courier-Journal* on April 25, 1992, that Ali appreciated his efforts because the boxer felt that Louisville never "properly recognized his contributions to society."¹² Bather explained that Ali felt this way because of the backlash that Louisville's government received in 1978 after changing the street name Walnut Street to Muhammad Ali Boulevard.¹³ Bather told the *Louisville Defender* on March 30, 1995, that Ali visited his home "two years ago," and the two discussed how the boxer should be remembered after his death.¹⁴ Bather explained that the MAC "came out of these

⁹ Louisville Downtown Partnership, *1990 Louisville Downtown Development Plan* (Louisville, 1990), 1.

¹⁰ Cynthia Wilson, "New Group Will Offer Activities for Youths," *Courier-Journal*, January 8, 1992, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/january-8-1992-page-13-188/docview/1872923913/se-2>.

¹¹ Wilson, "New Group."

¹² Mary O'Doherty, "City Paid Bather's Way to L.A. Birthday Bash for Muhammad Ali," *Courier-Journal*, April 25, 1992, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/april-25-1992-page-7-39/docview/1872915984/se-2>.

¹³ Past editions of the *Courier-Journal* showed how residents opposed changing the street names. The proposal to change Walnut Street to Muhammad Ali Boulevard had a split 6-5 vote amongst the Board of Aldermen and Louisville's Mayor William Stansbury signed the name change into law. In the *Courier-Journal's* Readers' Views section from November 18, 1978, local resident Mrs. James Dawson supported Louisville honouring Muhammad but saw Walnut Street and Fourth Street as "The Center of Louisville." Dawson opposed changing the street name, stating, "Don't take that from us. Think of the confusion and expense of such a change." According to a *Courier-Journal* article from December 17, 1978, Louisville police reported the theft of 12 street signs on Muhammad Ali Boulevard. Jerry Bronger, the Ninth Ward Alderman who voted for the name change, told the *Courier-Journal* on December 24, 1978, "I've caught so much hell because of Muhammad Ali Boulevard and all the hell I've caught were from veterans."

¹⁴ Mitchell L. H. Douglas, "Honoring a Hero: Plans for the Muhammad Ali Museum in Full Gear," *The Louisville Defender*, March 30, 1995, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/honoring-hero-plans-muhammad-ali-museum-full-gear/docview/2745510672/se-2>.

discussions... [and] he wanted me to work on it.”¹⁵ Bather’s statements to the *Courier-Journal* and the *Louisville Defender* provided insight into the relationship he had with Ali. Bather was married to Ali’s cousin, Coretta Waddell Bather, and their union lasted until he died in 2009.¹⁶ Ali helped pay for Bather’s tuition at Hunter College in 1970, where he earned a master’s degree in social work.¹⁷ During Bather’s Alderman re-election campaign in 1990, Ali attended fundraising events in Louisville on his behalf.¹⁸ Bather’s statements to the *Courier-Journal* and the *Louisville Defender*, as well as his relationship with Ali, revealed how the city official wanted the MAC to pay tribute to and represent Louisville’s appreciation of the boxer.

Despite incorporating the MAC and forming its board, Bather did not influence its long-term planning. In his resignation letter from May 25, 1995, Bather cited concerns that the “political turmoil” he caused might resurface because of his role as an elected official and the President of the MAC.¹⁹ The “political turmoil” that Bather mentioned stemmed from the criticism he received from other Aldermen for not disclosing his involvement in the planning of the MAC.²⁰ In the summer of 1993, the Board of Aldermen voted on a motion to provide \$30,000 to the unofficially formed board without knowing Bather’s ties to the project.²¹ Following Bather’s incorporation of the MAC, the Board of Aldermen hired Attorney General Chris Gorman to investigate Bather’s use of the \$30,000.²² When Gorman finished his

¹⁵ Douglas, “Honoring a Hero.”

¹⁶ Paula Burba and Sheldon S. Shafer, “Paul Bather Dies in Houston,” *Courier-Journal*, February 9, 2009, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/paul-bather-dies-houston/docview/241520703/se-2>.

¹⁷ O’Doherty, “City Paid Bather’s Way.”

¹⁸ O’Doherty, “City Paid Bather’s Way.”

¹⁹ Shafer, “Bather Resigns.”

²⁰ Shafer, “Bather Resigns.”

²¹ Rick McDonough, “City Probes Bather’s Use of Museum Money,” *Courier-Journal*, June 14, 1994, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/june-14-1994-page-1-33/docview/1873358574/se-2>.

²² Nikita Stewart, “Lawyers Sue Bather for \$6,800 in Bills From Museum Battle,” *Courier-Journal*, August 3, 1995, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/august-3-1995-page-15-43/docview/1873489946/se-2>.

investigation, he concluded that Bather took no money for personal use.²³ However, he also found that Bather violated the Board of Aldermen's Code of Ethics.²⁴ Bather stated he resigned because his role as an elected official presented a conflict of interest and may generate more controversy for MAC officials.

Members of Louisville's government also convinced Bather to resign as the President of the MAC. Louisville's government supported building the MAC, but they did not want Bather involved with its planning because of his position as an Alderman.²⁵ Aldermanic President Bebe Milton explained to the *Courier-Journal* on June 27, 1995, that she wanted Bather to resign because "it will take a public-private partnership to make [the permanent museum] reality."²⁶ Milton added, "I think the private support will be out there, but when an elected official is part of it, it does create a conflict and possibly hurt fundraising."²⁷ Rick McDonough reported in the *Courier-Journal* on June 28, 1995, that the Board of Aldermen gave the MAC's planners \$300,000 because Bather resigned, and Ali and Lonnie sought to recreate the board.²⁸ The \$300,000 had been part of the city's \$197.4 million budget for the fiscal year.²⁹ Bather said during the meeting that Alderman Bill Wilson, Abramson, and an unnamed city lawyer had

²³ Stewart, "Lawyers Sue Bather."

²⁴ Stewart, "Lawyers Sue Bather."

²⁵ Shafer reported in the *Courier-Journal* on February 8, 1995, that Abramson wanted to see the MAC come to fruition after Bather agreed to open a temporary exhibit at the Louisville Galleria. Abramson explained to Shafer that the MAC's planners should "raise what they can, then come to the city and perhaps also the county and state for what's still needed." This illustrated how the momentum Bather had gained with planning the MAC because when he first proposed building the museum and cultural centre, Abramson abstained from commenting. Shafer explained in the *Courier-Journal* on April 24, 1992, that Abramson refused to offer him a comment and instead referred him to Barry Alberts. However, it should be noted that Kathleen Partlow, Abramson's Press Secretary, told the Louisville Defender on March 30, 1995, that "there is no room in this year's city budget allocated for the museum." Partlow added that Abramson believed that the MAC should be funded by private donations and that the city should vocally support the MAC.

²⁶ Shafer, "Bather Resigns."

²⁷ Shafer, "Bather Resigns."

²⁸ Rick McDonough, "\$197.4 Million City Budget Trims Capital Projects," *Courier-Journal*, June 28, 1995, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/june-28-1995-page-13-237/docview/1873501798/se-2>.

²⁹ McDonough, "\$197.4 Million City Budget."

advised him to step down to avoid a conflict of interest.³⁰ Bather added that “we don’t want anyone to think that Paul Bather is lining his pockets or double dipping...”³¹ After members of Louisville’s government convinced Bather to resign, the Board of Aldermen donated \$300,000 to the planners.

Sheldon Shafer reported in the *Courier-Journal* on July 14, 1995, that Ali and Lonnie forced every member of the board to resign. Lonnie wanted them to resign because she and her husband disagreed with the decisions made by the MAC’s planners at that point, and she wanted museum professionals involved in the planning. Clarence Hester, one of the former board members who resigned, told Shafer that Lonnie criticized the board for not notifying her or her husband about the decision to open an exhibit at the Louisville Galleria and to purchase an Ali memorabilia collection from Paloger.³² Kevin Wigginton, who remained on the board, told Shafer that Bather’s decisions convinced Lonnie that museum experts needed to run the board.³³ Shafer referenced Ali sending a memo to the board, in which he threatened to withdraw his “personal support, name, image, and likeness from any and all business and entities associated with the museum” if any member refused to resign.³⁴ The new board included six holdovers from Bather’s original board and five new members, including Lonnie.³⁵ Ali and Lonnie recreated the board because they disliked the old board’s management decisions and felt that they lacked experience in the museum field.

³⁰ McDonough, “\$197.4 Million City Budget.”

³¹ McDonough, “\$197.4 Million City Budget.”

³² Sheldon Shafer, “Wrongdoing Wasn’t Reason for New Ali Museum Board,” *Courier-Journal*, July 14, 1995, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/july-14-1995-page-12-55/docview/1873484031/se-2>.

³³ Shafer, “Wrongdoing.”

³⁴ Shafer, “Wrongdoing.”

³⁵ Shafer, “Wrongdoing.”

The new MAC board withdrew its offer to purchase Paloger's memorabilia collection. In 2023, Paloger told reporter P.J. Kinsella that, during the 1990s, he had the most extensive Ali memorabilia collection ever.³⁶ Shafer stated in the *Courier-Journal* on February 8, 1995, that Paloger had one of the largest collections of Ali-themed memorabilia in the world.³⁷ Paloger started collecting Ali memorabilia in 1992 when he purchased an Ali-signed check for \$110 at The National, a sports card show in Atlanta.³⁸ His collection included Ali's boxing robes, trunks, shoes, fight scorecards, handwritten letters, posters, programs, and ticket stubs from his past fights.³⁹ The board rented parts of Paloger's collection for the Galleria exhibit and offered to purchase the entire collection for \$1 million in 1995.⁴⁰ Paloger, according to the Kinsella article, had 80 percent of his entire Ali memorabilia collection in 1995.⁴¹ Paloger's collection, amongst the largest of its kind, included personal items, merchandise, tickets, and programs.

The *Courier-Journal* did not report the fallout between Paloger and the board in the summer of 1995. However, Rochelle Riley did report on it in the *Courier-Journal* on September 16, 1997. Riley wrote that during a board meeting in the summer of 1995, the board rejected Paloger's offer to purchase his memorabilia collection for \$1 million.⁴² John Ramsey, a board member at the time, told Riley that he and other unnamed board members negotiated Paloger down to \$300,000 during a lunch meeting at the Hyatt Regency Hotel.⁴³ However, the rest of the

³⁶ Kinsella, "From Ali."

³⁷ Sheldon Shafer, "Ali Museum Could Open by Year's End at Galleria," *Courier Journal*, February 8, 1995, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/february-8-1995-page-6-247/docview/1873451541/se-2>

³⁸ Kinsella, "From Ali."

³⁹ Sheldon Shafer, "A First Round Knockout: Galleria to House Temporary Ali Exhibit," *Courier-Journal*, March 22, 1995, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/march-22-1995-page-1-263/docview/1873469472/se-2>.

⁴⁰ Shafer, "Ali Museum Could Open."

⁴¹ Kinsella, "From Ali."

⁴² Rochelle Riley, "Ali Wishes Items Weren't Being Sold," *Courier-Journal*, September 16, 1997, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/september-16-1997-page-1-43/docview/1873886587/se-2>.

⁴³ Riley, "Ali Wishes."

board did not want to proceed with that offer, and Paloger did not sell his collection to them.⁴⁴ Ramsey explained to Riley that he “couldn’t tell them to spend that kind of money when the museum didn’t have the money to stay open.”⁴⁵ Christie’s Los Angeles, an auctioning company, auctioned off Paloger’s collection in 1997 for \$1.3 million.⁴⁶ MAC officials declined to purchase memorabilia from that auction and encouraged buyers to consider donating their purchases to the museum.⁴⁷ Due to financial constraints, the new MAC board withdrew its offer to purchase Paloger’s collection.

The new MAC board also closed its exhibit at the Louisville Galleria in 1996 due to financial constraints. The Galleria exhibit opened during Bather’s Presidency on May 4, 1995.⁴⁸ The Galleria exhibit focused on Ali’s boxing accomplishments and values. According to the floor plan provided by the Muhammad Ali Center Collections & Archives, the museum chronicled Ali’s life and career (Figure 1).

⁴⁴ Riley, “Ali Wishes.”

⁴⁵ Riley, “Ali Wishes.”

⁴⁶ Riley, “Ali Wishes.”

⁴⁷ Riley, “Ali Wishes.”

⁴⁸ Jim Hopkins, “Ali Museum Plan Faces Challenges,” *Courier-Journal*, June 27, 1999, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/june-27-1999-page-1-494/docview/1874091066/se-2>.

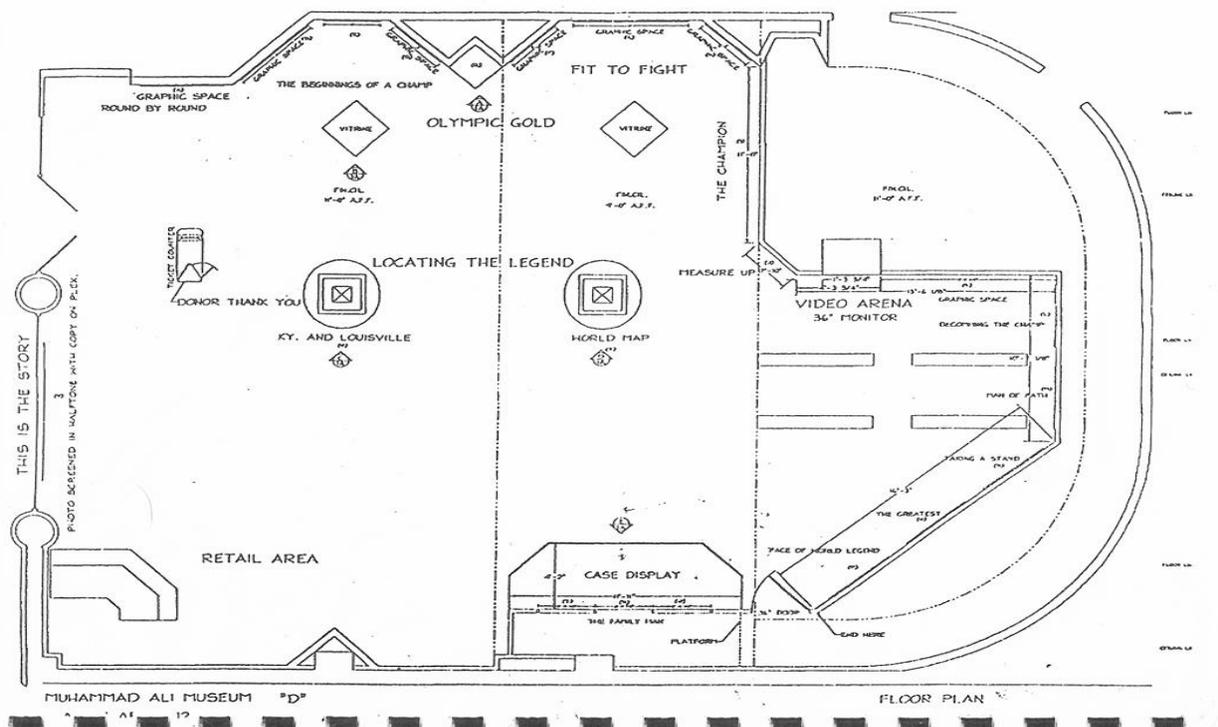


Figure 1: The Muhammad Ali Center Collections & Archives, *The Muhammad Ali Museum and Education Center Floor Plan for Galleria Exhibit in 1995* (Louisville, KY)

The exhibit highlighted key events from Ali’s life, including his start in boxing at the age of 12, his gold medal win at the 1960 Olympics, his first heavyweight championship in 1964, his conversion to Islam that same year, and his refusal to serve in the Vietnam War.⁴⁹ Shafer, who obtained early access to the exhibit, gave a more detailed description of the Galleria exhibit in a *Courier-Journal* article from April 24, 1995.⁵⁰ Shafer wrote that the Galleria exhibit featured a case display of Ali memorabilia, a retail area, and a theatre with a 36-foot monitor that aired an eight-minute video on Ali, including footage from his past fights.⁵¹ The MAC had the museum

⁴⁹ Sheldon Shafer, “Museum Offers Trip Through Life of Muhammad Ali,” *Courier-Journal*, April 24, 1995, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/april-24-1995-page-9-40/docview/1873454025/se-2>.

⁵⁰ Shafer, “Museum Offers Trip.”

⁵¹ Shafer, “Museum Offers Trip.”

open seven days a week, with admission priced at \$2.50 for adults, \$2.00 for senior citizens and students, and \$1.00 for children under the age of six (Figure 2).⁵²

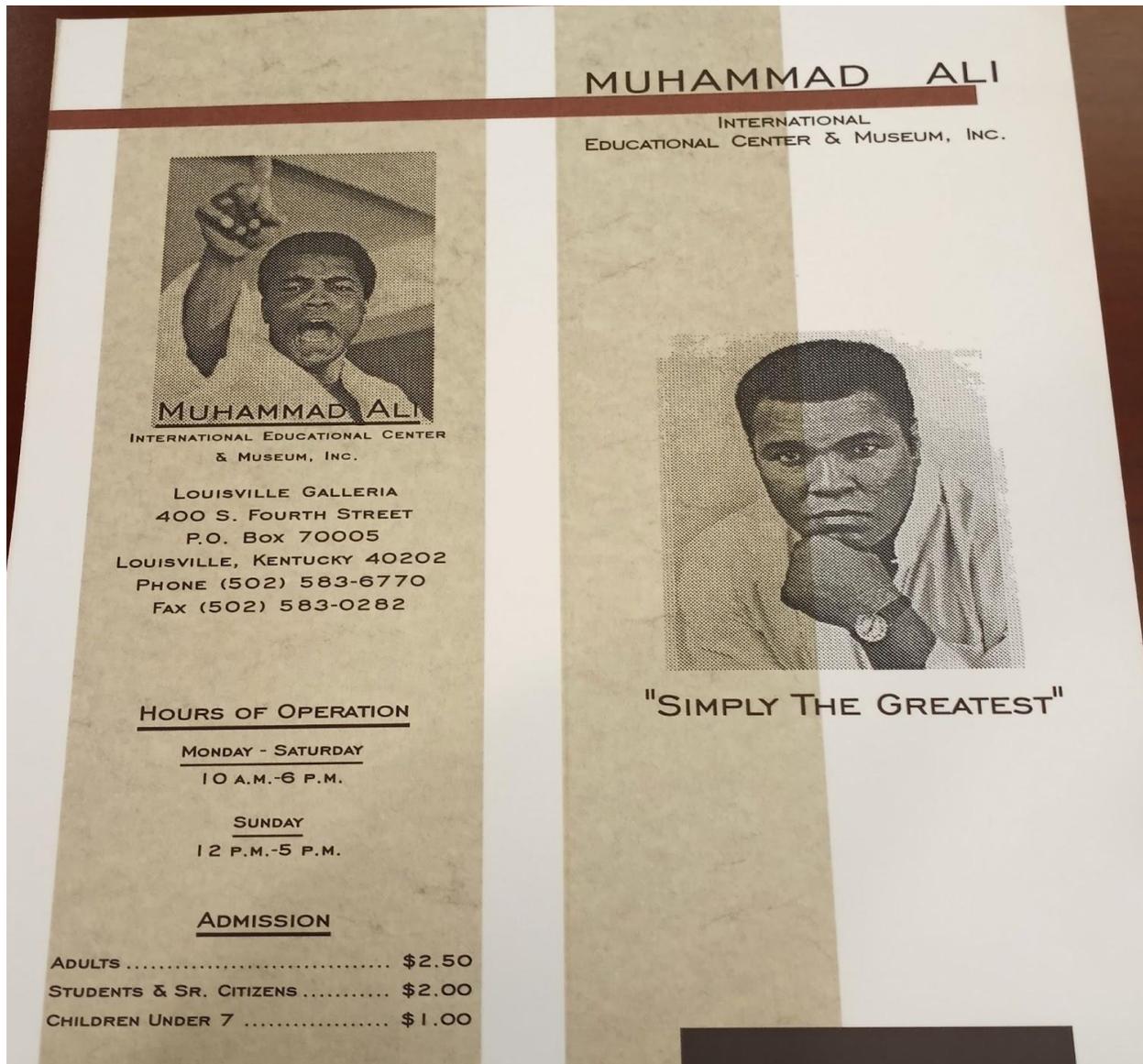


Figure 2: The Muhammad Ali Center Library and Archives, *The Muhammad Ali Museum and Education Center Brochure for Galleria Exhibit in 1995* (Louisville, KY).

The MAC's planners opened an exhibit at the Louisville Galleria that chronicled Ali's life.

⁵² Shafer, "Museum Offers Trip."

Shafer reported in the *Courier-Journal* on January 3, 1996, that the MAC's planners wanted to close the Galleria exhibit. Shafer wrote that MAC board members told him that "the Galleria display had been a financial drain and hadn't been properly marketed... [even if it] had served a purpose by generating interest in a permanent project."⁵³ Paul Porter, the MAC's lawyer, told Shafer that the exhibit struggled to make money, even with only one paid staff member.⁵⁴ Porter added that he and other MAC planners wanted to devote their energy to starting a national fund drive to build a permanent museum.⁵⁵ Galleria manager Duke Runnels told Shafer that the exhibit "drew a reasonable crowd," but declined to comment on whether the MAC's planners fell behind on its rent payments.⁵⁶ Although the *Courier-Journal* did not report on the closure of the Galleria exhibit at the time, Jim Hopkins wrote in the *Courier-Journal* on June 27, 1999, that it closed in January 1996.⁵⁷ When the Galleria exhibit opened, Bather intended to keep it open from 1995 to 1998.⁵⁸ He and other MAC planners wanted to use it to gather funds to build a \$25 million permanent museum.⁵⁹ Despite Bather's desire to have the exhibit open from 1995 to 1998, the MAC board closed it because they saw it as a waste of spending and a hindrance to opening a permanent facility.

Bather proposed and incorporated the MAC as a non-profit and formed its first board of directors, but he did not influence its exhibit design, site selection, or fundraising. Bather proposed the MAC in 1992 because of his desire to diversify the tourist attractions on West Main Street by including museums about sports and Black heritage. Bather also wanted Louisville to

⁵³ Sheldon Shafer, "Muhammad Ali Exhibit at Galleria to Close This Week," *Courier-Journal*, January 3, 1996, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/january-3-1996-page-9-121/docview/1873581957/se-2>.

⁵⁴ Shafer, "Ali Exhibit at Galleria."

⁵⁵ Shafer, "Ali Exhibit at Galleria."

⁵⁶ Shafer, "Ali Exhibit at Galleria."

⁵⁷ Hopkins, "Museum Plan Faces Challenges."

⁵⁸ Shafer, "Museum Offers Trip."

⁵⁹ Shafer, "Museum Offers Trip."

pay tribute to Ali and his legacy. Bather incorporated the MAC and formed its board on February 16, 1994. Bather opened a temporary exhibit at the Louisville Galleria on May 4, 1995. After Bather's resignation, Ali and Lonnie recreated the board. The new board that Lonnie and Ali created withdrew from agreements that Bather had made. This chapter showed an aspect of the MAC neglected by scholars, whose focus had been on its narrative and design rather than its origins.

Chapter Two: Planning

Shafer reported in the *Courier-Journal* on June 17, 1996, that MAC's planners unveiled their plans to the public. The MAC's planners wanted to open a \$25 million museum near the Kentucky Exposition Center, a multi-purpose venue in Louisville.¹ The MAC's planners wanted a 60,000-square-foot building with exhibits, a Hall of Fame, a 100-seat theatre, a restaurant, a gift shop, meeting rooms, and classrooms.² Rochelle Riley reported in the *Courier-Journal* on December 3, 1996, that the MAC's planners considered building the museum and cultural centre on Main Street in downtown Louisville with a \$25 to \$40 million budget.³ However, in December 1997, Lonnie reincorporated the Muhammad Ali Museum and Education Center in Kentucky.⁴ Sources never explained why reincorporation was necessary.⁵ This chapter will focus on the planning of the MAC from 1997 to 2005. This chapter will explain the key individuals and groups involved in creating the MAC, as well as the political and logistical reasons behind the decision to build the museum and cultural centre on North Sixth Street in downtown Louisville. This chapter will argue that Muhammad Ali, Lonnie, members of Louisville's government, and museum experts were the key individuals and groups involved in the planning of the MAC. This chapter will also argue that the MAC's planners built the museum and cultural centre on North Sixth Street because Louisville's government wanted them to.

¹ Sheldon Shafer, "Efforts to Create Ali Museum Back on Track," *Courier-Journal*, June 17, 1996, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/june-17-1996-page-9-46/docview/1873657715/se-2>.

² Shafer, "Museum Back on Track."

³ Rochelle Riley, "Proposed Museum will Honor Ali's Place in Boxing History," *Courier-Journal*, December 3, 1996, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/december-3-1996-page-1-46/docview/1873735777/se-2>.

⁴ Hopkins, "Museum Plan Faces Challenges."

⁵ Hopkins, "Museum Plan Faces Challenges."

In 1997, when Lonnie reincorporated the MAC, Abramson joined the organization's Board of Directors. Press packets and past editions of *The Mentor*, the newsletter created by the planners, mentioned who served on the board. Abramson served on the board from 1997 to 1999.⁶ David Armstrong took over Abramson's role on the board after becoming Louisville's new Mayor in 1999.⁷ Armstrong only served one term from 1999 to 2003 because he did not want to run for Mayor of Louisville Metro, the consolidated city-county government of Louisville and Jefferson County, established in 2003.⁸ Louisville Metro elected Abramson as Mayor in 2003, and he rejoined the MAC's board.⁹ According to a letter that he wrote to the board on October 8, 1998, Abramson supported building the MAC because:

A major center of this type with national significance will attract many new visitors to our city. Combined with the Kentucky Derby Museum and the Louisville Slugger Bat Museum, Louisville will have three facilities of national stature that cannot be found anywhere in the country. But this project is not just tourist dollars. It will give Louisville a chance to serve as a host for people involved in a variety of efforts to instill a strong set of values in people. This influx of dedication, ideas, learning, and commitment to human understanding can only benefit our citizens. I can think of no other projects that hold as much promise for this community, this nation, and the human spirit all over the world.¹⁰

In the letter, Abramson expected the MAC to boost Louisville tourism and the well-being of its residents. Abramson told the *Courier-Journal* on November 19, 2005, that he expected the MAC to draw around 400,000 visitors per year, creating "an economic impact of \$7 to \$8 million" on

⁶ Operating Board of Directors, Box 1 (of 5); Muhammad Ali Center - Downtown Development Corporation, 1998 Press Packet, Louisville Metro Records Management & Archives, Louisville Metro Government, Louisville, Kentucky.

⁷ Operating Board of Directors, Box 1 (of 5); Muhammad Ali Center - Downtown Development Corporation, 1999 Press Packet, Louisville Metro Records Management & Archives, Louisville Metro Government, Louisville, Kentucky.

⁸ Associated Press, "Armstrong Won't Run for Metro Mayor," *Madison Courier*, January 11, 2001, <https://books.google.ca/books?id=pFpjAAAIBAJ&lpg=PA3&dq=david%20armstrong%20louisville%20metro&pg=PA3#v=onepage&q=david%20armstrong%20louisville%20metro&f=false>.

⁹ *The Mentor*: Newsletter of the Muhammad Ali Center, 2003, Box 1 (of 5), Downtown Development Corporation, Louisville Metro Records Management & Archives, Louisville Metro Government, Louisville, Kentucky.

¹⁰ Operating Board of Directors, 1998.

the city annually.¹¹ Abramson served on the board because he expected the MAC to benefit Louisville by enhancing its image abroad, strengthening its economy, and preserving its values.

Abramson hired urban planner Barry Alberts to help with planning the MAC. Abramson picked Alberts because of his role in building and redesigning other tourist attractions in downtown Louisville. Alberts helped build downtown tourist attractions like Slugger Field and the Louisville Slugger Museum & Factory.¹² Alberts also helped redesign other downtown tourist attractions like the Commonwealth Convention Center and the Riverfront Plaza.¹³ Additionally, Alberts served as Executive Director of the Louisville Development Authority from 1988 to 2007.¹⁴ Abramson created the Louisville Development Authority in 1988 to revitalize and promote downtown Louisville to tourists.¹⁵ The program operated through a tax increment financing plan that allowed the city to sell bonds for any downtown public improvements and use any increase in tax receipts in the district to pay them off.¹⁶ On April 12, 1997, Rick McDonough reported in the *Courier-Journal* that Abramson assigned Alberts to work on the MAC.¹⁷ McDonough never specified the role Alberts had in planning the MAC, and no other *Courier-Journal* articles from the late 1990s and early 2000s clarified his involvement. However, Shafer wrote in the *Courier-Journal* on December 25, 2007, that Alberts served as the Project Manager for the MAC, a role that involved coordinating the planning and construction of

¹¹ Wayne Tompkins, "Downtown Sites Expect to Reap Financial Windfall," *Courier-Journal*, November 19, 2005, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/november-19-2005-page-49/docview/2887448793/se-2>.

¹² The Muhammad Ali Center Planning Team Roster, 1998, Box 1 (of 5), Downtown Development Corporation, Louisville Metro Records Management & Archives, Louisville Metro Government, Louisville, Kentucky.

¹³ The Muhammad Ali Center Planning Team Roster, 1998.

¹⁴ Sheldon Shafer, "Muhammad Ali Center Gets Interim Chief," *Courier-Journal*, December 25, 2007, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/muhammad-ali-center-gets-interim-chief/docview/241455587/se-2>.

¹⁵ Rick McDonough, "Mayor Plans New Agency on Downtown Development," *Courier-Journal*, June 30, 1988, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/june-30-1988-page-10-43/docview/1872086023/se-2>.

¹⁶ McDonough, "Mayor Plans New Agency."

¹⁷ Rick McDonough, "Backers of Arena Want to Include Ali Museum," *Courier-Journal*, April 12, 1997, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/april-12-1997-page-1-55/docview/1873824928/se-2>.

the museum and cultural centre.¹⁸ Abramson assigned Alberts to assist in planning the MAC due to his experience as an urban planner, and Alberts played a role in coordinating its construction.

Lonnie also played a significant role in creating the MAC. Shafer wrote in the *Courier-Journal* on June 17, 1996, that Lonnie led the search site committee for the MAC that focused on selecting a location for the museum and cultural centre.¹⁹ Riley wrote in the *Courier-Journal* on August 30, 1996, that Lonnie served as the Chief Financial Officer and Secretary-Treasurer for the board.²⁰ Larry Townsend, the President of the MAC during its planning phase from 1996 to 1999, told the *Courier-Journal* on April 12, 1997, that Ali and Lonnie persuaded him to oversee the planning of the museum and cultural centre.²¹ Michael J. Fox stated in a 2018 interview that he wanted to become the President of the MAC after meeting Lonnie and Ali in their home in Berrien Springs, Michigan.²² The three of them discussed ways to preserve Ali's legacy, and this meeting convinced Fox to take on the role.²³ Susan Shaeffer-Nahmias, the original curator of the MAC, stated in 2017 that Ali and Lonnie insisted on building it in Louisville.²⁴ She also said that Ali and Lonnie read every text, viewed every image, and approved every architectural feature used in the MAC.²⁵ Shaeffer-Nahmias explained that Ali and Lonnie did this to ensure that those parts of the MAC represented the boxer's values and beliefs.²⁶ Lonnie helped create the MAC by researching sites, fundraising, recruiting former Presidents, and evaluating the design.

¹⁸ Shafer, "Interim Chief."

¹⁹ Shafer, "Museum Back on Track."

²⁰ Rochelle Riley, "Abramson Vows Major Push for Ali Museum," *Courier-Journal*, August 30, 1996, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/august-30-1996-page-1-62/docview/1873666943/se-2>.

²¹ McDonough, "Backers of Arena."

²² Michael J. Fox, "Michael J. Fox 1945—Honored as 2019 Historymaker Art & Heritage Preservationist," interview by Norma Jean Coulter, *Arizona Historymakers*, Historical League, Inc., 2018, 25, <https://historicalleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Final-foxa3516d20-a7d1-4f2d-a10d-93ab0ff932f4.pdf>.

²³ Fox, "Michael J. Fox," 25.

²⁴ Rosner and Rogers, "Striking Combinations," 26.

²⁵ Rosner and Rogers, "Striking Combinations," 26.

²⁶ Rosner and Rogers, "Striking Combinations," 26.

As noted in the first chapter, Lonnie and Ali wanted museum experts involved in planning the MAC, leading to the involvement of the New York-based architecture firm Lee H. Skolnick Architecture + Design Partnership (now known as Skolnick Architecture). In 1997, the MAC's planners hired Skolnick to be their Chief Architect.²⁷ Skolnick previously designed museums that used environmental and interactive components, including the Creative Discovery Museum that opened in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1995.²⁸ This exhibit had stations that allowed visitors to drive electric cars, work with electric generators, and learn about energy by sending water through conduits in a two-story sculpture.²⁹ Skolnick also designed "Earth 2U, Exploring Geography," a travelling exhibit from 1995 to 2003 that taught visitors about geography through audiovisual materials and hands-on activities.³⁰ In October 1997, Skolnick investigated ten different sites to build the MAC.³¹ In October 1998, Skolnick released designs for the proposed MAC building at the Riverfront Plaza, the site favoured by its planners from 1998 to 2001.³² Skolnick, along with the architectural firms Bleyer Blinder Belle and the Bravura Corporation, designed the MAC building that opened in 2005.³³ Skolnick helped create the MAC because they investigated sites to build the museum and cultural centre, and produced two building designs, the latter being the one that opened in 2005.

²⁷ Rochelle Riley, "New York Architect Is Chosen for Muhammad Ali Center," *Courier-Journal*, October 31, 1997, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/october-31-1997-page-10-61/docview/1873870127/se-2>.

²⁸ Dulcie Leimbach, "Currents; A Museum that Plays," *New York Times*, May 18, 1995, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/currents-museum-that-plays/docview/430165552/se-2>.

²⁹ Leimbach, "A Museum that Plays."

³⁰ "Earth 2U: Exploring Geography," *Smithsonian*, accessed March 13, 2025, <https://www.sites.si.edu/s/archived-exhibit?topicId=0TO3600000U0DdGAK>.

³¹ Riley, "New York Architect."

³² Sheldon Shafer, "Plans for Ali Center Are Unveiled; \$70 Million Fund Drive Begins," *Courier-Journal*, October 8, 1998, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/october-8-1998-page-1-48/docview/1874022765/se-2>.

³³ Rosner and Rogers, "Striking Combinations," 27.

From 1998 to 2001, the MAC's planners prioritized building the museum and cultural centre at the Riverfront Plaza, a plan supported by Abramson's government. Shafer reported in the *Courier-Journal* on October 2, 1998, that Abramson's government convinced the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts to approve the MAC's construction at the Riverfront Plaza.³⁴ The proposed museum and cultural centre was next to the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts (Figure 3).³⁵



Figure 3: Map showing the distance between the proposed Muhammad Ali Museum and Education Center building and the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts, *The Courier-Journal*, October 2, 1998, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/october-2-1998-page-1-86/docview/1874024094/se-2>.

Officials from the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts did not want the MAC next to their facility because of potential traffic and parking problems.³⁶ However, Abramson's government

³⁴ Sheldon Shafer, "Ali Museum Clears Hurdle on Location," *Courier-Journal*, October 2, 1998, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/october-2-1998-page-1-86/docview/1874024094/se-2>.

³⁵ Shafer, "Ali Museum Clears Hurdle."

³⁶ Shafer, "Ali Museum Clears Hurdle."

convinced them to support the project.³⁷ Abramson assured officials from the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts of the final say on the MAC's building design, specifically joint uses for both facilities, and directing visitors to the building.³⁸ Shafer reported in the *Courier-Journal* on October 8, 1998, that Abramson's government promised \$10 million worth of land to the MAC's planners to help build the museum and cultural centre at the Riverfront Plaza.³⁹ Abramson's government persuaded the MAC's planners to choose the Riverfront Plaza by convincing officials from the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts to locate the proposed building next door and promising \$10 million in land.

When the MAC's planners announced the proposed museum and cultural centre at the Riverfront Plaza, the design differed from the building that opened in 2005. Shafer described the proposed building in a 1998 *Courier-Journal* article. Shafer wrote that the proposed building had four levels and 93,000 square feet of space.⁴⁰ Shafer added that the MAC's planners wanted the building to feature an auditorium, an archive, classrooms, a gift shop, a restaurant, offices, a garden, and 40,000 square feet of exhibit space.⁴¹ The MAC's planners released a press packet in 1998 that included a photo of the exterior building and the lobby.⁴² The picture of the building's exterior showed a larger and narrower building made of glass with a curved roof and five images of Ali on the side (Figure 4).⁴³

³⁷ Shafer, "Ali Museum Clears Hurdle."

³⁸ Shafer, "Ali Museum Clears Hurdle."

³⁹ Shafer, "Plans for Ali Center."

⁴⁰ Shafer, "Plans for Ali Center."

⁴¹ Shafer, "Plans for Ali Center."

⁴² Muhammad Ali Center Press Packet, 1998, Box 1 (of 5), Downtown Development Corporation, Louisville Metro Records Management & Archives, Louisville Metro Government, Louisville, Kentucky.

⁴³ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.



EXTERIOR RENDERING

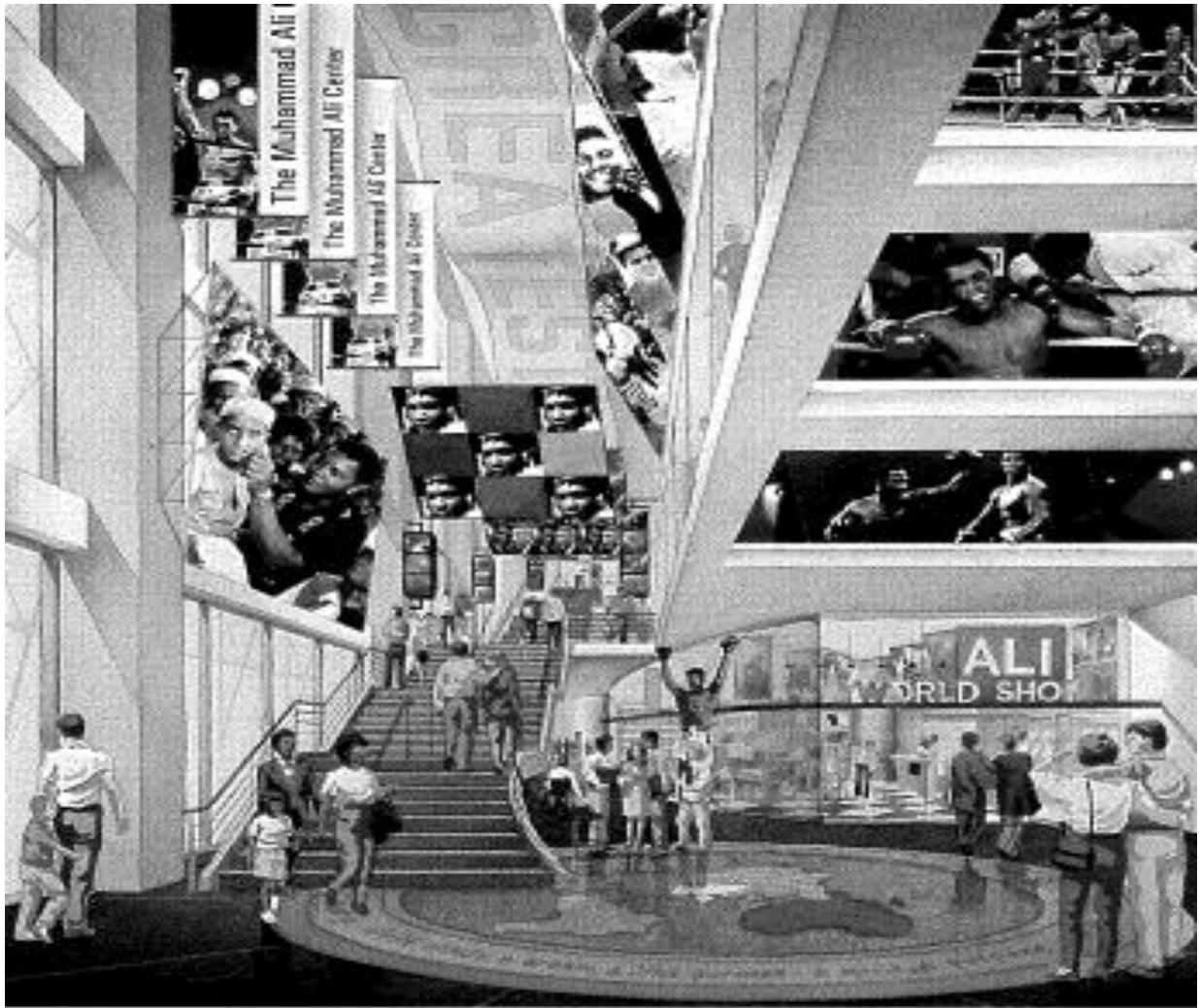
Lee H. Skolnick Architecture + Design Partnership

Figure 4: Muhammad Ali Center Press Packet, 1998, Image of the Muhammad Ali Center's exterior design for their proposed building at the Riverfront Plaza. Box 1 (of 5), Downtown Development Corporation, Louisville Metro Records Management & Archives, Louisville Metro Government, Louisville, Kentucky.

The pictures on the side of the building included two portrait photos of Ali, two photos of Ali boxing, and a picture of Ali at the 1996 Olympics in the centre.⁴⁴ This press packet also featured a picture of the lobby, showing images of Ali, a statue of Ali, and a gift shop called “Ali World Shop” (Figure 5).⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.

⁴⁵ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.



INTERIOR LOBBY RENDERING

Lee H. Skolnick Architecture + Design Partnership

Figure 5: Muhammad Ali Center Press Packet, 1998, Image of the Muhammad Ali Center's interior lobby design for their proposed building at the Riverfront Plaza. Box 1 (of 5), Downtown Development Corporation, Louisville Metro Records Management & Archives, Louisville Metro Government, Louisville, Kentucky.

The photos of Ali in the lobby included portraits, photographs of him boxing, and a picture of him engaged in humanitarian work.⁴⁶ The 1998 press packet showed how the original MAC

⁴⁶ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.

building design differed from the one that opened in 2005, featuring a larger and narrower building made of glass and a lobby containing images of Ali and a statue of the boxer.

The 1998 press packet listed three proposed exhibits: “Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times,” “Muhammad Ali: The Athlete,” and “Muhammad Ali: The Ambassador.” The “Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times” exhibit told the story of Ali’s life.⁴⁷ The press packet stated that the MAC’s planners wanted this exhibit to highlight Ali’s upbringing in Louisville, his gold medal win at the 1960 Olympics, his first world championship reign from 1964 to 1967, his suspension from boxing from 1967 to 1970, his return to boxing in the 1970s, and his humanitarian work in the 1990s.⁴⁸ The press packet noted that the MAC’s planners wanted this exhibit to feature displays of Ali’s humanitarian work after he retired from boxing in 1981.⁴⁹ They wanted to surprise people by showing them how “Muhammad Ali’s life didn’t end with his boxing career.”⁵⁰ Lonnie expressed a similar sentiment about Ali’s humanitarian work in her *Courier-Journal* article from October 3, 1999. In the article, Lonnie stated that she and other MAC planners wanted the museum to illustrate Ali’s post-retirement commitment to tolerance and understanding.⁵¹ Lonnie explained that she and other planners wanted to challenge the assumption that Parkinson’s syndrome had compromised Ali’s physical and mental capacities.⁵² While “Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times” focused on parts of Ali’s life well known to the public, it also highlighted his life after retirement because the planners, especially Lonnie, felt that part of the boxer’s life deserved more recognition.

⁴⁷ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.

⁴⁸ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.

⁴⁹ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.

⁵⁰ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.

⁵¹ Lonnie Ali, “The Muhammad Ali Center’s Mission,” *Courier-Journal*, October 3, 1999, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/october-3-1999-page-52-604/docview/1874126939/se-2>.

⁵² Ali, “Ali Center’s Mission.”

The “Muhammad Ali: The Athlete” exhibit focused on his journey to boxing greatness, while the “Muhammad Ali: The Ambassador” exhibit highlighted his activism and values. The MAC’s planners wrote that they wanted the “Muhammad Ali: The Athlete” exhibit to show Ali’s physical, spiritual, and emotional characteristics because they “enabled him to become ‘The Greatest.’”⁵³ The exhibit text also stated that the MAC’s planners wanted the exhibit to highlight other unnamed athletes by showing how “determination, resolve, and physical well-being [factored] in their individual achievements.”⁵⁴ The exhibit text for “Muhammad Ali: The Ambassador” stated that the MAC’s planners wanted this exhibit to focus on Ali’s values and philosophy.⁵⁵ Ali’s values and philosophy, as stated in the exhibit text, influenced his decision not to serve in Vietnam and his human rights advocacy.⁵⁶ The exhibit text also stated that the MAC’s planners proposed a “World Ambassadors Hall of Fame,” a space that would spotlight individuals who have helped their communities, and the “Muhammad Ali Institute,” a space for educational workshops.⁵⁷ The 1998 press packet showed that the original museum design focused on Ali’s life, boxing career, and involvement in social justice causes, rather than his six principles of confidence, conviction, dedication, kindness, respect, and spirituality.

The MAC’s planners published another exhibit overview on November 19, 2001, that differed from the one in the 1998 press packet. The proposed galleries in the 2001 exhibit overview were the “West End Gallery,” “Training for Life,” “Olympic Gold Gallery,” “Living Your Beliefs,” and “Making Difference Gallery.” The “West End Gallery” used audio, artifacts,

⁵³ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.

⁵⁴ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.

⁵⁵ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.

⁵⁶ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.

⁵⁷ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.

and props to show Ali's childhood in the West End.⁵⁸ The "West End Gallery" also featured famous sites in that area, like Chickasaw Park, and oral histories from people who grew up there, specifically Ali's family, friends, and neighbours.⁵⁹ The "Training for Life" gallery focused on how Ali became a boxer.⁶⁰ It also featured an interactive area that offered visitors the chance to punch heavy bags, measure their fitness levels, determine their weight class, and compare their speed, arm length, glove size, stamina, and reflexes with Ali.⁶¹ The "Olympic Gold Gallery" focused on Ali's amateur boxing career, including his gold medal win at the 1960 Olympics.⁶² It also highlighted other Black athletes like Wilma Rudolph, a sprinter who won three gold medals at the 1960 Olympics.⁶³ The "Living Your Beliefs" gallery focused on Ali's encounters with segregation, his affiliation with the Nation of Islam (NOI), his opposition to the Vietnam War, and the significance of the civil rights movement.⁶⁴ The "Making Difference Gallery" used eyewitness reports attesting to Ali's philanthropy and humanitarian work.⁶⁵ While the updated MAC design featured five stations instead of three, it still focused on describing parts of Ali's life rather than illustrating how he followed his principles.

Still, the MAC's planners wanted to use the museum and cultural centre to share Ali's values with the public during this period. The 1998 press packet defined its mission as "to preserve and share the legacy of Muhammad Ali, to promote tolerance, hope, and understanding, and to inspire people to be as great as they can be."⁶⁶ In an interview published by the same press

⁵⁸ Ali Center: Exhibit Overview, 2001, Muhammad Ali Center, Undated File — Box 44, Folder: 101, University of Louisville Archives & Special Collections, University of Louisville.

⁵⁹ Exhibit Overview, 2001.

⁶⁰ Exhibit Overview, 2001.

⁶¹ Exhibit Overview, 2001.

⁶² Exhibit Overview, 2001.

⁶³ Exhibit Overview, 2001.

⁶⁴ Exhibit Overview, 2001.

⁶⁵ Exhibit Overview, 2001.

⁶⁶ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.

packet, Lonnie explained that while she wanted people to visit the MAC for various reasons, she wanted visitors to learn about Ali's values and integrate those values into their lives.⁶⁷ The press packet also included a letter from Kofi Annan, the secretary-general of the United Nations from 1997 to 2006.⁶⁸ Annan stated in the letter that "with Muhammad's spirit and beliefs guiding it, the Center should inspire thousands of people toward building a better and safer world."⁶⁹

Lonnie wrote in the *Courier-Journal* in 1999 that her husband's efforts at preventing child hunger and promoting peace made him a symbol of "tolerance, hope, and understanding."⁷⁰

Lonnie added that she wanted the MAC to associate Ali with "tolerance, hope, and understanding... just as people associated Martin Luther King Jr. with nonviolence and civil rights and Jimmy Carter with his work in human rights."⁷¹ The MAC's planners wanted to promote Ali's values and beliefs to its visitors because of his humanitarianism.

Lonnie also said that she and Ali wanted the MAC to inspire young Black men. In a 1998 interview, Lonnie said that past conversations that she and her husband had with young Black men sparked their idea to create the MAC.⁷² Lonnie explained that these conversations made them realize that:

"Today's urban males—especially young Black males—do not put much hope into tomorrow. Many don't expect to live long enough to see their 21st birthday. They live for today, not for the future... doing drugs, selling drugs, stealing, and killing to get by. Education is something you do for the future, so it holds little importance or meaning in their lives. Most importantly, these kids do not have dreams for the future. In fact, they have no real dreams even for tomorrow. For them, wearing gold, having the latest pair of athletic shoes, and other trendy clothing is what has become important. Cars are also

⁶⁷ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.

⁶⁸ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.

⁶⁹ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.

⁷⁰ Ali, "Ali Center's Mission."

⁷¹ Ali, "Ali Center's Mission."

⁷² Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.

important. Everything they do becomes defined by what material gratification they can acquire today.”⁷³

Lonnie and her husband were concerned about “today’s urban males” dying at an early age due to their involvement in drugs and crime. They also felt that these young men were not prepared for the future because they valued material possessions over education. Lonnie and Ali wanted the MAC to educate young Black men because they were concerned about their life choices and lack of ambition for the future.

The MAC’s planners aimed to open the museum and cultural centre in 2001. The MAC’s planners released a Project Timetable on January 6, 1999 (Figure 6).⁷⁴

Muhammad Ali Center	
Project Timetable	
January 6, 1999	
January, 1999	Begin regular schedule of Board meetings
February 1-28, 1999	New York National media briefings
February 15, 1999	Finalize project design and planning team
January 15-March 15, 1999	Seed Money Solicitations/Commitments (\$4-5 million)
February – September, 1999	Project Design Development proceeds
January – December, 1999	Primary Fundraising Effort
September 30, 1999	Design Development/Budget Estimate Complete
October/November, 1999	Budget/Fundraising Reconciliation
December, 1999- March 2000	Construction Documents/Additional Fundraising
April 2000	Construction Contracts Executed
April 2000 – September, 2001	Construction
Fall 2001	Grand Opening

Figure 6: Muhammad Ali Center Press Packet, 1999, The Muhammad Ali Center Project Timetable, Box 1 (of 5), Downtown Development Corporation, Louisville Metro Records Management & Archives, Louisville Metro Government, Louisville, Kentucky.

⁷³ Ali Center Press Packet, 1998.

⁷⁴ Muhammad Ali Center: Project Timetable, 1999, Box 1 (of 5), Downtown Development Corporation, Louisville Metro Records Management & Archives, Louisville Metro Government, Louisville, Kentucky.

The timetable stated that the MAC's planners aimed to secure funding, finish their design, and hire a construction team by April 2000.⁷⁵ The timetable also stated that they expected the construction to last from April 2000 to September 2001, with an opening planned for later that fall; the document did not specify the month.⁷⁶ Shafer wrote in a 1998 *Courier-Journal* article that the MAC's planners were expecting a \$20 million donation from the Kentucky state government and aimed to raise an additional \$50 million.⁷⁷ In the same article, Shafer also wrote that the MAC's planners received between \$5 and \$10 million in pledges from private sources.⁷⁸ Townsend told the *Courier-Journal* on March 16, 1999, that he, Lonnie, and Ali devoted "12-hour days, six days a week" to meeting CEOs, marketing specialists, and celebrities like Steven Spielberg and Bill Gates to secure funding.⁷⁹ Shafer wrote in the *Courier-Journal* on November 10, 1999, that Malcolm Chancey, Ina Brown Bond, and filmmaker Eleanor Bingham Miller led the effort to gather funds from groups, individuals, and events on a local and state level.⁸⁰ The MAC's planners wanted to open the museum and cultural centre in 2001, with funding from the Kentucky government, celebrities, and corporations.

Residents criticized the Kentucky government for giving \$10 million to the MAC's planners and expressed those frustrations in the letters to the editor section of the *Courier-Journal*. Ruby L. Widmer wrote in a letter to the editor for the *Courier-Journal* on February 17, 2000, that "the money and the land could be put to better use to benefit all the citizens of

⁷⁵ Project Timetable, 1999.

⁷⁶ Project Timetable, 1999.

⁷⁷ Shafer, "Plans for Ali Center."

⁷⁸ Shafer, "Plans for Ali Center."

⁷⁹ Rochelle Riley, "Campaign for an Ideal: Ali Entourage Travels Across the Country Raising Money for a Museum to Celebrate His Legacy," *Courier-Journal*, March 16, 1999, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/march-16-1999-page-23-39/docview/1874077062/se-2>.

⁸⁰ Sheldon Shafer, "Ali Center Backers Report Raising \$6 Million," *Courier-Journal*, November 10, 1999, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/november-10-1999-page-16-298/docview/1874128296/se-2>.

Louisville.”⁸¹ Fred Hagan wrote on June 12, 2000, that Patton, who “got caught up in the Muhammad Ali mystique, and got a warm and fuzzy feeling by donating to such a just cause, when, in fact,... [it] would have been better to spend the \$10 million on prenatal care so we won’t have to build more prisons in a few years to house the poor, unhealthy, hard-to-teach children of today.”⁸² In the same edition of the *Courier-Journal*, Randall Hardesty criticized the \$80 million budget for the MAC because the National D-Day Museum (now known as The National WWII Museum) only opened on a \$25 million budget.⁸³ Hardesty explained that he found the planning of the MAC to be “a bit grandiose” because it “will commemorate one man while the D-Day museum honours millions of men and women who participated in World War II.”⁸⁴ Widmer, Hagan, and Hardesty’s letters highlighted how some residents opposed the Kentucky government donating \$20 million to the MAC’s planners.

Business and city officials defended the money that the MAC’s planners received from the Kentucky government because of its potential as a tourist attraction, and most Louisvillians supported the project. Bill Williams, former Slugger Museum Executive Director, wrote in the *Courier-Journal* on February 17th, 2000, that the MAC may draw up 750,000 visitors per year.⁸⁵ Wilson added that “more tourists and visitors mean more hotel rooms sold, more dinners eaten... [and] more products purchased.”⁸⁶ Members of Louisville’s government believed that residents supported building the MAC because of their findings from a 2001 telephone survey of Jefferson

⁸¹ Ruby L. Widmer, “Readers Forum,” *Courier-Journal*, Feb 17, 2000, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/february-17-2000-page-10-51/docview/1874181903/se-2>.

⁸² Fred Hagan, “Readers Forum,” *Courier-Journal*, June 12, 2000, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/june-12-2000-page-6-44/docview/1874192980/se-2>.

⁸³ Randall Hardesty, “Readers Forum,” *Courier-Journal*, June 12, 2000, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/june-12-2000-page-6-44/docview/1874192980/se-2>.

⁸⁴ Hardesty, “Readers Forum.”

⁸⁵ Bill Williams, “Readers Forum,” *Courier-Journal*, Feb 17, 2000, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/february-17-2000-page-10-51/docview/1874181903/se-2>.

⁸⁶ Williams, “Readers Forum.”

County.⁸⁷ According to the telephone survey, two-thirds of all respondents supported “the expansion of Waterfront Park, the proposed Muhammad Ali Center, and the repositioning of the Galleria into an urban/entertainment center.”⁸⁸ While the planning of the MAC received pushback from some Louisvillians, it still received support from local business officials, politicians, and other residents.

However, the MAC did not open in 2001 due to fundraising issues. On June 7, 1999, Townsend told the *Courier-Journal* that the MAC’s planners postponed the opening date because they had only raised \$20 million.⁸⁹ However, after being pressed further about money raised in gifts and written pledges, Townsend admitted to the *Courier-Journal* on June 27 that they only raised \$4 million.⁹⁰ Townsend arrived at the \$20 million figure by counting verbal promises as pledges, despite standard fundraising practices only including written commitments.⁹¹ Chancey told the *Courier-Journal* that written pledges legally ensured payment if a donor died or a corporation’s management changed.⁹² Chancey had gathered funds for Cardinal Stadium, a sports stadium in Louisville, the previous year.⁹³ Townsend explained that their fundraising struggles occurred because the project became more than a museum about Ali, and its proposed budget tripled.⁹⁴ Townsend added that the MAC’s planners needed a prominent national celebrity for fundraising.⁹⁵ He cited figures like Colin Powell and Lee Iacocca, the

⁸⁷ City of Louisville, Downtown Development Corporation, and Louisville Central Area Inc, *2002 Louisville Downtown Development Plan* (Louisville, 2002), 23.

⁸⁸ City of Louisville, Downtown Development Corporation, and Louisville Central Area Inc, *2002 Downtown Development Plan*, 47.

⁸⁹ Sheldon Shafer, “Ali Center to Miss Target Date,” *Courier-Journal*, June 8, 1999, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/june-8-1999-page-1-39/docview/1874089199/se-2>.

⁹⁰ Hopkins, “Museum Plan Faces Challenges.”

⁹¹ Hopkins, “Museum Plan Faces Challenges.”

⁹² Hopkins, “Museum Plan Faces Challenges.”

⁹³ Hopkins, “Museum Plan Faces Challenges.”

⁹⁴ Hopkins, “Museum Plan Faces Challenges.”

⁹⁵ Hopkins, “Museum Plan Faces Challenges.”

former Chrysler Corporation chairman who led the campaign to restore the Statue of Liberty.⁹⁶

The MAC's planners delayed the opening of the museum and cultural centre because they only raised \$4 million in gifts and written pledges.

Also, in the summer of 2001, Louisville's government told the MAC's planners that they preferred having the museum and cultural centre built on North Sixth Street. Armstrong told the *Courier-Journal* on July 5, 2001, that he wanted to make room for other potential developments at the Riverfront Plaza.⁹⁷ Among the proposed developments were expanding the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts, adding new restaurants, and adding more hotels.⁹⁸ Armstrong also told the *Courier-Journal* on December 4, 2001, that the spot at the Riverfront Plaza had poor visibility that hid the proposed MAC building "from almost anywhere but the air."⁹⁹ Armstrong wanted the MAC built on the North Sixth Street site that the Kingfish restaurant occupied from 1971 to 1997.¹⁰⁰ Louisville's government demolished Kingfish in 1997 to make room for a \$60 million tower for Vencor, a private healthcare company.¹⁰¹ Louisville's government put the property on sale in May 2000 because Vencor filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, a form of bankruptcy that allowed businesses to reorganize their assets and debts under court supervision.¹⁰² Louisville's government purchased the property for \$4.4 million in April 2001 and offered it to the planners.¹⁰³ Armstrong wanted the MAC built on North Sixth

⁹⁶ Hopkins, "Museum Plan Faces Challenges."

⁹⁷ Sheldon Shafer, "Ali Center May Land at Former Site of Kingfish," *Courier-Journal*, July 5, 2001, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/july-5-2001-page-1-38/docview/2868243579/se-2>.

⁹⁸ Shafer, "Former Site of Kingfish."

⁹⁹ Sheldon Shafer, "Ali Center to Be Constructed on Part of Old Kingfish Site," *Courier-Journal*, December 14, 2001, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/december-14-2001-page-1-100/docview/2868214612/se-2>.

¹⁰⁰ Shafer, "Old Kingfish Site."

¹⁰¹ Sheldon Shafer, "Downtown Kingfish Will Close This Sunday," *Courier-Journal*, September 30, 1997, <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-courier-journal-kingfish-closing/18906112/?locale=en-CA>.

¹⁰² Sheldon Shafer, "Louisville Renews Bid on Vencor Property," *Courier-Journal*, May 7, 2000, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/may-7-2000-page-5-767/docview/1874213407/se-2>.

¹⁰³ Sheldon Shafer, "City Solicits Proposals for Kingfish Site," *Courier-Journal*, April 26, 2001, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/april-26-2001-page-20-52/docview/2868243224/se-2>.

Street because he believed the Riverfront Plaza site lacked visibility, preferred to reserve that space for other developments, and saw an opportunity to repurpose the vacant Kingfish site.

The MAC's planners decided to build the MAC on North Sixth Street in late 2001. Shafer reported in the *Courier-Journal* on December 4, 2001, that the MAC's planners wanted to build the museum and cultural centre on the former site of the Kingfish restaurant.¹⁰⁴ The MAC decided on North Sixth Street for three reasons. The first being that PARC agreed to finance and build a \$7.5 million parking garage underneath the proposed MAC building.¹⁰⁵ Shafer reported in the *Courier-Journal* on January 8, 2002, that the Louisville Board of Aldermen voted to build the MAC on North Sixth Street.¹⁰⁶ The second being that Louisville's government agreed to spend \$7 million to build a one-acre plaza surrounding the MAC.¹⁰⁷ The plaza included an outdoor amphitheatre and two pedestrian bridges.¹⁰⁸ The third being that the new location linked the MAC to the Slugger Museum, the Galt House Hotel, the Kentucky Science Center, and Waterfront Park.¹⁰⁹ The MAC's planners decided to build the museum and cultural centre on North Sixth Street because the city wanted to use the Riverfront Plaza for other projects, the city promised to help build the parking garage and plaza, and the building's proximity to other tourist attractions in downtown Louisville.

The MAC's planners decreased their budget in early 2002. Shafer reported in the *Courier-Journal* on February 19, 2002, that the MAC's planners reduced the building's budget from \$60 million to \$41 million.¹¹⁰ The MAC's planners had \$33 million in pledges, covering 80

¹⁰⁴ Shafer, "Old Kingfish Site."

¹⁰⁵ Shafer, "Old Kingfish Site."

¹⁰⁶ Sheldon Shafer, "Site for Ali Center May Be Confirmed Tonight," *Courier-Journal*, January 8, 2002, <https://courier-journal.newspapers.com/image/364415787>.

¹⁰⁷ Shafer, "Old Kingfish Site."

¹⁰⁸ Shafer, "Old Kingfish Site."

¹⁰⁹ Shafer, "Old Kingfish Site."

¹¹⁰ Sheldon Shafer, "Space, Costs Reduced for Ali Center," *Courier-Journal*, February 19, 2002, <https://courier-journal.newspapers.com/image/361891919>.

percent of its newly proposed budget.¹¹¹ The MAC's planners also saved money from moving from the Riverfront Plaza to Kingfish because of PARC's agreement to build the parking garage.¹¹² Kentucky Governor Paul Patton donated only \$10 million, despite initially promising \$20 million.¹¹³ Fox explained to Shafer that Patton only donated \$10 million because of changes to the Kentucky government's budget in 2000.¹¹⁴ Shafer also noted that, in late 2001, the MAC's planners hosted charity premieres of *Ali*, a biographical film about the boxer, but the screenings raised only \$319,000 instead of the \$2 million they had expected.¹¹⁵ The budget cuts caused the MAC's planners to reduce the building's size by 13 percent.¹¹⁶ The 13 percent included cuts to lobby space, cuts to expenses for external materials, and reducing the building from nine to six levels; initially, when the MAC's planners switched their proposed site to North Sixth Street, they needed a narrower building for the new location and requested nine floors.¹¹⁷ Shafer reported on how the MAC's planners reduced the budget and size of the proposed MAC due to fundraising issues and the cost of building it on North Sixth Street.

After changing the location for the proposed MAC, the MAC's planners unveiled a new building design. The MAC's planners unveiled their proposed architectural design at a press conference on April 11, 2002.¹¹⁸ Lonnie announced at the press conference that they wanted the MAC building to have 93,000 square feet, including two floors for permanent exhibit space.¹¹⁹ Lonnie stated that the MAC's planners wanted the building to feature two lobbies, facilities for

¹¹¹ Shafer, "Space, Costs Reduced."

¹¹² Shafer, "Space, Costs Reduced."

¹¹³ Shafer, "Space, Costs Reduced."

¹¹⁴ Shafer, "Space, Costs Reduced."

¹¹⁵ Shafer, "Space, Costs Reduced."

¹¹⁶ Shafer, "Space, Costs Reduced."

¹¹⁷ Shafer, "Space, Costs Reduced."

¹¹⁸ News Release: Muhammad Ali Center to Unveil Architectural Design Plans, 2002, Box 1 (of 5), Downtown Development Corporation, Louisville Metro Records Management & Archives, Louisville Metro Government, Louisville, Kentucky.

¹¹⁹ News Release, 2002.

distance learning programs, classrooms, a two-hundred-seat theatre, a temporary gallery space for rotating exhibits, a library, an archive, a gift shop, and “multi-function rooms” for public gatherings.¹²⁰ The MAC’s planners also revealed a new design for the building by Skolnick that featured a “circular torch” on top (Figure 7).¹²¹



Figure 7: Louisville Metro Records Management & Archives, *The Muhammad Ali Center’s Proposed Design in 2002* (Louisville, KY).

The building featured an amphitheatre, a water fountain, an image of Ali on the front and left side, and a torch on top of the building.¹²² The torch showed Ali raising his left hand in the air and inscriptions of famous Ali quotes like “wisdom is knowing you can’t be wise” and “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.”¹²³ The image on the front of the building showed Ali greeting

¹²⁰ News Release, 2002.

¹²¹ News Release, 2002.

¹²² News Release, 2002.

¹²³ News Release, 2002.

children.¹²⁴ The image on the side of the building showed Ali in numerous boxing stances.¹²⁵ Shafer reported on June 12th, 2002, that the MAC broke ground for construction after a ceremony where Ali, Lonnie, and Armstrong lifted shovels to mark the occasion.¹²⁶ The press release from the MAC's planners showed that the proposed MAC building differed from the 1998 design, featuring a wider building, a circular torch on top, an amphitheatre, and a water fountain.

By 2004, the MAC's planners wanted the MAC to be based on Ali's six principles. In a 2018 interview with the Historical League, a historical society in Arizona, Fox took credit for this idea. Fox explained he came up with it while visiting Ali and Lonnie's home in Berrien Springs, Michigan.¹²⁷ During the trip, Fox asked Ali to tell him his principles, and Ali responded with confidence, conviction, dedication, respect, spirituality, and kindness.¹²⁸ Fox decided that he wanted those principles to shape the MAC.¹²⁹ Shafer reported in the *Courier-Journal* on March 13th, 2004, that the MAC's planners wanted the museum to feature six stations on Ali's principles.¹³⁰ The planners, according to Shafer, wanted these six stations on the fourth and fifth floors of the building.¹³¹ The MAC's planners went from having the museum of the MAC focus on aspects of Ali's life and career to having it mainly consist of six stations representing his principles.

¹²⁴ News Release, 2002.

¹²⁵ News Release, 2002.

¹²⁶ Sheldon Shafer, "Ali Center in Louisville Takes First Step With Groundbreaking," *Courier-Journal*, June 12, 2002, <https://courier-journal.newspapers.com/image/364560313>.

¹²⁷ Fox, "Michael J. Fox," 25.

¹²⁸ Fox, "Michael J. Fox," 25.

¹²⁹ Fox, "Michael J. Fox," 25.

¹³⁰ Sheldon Shafer, "Work to Start on Ali Center," *Courier-Journal*, March 13, 2004, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/headline-work-start-on-ali-center/docview/241174823/se-2>.

¹³¹ Shafer, "Work to Start."

The MAC opened on November 19, 2005, during a grand opening gala celebration at the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts.¹³² The grand opening gala celebration included a red-carpet event, a six-act show with live music performances, and speeches in person and pre-recorded.¹³³ The gala included speeches from television hosts like Matt Lauer and Tavis Smiley, actors like Chris Tucker and Jim Carrey, former U.S. President Bill Clinton, and former boxing heavyweight champion Lennox Lewis.¹³⁴ The audience at the gala watched recorded remarks from former President Jimmy Carter and actors like Michael J. Fox and Will Smith.¹³⁵ Actor and songwriter Kris Kristofferson performed a live cover of the Bob Dylan song “Gotta Serve Somebody.”¹³⁶ The event ended with gospel singers BeBe and CeCe Winans performing their song “Hold Up the Light.”¹³⁷ Other celebrities at the event included Angelina Jolie, Blair Underwood, Mavis Staples, Congresswoman Maxine Waters, former Kentucky Governor John Y. Brown Jr., and Abramson.¹³⁸ Approximately 2,400 people paid between \$100 and \$1,000 for tickets to the gala.¹³⁹ Also, about 800 people stood outside across the street from the gala to see the parade of limousines and trolley cars carrying celebrities.¹⁴⁰ The opening ceremony of the MAC drew a large crowd of residents and celebrities, marking the end of its pre-opening phase.

The MAC opened on a \$54 million budget. Corporate donors included \$5 million from Ford in 2001, \$1.1 million from Pratt Industries in 2001, and \$500,000 from Yum Brands in

¹³² Angie Fenton, “The Stars Come Out for Ali,” *Courier-Journal*, November 18, 2005, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/headline-stars-come-out-ali/docview/241407895/se-2>.

¹³³ Mark Coomes, “Gala for ‘The Greatest’: Party lifts curtain on a shining tribute to Ali,” *Courier-Journal*, November 20, 2005, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/headline-muhammad-ali-gala-greatest/docview/241352303/se-2>.

¹³⁴ Coomes, “Gala for ‘The Greatest.’”

¹³⁵ Coomes, “Gala for ‘The Greatest.’”

¹³⁶ Coomes, “Gala for ‘The Greatest.’”

¹³⁷ Coomes, “Gala for ‘The Greatest.’”

¹³⁸ Coomes, “Gala for ‘The Greatest.’”

¹³⁹ Coomes, “Gala for ‘The Greatest.’”

¹⁴⁰ Coomes, “Gala for ‘The Greatest.’”

2003.¹⁴¹ Individual donations included \$1.5 million from Bond, \$1 million from Townsend, \$1 million from Miller, and \$250,000 from talk show host Tavis Smiley.¹⁴² Internet entrepreneur Peter Paul donated \$1 million.¹⁴³ An anonymous donor in Kentucky also donated \$1 million.¹⁴⁴ The Gheens Foundation donated \$250,000.¹⁴⁵ The James Graham Brown Foundation donated \$1.5 million.¹⁴⁶ Kentucky's government donated \$10 million.¹⁴⁷ Louisville's government donated \$3.3 million.¹⁴⁸ Shafer wrote in the *Courier-Journal* on November 19, 2005, that funding included \$15.2 million from individuals, \$12.8 million from corporations, \$10.7 million from foundations, and \$13.3 million from state and local governments.¹⁴⁹ Funding for the MAC came from corporations such as Ford, Pratt Industries, and Yum Brands, foundations like the Gheens Foundation and the James Graham Brown Foundation, wealthy individuals, and the governments of Kentucky and Louisville.

Other parts of the MAC building were finished years after the museum and cultural centre opened. Shafer reported in the *Courier-Journal* on November 18, 2005, that only the lobby, gift shop, two floors for its museum, and the LeRoy Neiman Gallery, a space for gatherings and events, had been completed at the MAC.¹⁵⁰ Shafer added that MAC officials expected the administrative offices, library, plaza, and the pedway from Sixth Street to the

¹⁴¹ Sheldon Shafer, "Ali Project Gets Closer to Goal," *Courier-Journal*, March 27, 2003,

<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/headline-ali-project-gets-closer-goal/docview/241086555/se-2>.

¹⁴² Sheldon Shafer, "Ali's Clout Smoothed Path for Fund Raising," *Courier-Journal*, November 19, 2005,

<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/alis-clout-smoothed-path-fund-raising/docview/241328108/se-2>.

¹⁴³ Sheldon Shafer, "Ali Center Fund Drive Approaches \$24 Million," *Courier-Journal*, November 7, 2000,

<https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/november-7-2000-page-12-47/docview/1874217630/se-2>.

¹⁴⁴ Shafer, "Fund Drive Approaches \$24 Million."

¹⁴⁵ Shafer, "Ali's Clout."

¹⁴⁶ Shafer, "Ali's Clout."

¹⁴⁷ Shafer, "Ali's Clout."

¹⁴⁸ Shafer, "Ali's Clout."

¹⁴⁹ Shafer, "Ali's Clout."

¹⁵⁰ Sheldon Shafer, "Public Can Glimpse Ali Center Sunday After Community Ceremony," *Courier-Journal*, November 18, 2005, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/headline-public-can-glimpse-ali-center-sunday/docview/241322191/se-2>.

Riverfront Plaza to be completed in 2006.¹⁵¹ In 2003, MAC's planners announced they would build the plaza; however, they finished construction in 2008.¹⁵² The Brown-Forman Pavilion, an outdoor area near the plaza that hosts cocktail receptions, dinners, wedding ceremonies, and other types of gatherings, opened in 2011.¹⁵³ Both the Muhammad Ali Center Collections & Archives and the pedway opened in 2013.¹⁵⁴ The MAC needed donations to build those parts of the facility. The James Graham Foundation gave the MAC \$500,000 to build the library and archive.¹⁵⁵ Louisville's government gave \$850,000 to the MAC to build the pedway.¹⁵⁶ Despite opening in 2005, the MAC finished building the plaza, pavilion, library, archives and pedway years later.

The annual visitor rate did not meet the number that MAC officials and Abramson gave. In 1998, when the MAC's planners announced their intention to build the MAC at the Riverfront Plaza, they predicted around 430,000 visitors per year.¹⁵⁷ Jeanie Kahnke, the Senior Director of Public Relations and External Affairs at the MAC, told the *Courier-Journal* in 2004 that the MAC's planners predicted around 350,000 visitors per year.¹⁵⁸ Also, as noted earlier in this chapter, Abramson told the *Courier-Journal* in 2005 that he expected the MAC to have around 400,000 visitors per year. Abramson and Kahnke based their estimations on the number of

¹⁵¹ Shafer, "Public Can Glimpse."

¹⁵² Sheldon Shafer, "Ali Center's Plaza Set, but Fountain Still Dry," *Courier-Journal*, July 12, 2005, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/ali-centers-plaza-set-fountain-still-dry/docview/241465038/se-2>.; "Muhammad Ali Center - Plaza.," Branden Klayko, "Remembering the Ali Center Fountain's Glory Day," *Broken Sidewalk*, August 20, 2008, <https://brokensidewalk.com/2008/remembering-the-ali-center-fountains-glory-day/>.

¹⁵³ "Brown-Forman Pavilion," *Muhammad Ali Center*, accessed July 3, 2025, <https://alicenter.org/visit/host-an-event/spaces/brown-forman-pavilion/>.

¹⁵⁴ "Pedway Opens over Sixth Between Ali Center and Belvedere," *Courier-Journal*, April 5, 2013, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/pedway-opens-over-sixth-between-ali-center/docview/1324266970/se-2>.

¹⁵⁵ Sheldon Shafer, "Adding Ali Archives," *Courier-Journal*, May 9, 2013, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/may-9-2013-page-b1-ky/docview/1999191175/se-2>.

¹⁵⁶ Sheldon Shafer, "Abramson Cuts Back on Capital Spending," *Courier-Journal*, May 28, 2010, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/abramson-cuts-back-on-capital-spending/docview/347054285/se-2>.

¹⁵⁷ Shafer, "Plans for Ali Center."

¹⁵⁸ Shafer, "Work to Start."

visitors that other downtown tourist attractions had during the early 2000s. For instance, in 2004, the Louisville Science Center had approximately 500,000 visitors, the Kentucky Derby Museum had around 200,000 visitors, and the Louisville Slugger Museum & Factory had about 180,000 visitors.¹⁵⁹ However, from 2006 to 2017, attendance at the MAC varied between 80,000 and 135,000 annually. The MAC had approximately 85,000 visitors in 2006.¹⁶⁰ The MAC had approximately 135,000 visitors in 2007.¹⁶¹ The MAC had approximately 85,000 visitors in 2008.¹⁶² The MAC had approximately 80,000 visitors in 2013 and 2014.¹⁶³ The MAC had approximately 100,000 visitors in 2015.¹⁶⁴ Kahnke told *Blooloop* in 2017 that the MAC had approximately 100,000 visitors in 2016, including 25,000 who came during the week following Ali's passing.¹⁶⁵ During the first ten years of its existence, attendance at the MAC fell short of the planners' estimates.

The planning of the MAC lasted from 1997 to 2005. The key individuals involved in the planning included Lonnie, the city, local business officials, and museum experts. The museum and cultural centre received financial backing from a mixture of corporations, foundations, wealthy individuals, and both the Kentucky and Louisville governments. From 1998 to 2001, the MAC's planners intended to build a 93,000 square foot museum and cultural centre at the Riverfront Plaza on a \$80 million budget. During this period, they advertised the proposed MAC

¹⁵⁹ Shafer, "Work to Start."

¹⁶⁰ Sheldon Shafer, "Ali Center Party to Mark Year of Growing Pains," *Courier-Journal*, November 17, 2006, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/ali-center-party-mark-year-growing-pains/docview/241382983/se-2>.

¹⁶¹ Sheldon Shafer, "Ali Center Names a New Chief Executive," *Courier-Journal*, June 4, 2008, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/ali-center-names-new-chief-executive/docview/241460846/se-2>.

¹⁶² Sheldon Shafer, "Ali Center Hires John Ramsey, Close Friend of Boxing Champ," *Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2009, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/ali-center-hires-john-ramsey-close-friend-boxing/docview/241578453/se-2>.

¹⁶³ Sheldon Shafer, "Party Aiming for Knockout," *Courier-Journal*, November 16, 2015, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/party-aiming-knockout/docview/1733177207/se-2>.

¹⁶⁴ Sheldon Shafer, "Museum Looks to Future After Ali," *Courier-Journal*, July 5, 2016, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/museum-looks-future-after-ali/docview/1801620173/se-2>.

¹⁶⁵ Charles Read, "Muhammad Ali Centre Packs a Punch with Alcorn McBride Upgrade," *Blooloop*, March 16, 2017, <https://blooloop.com/museum/news/muhammad-ali-alcorn-video-players/>.

as a place that would instill Ali's values in its visitors and consist of three exhibits focusing on the boxer's life, career, and humanitarian work. However, the MAC's planners announced in December 2001 that they intended to build the MAC on North Sixth Street because Louisville's government convinced them and because of the building's proximity to other tourist attractions in downtown Louisville. After announcing their new location, the MAC's planners trimmed their budget from \$80 million to \$41 million, unveiled details about their building, and broke ground for construction. The MAC opened on November 19, 2005. Other parts of the MAC building were completed after its opening, including its plaza, pedway, pavilion, and archive. The planning of the MAC lasted from 1997, when Lonnie had the museum and cultural centre reincorporated, to 2005, the year that it officially opened to the public.

Chapter Three: Downtown Louisville

This chapter will analyze the changes that Louisville's government made to the downtown area from the late 1980s to the early 2010s. It will identify what caused Louisville's government to revamp the downtown area, specifically Abramson's role in changing the area. It will explain that the changes made to the downtown area caused a tourism and population increase. It will connect the changes to downtown Louisville with other changes made in the city during the 1990s and 2000s. This chapter will argue that the lack of tourism in downtown Louisville during the late 1980s influenced the changes that the city's government made to the downtown area from the late 1980s to the early 2010s. It will also argue that these changes to the downtown area increased the population and number of tourists, reflecting the changes made to the city during the 1990s and 2000s.

Downtown Louisville had tourist attractions during the 1980s. The 1990 *Louisville Downtown Development Plan* noted the number of people who visited the Macauley Theater, the Kentucky Theater, the Louisville Free Public Library, the Actors Theater, the Museum of History and Science, the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts, and the Commonwealth Convention Center during the late 1980s. The Macauley Theater, the Kentucky Theater, and the Louisville Free Public Library collectively had around 450,000 visitors in 1988.¹ The Commonwealth Convention Center had around 250,000 visitors per year from 1978 to 1990.² The Actors Theater of Louisville, a theatre that hosted plays and festivals, had 212,000 visitors in

¹ City of Louisville, Downtown Development Corporation, and Louisville Central Area Inc., *1990 Downtown Development Plan*, 85.

² City of Louisville, Downtown Development Corporation, and Louisville Central Area Inc., *1990 Downtown Development Plan*, 41.

1988.³ The Museum of History and Science had 321,000 visitors in 1988.⁴ The Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts had 450,000 visitors in 1989.⁵ The Actors Theater of Louisville, the Museum of History and Science, and the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts were on West Main Street.⁶ During the late 1980s and early 1990s, city officials noticed an arts district had emerged on West Main Street and were looking for ways to strengthen it. Abramson told the *Courier-Journal* in 1988 that his government wanted to turn West Main into a “cultural district” because arts groups in Louisville had doubled since the Kentucky Center of the Performing Arts opened in 1983.⁷ The *1990 Louisville Downtown Development Plan* stated that Louisville's government should prioritize zoning laws on West Main Street to preserve the area's historic architecture and district guidelines.⁸ Reports from the *1990 Louisville Downtown Development Plan* indicate that there were tourist attractions in downtown Louisville during the 1980s.

Despite having tourist attractions, key areas in downtown Louisville faced challenges. Louisville's government and residents neglected the waterfront area from the late 1950s to the 1990s because the city built the interstates, such as the I-65, I-64, and I-71, near the Ohio River.⁹ These interstates blocked the waterfronts from the rest of the downtown area and hid the

³ City of Louisville, Downtown Development Corporation, and Louisville Central Area Inc., *1990 Downtown Development Plan*, 85.

⁴ City of Louisville, Downtown Development Corporation, and Louisville Central Area Inc., *1990 Downtown Development Plan*, 85.

⁵ City of Louisville, Downtown Development Corporation, and Louisville Central Area Inc., *1990 Downtown Development Plan*, 85.

⁶ City of Louisville, Downtown Development Corporation, and Louisville Central Area Inc., *1990 Downtown Development Plan*, 85.

⁷ Sheldon Shafer, “West Main Pictured as ‘Cultural District,’ Housing Artists, Offices,” *Courier-Journal*, December 27, 1988, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/december-27-1988-page-1-33/docview/1872129924/se-2>.

⁸ City of Louisville, Downtown Development Corporation, and Louisville Central Area Inc., *1990 Downtown Development Plan*, 131-132.

⁹ Janie-Rice Brother, Jennifer Ryall, and Jay Stottman. *They Came... They Saw... They Bought: The Twentieth Century Housing Boom in Louisville, Kentucky 1920 to 1970*. (Louisville: Kentucky Archaeological Survey), 79-83.

waterway.¹⁰ It turned the waterfront into a collection of abandoned warehouses, refuse storage sites, and parking facilities for downtown high-rises.¹¹ The Louisville Galleria opened in 1982 on a \$130 million budget.¹² It closed in 2004 because there were malls in Jefferson County, including the Mall St. Matthews, the Oxmoor Center, and the Jefferson Mall.¹³ During the 1970s and 1980s, politicians and newspapers dubbed Jefferson Street as “the porno district” because it housed a collection of adult movie theatres, bars, and bookstores.”¹⁴ Abramson purchased most of the block in 1986 for \$4.7 million.¹⁵ Abramson demolished the “porno district” in 1988 to build a parking lot.¹⁶ He demolished “the porno district” because of its proximity to the Commonwealth Convention Center.¹⁷ City officials also viewed the “porno district” as a hub for criminal activity. Alan Judd wrote in a 1982 *Courier-Journal* article that “while most patrons of such businesses break no laws [,] ... officers have made more than 125 arrests for prostitution and other crimes since 1979.”¹⁸ Judd quoted Howard Tingle, a local Lieutenant, explaining that “the lure of easy sex... brings a lot of people who are involved in robberies and thefts, and it

¹⁰ Stephen D. Rausch, John E. Martin-Rutherford, Carol Norton, Preston S. Lacy, and Peter B. Meyer, “Effects of Public Sector Interventions on Adjacent Land Values: Waterfront Park in Louisville, Kentucky,” (paper presented at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy’s Seminar on the Impact of Public Intervention on Land Prices, Cambridge, MA, December 2007), 12.

¹¹ Rausch, Martin-Rutherford, Norton, Lacy, and Meyer, “Public Sector Interventions,” 12.

¹² Carl E. Kramer, “Galleria,” in *The Encyclopedia of Louisville*, ed. John E. Kleber (University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 327.

¹³ “All Jefferson County Firestone Retail Stores Join in Celebrating the Grand Opening of Our New, Modern Location in the Mall, St. Matthews,” *Courier-Journal*, April 4, 1962, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/april-4-1962-page-20-32/docview/1867036593/se-2>; “Oxmoor Center Grand Opening Tomorrow... 10 A.M.,” *Courier-Journal*, February 7, 1971, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/february-7-1971-page-103-248/docview/1867524690/se-2>; “Jefferson Mall Opens Without Terrible Problems,” *Courier-Journal*, August 3, 1978, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/august-3-1978-page-17-114/docview/1868532285/se-2>.

¹⁴ Alan Judd, “Despite Shows’ Legality, Porno District Is Haven For Crime, Officials Say,” *Courier-Journal*, November 3, 1985, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/november-3-1985-page-21-532/docview/1871877745/se-2>.

¹⁵ Sheldon Shafer and Rick McDonough, “City Will Demolish ‘Porno Zone;’ Includes Old Savoy Theater,” *Courier-Journal*, January 27, 1989, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/january-27-1989-page-10-54/docview/1872199888/se-2>.

¹⁶ Shafer and McDonough, “City Will Demolish.”

¹⁷ Shafer and McDonough, “City Will Demolish.”

¹⁸ Alan Judd, “Haven For Crime,” *Courier-Journal*, November 3, 1985. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/november-3-1985-page-21-532/docview/1871877745/se-2>.

brings the victims.”¹⁹ Despite the efforts made by the city, key areas in downtown Louisville, including the waterfront area, the Louisville Galleria, and Jefferson Street, did not attract tourists.

The problems facing downtown Louisville in the late 1980s stemmed from national and local trends, including cuts to federal urban renewal funding, a declining population, and a diminished industrial job market. In 2001, urban planner James Braun identified the periods from 1959 to 1980 and post-1980 as two distinct periods of urban renewal in Louisville.²⁰ From 1959 to 1980, a federal appropriation funded 90 percent of Louisville’s urban renewal budget, and the city funded the remaining 10 percent.²¹ Louisville’s government created the Urban Renewal and Community Development Agency of Louisville, a local public authority designated by the Board of Aldermen in Louisville that planned and conducted development projects.²² During this period, Louisville’s urban renewal projects involved large-scale initiatives and blanket demolition, resulting in extended periods of vacant land.²³ Federal appropriations did not fund urban renewal projects in Louisville after 1980 because federal funding for urban renewal projects and staff ceased.²⁴ Instead, urban renewal projects received funding through the regular annual budgeting process from the Board of Aldermen in Louisville.²⁵ The Board of Aldermen’s budgeting process involved Community Block Grant Funds, a type of federal government fund that allowed cities to address community development needs.²⁶ The cuts in federal spending

¹⁹ Judd, “Haven For Crime.”

²⁰ James Braun, “Urban Renewal,” In *The Encyclopedia of Louisville*, ed. John E. Kleber, (Louisville: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 905.

²¹ Braun, “Urban Renewal,” 905.

²² Braun, “Urban Renewal,” 905.

²³ Braun, “Urban Renewal,” 905.

²⁴ Braun, “Urban Renewal,” 905.

²⁵ Braun, “Urban Renewal,” 905.

²⁶ Braun, “Urban Renewal,” 905.

forced cities like Louisville to gather their funding and focus on public-private partnerships for urban development.²⁷ As a result, Louisville had limited public funding sources and relied on support from foundations and corporations for urban renewal projects after 1980.

Census data and industrial closures during this period revealed the scale of Louisville's population loss and industrial decline. Louisville's population went from 390,000 in 1960 to 260,000 in 2000.²⁸ Meanwhile, nearby suburban counties like Jefferson County grew from 610,000 in 1960 to 695,000 in 1970.²⁹ Jefferson County's population size stayed at a similar level until its merger with Louisville in 2003.³⁰ Belknap Inc., the largest wholesale distributor in the U.S. in 1960, fell into debt and went bankrupt in 1985.³¹ Seagram, one of the largest distillery business complexes in the early twentieth century, closed its Art Deco distillery, warehouse, and office complex in Louisville in 1983.³² Three of the four tobacco plants in Louisville closed between 1970 and 1984.³³ Louisville produced one-sixth of the cigarettes in the U.S. during the 1960s.³⁴ The General Electric plant in Louisville eliminated 9,000 of its 22,000 jobs in the 1970s and another 8,000 during the 1980s and 1990s.³⁵ In 1973, Manufacturing employment in the metropolitan area encompassing Louisville and Jefferson County totalled 137,000, accounting for 34 percent of the total employment in the area.³⁶ By 1990, this figure dropped to 88,000,

²⁷ Roger Biles and Mark H. Rose, *A Good Place to Do Business: The Politics of Downtown Renewal since 1945* (Temple University Press, 2022), xi.

²⁸ Edward Bennett and Carolyn Gatz, *Louisville, Kentucky: A Restoring Prosperity Case Study* (Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, 2008), 11.

²⁹ Bennett and Gatz, *Louisville, Kentucky*, 12.

³⁰ Bryan S. Bush, *The Men Who Built Louisville: The City of Progress in the Gilded Age* (The History Press, 2019), 72.

³¹ Company News, "Seagram to Close Louisville Plant," *New York Times*, January 19, 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/01/19/business/seagram-to-close-louisville-plant.html>.

³² Bennett and Gatz, *Louisville, Kentucky*, 14.

³³ Bennett and Gatz, *Louisville, Kentucky*, 14.

³⁴ Bennett and Gatz, *Louisville, Kentucky*, 14.

³⁵ Bennett and Gatz, *Louisville, Kentucky*, 13.

³⁶ Bennett and Gatz, *Louisville, Kentucky*, 13.

representing 20 percent of the total employment in the area.³⁷ Cuts in federal spending, Louisville's declining population, and Louisville's declining job market contributed to the issues in the downtown area.

Abramson created a policy committee for downtown Louisville in May 1988. The Policy Committee wrote the *Louisville Downtown Development Plan* in 1990. The Policy Committee supported building Louisville's Waterfront Park to complement the Olmsted Parkway System.³⁸ The Policy Committee recommended turning West Main Street into a cultural district for museums, art centres, and cultural institutions.³⁹ They recommended this because of how many people visited the Actors Theater of Louisville, the Macauley Theater, and the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts.⁴⁰ The Policy Committee also proposed expanding the Commonwealth Convention Center and redesigning the Riverfront Plaza.⁴¹ According to the *2013 Downtown Louisville Master Plan*, the *1990 Louisville Downtown Development Plan* influenced the first phase of Waterfront Park in 1999.⁴² The *Downtown Louisville Master Plan* also stated that it influenced the expansion of the Commonwealth Convention Center in 2000 and the transformation of West Main Street into a cultural district during the 1990s and early 2000s.⁴³ The tourist attractions that opened on West Main Street during the 1990s and 2000s included the MAC, the Slugger Museum & Factory, a redesigned Riverfront Plaza, and the Frazier Historical

³⁷ Bennett and Gatz, *Louisville, Kentucky*, 13.

³⁸ City of Louisville, Downtown Development Corporation, and Louisville Central Area Inc., *1990 Downtown Development Plan*, 7.

³⁹ City of Louisville, Downtown Development Corporation, and Louisville Central Area Inc., *1990 Downtown Development Plan*, 180.

⁴⁰ City of Louisville, Downtown Development Corporation, and Louisville Central Area Inc., *1990 Downtown Development Plan*, 84.

⁴¹ City of Louisville, Downtown Development Corporation, and Louisville Central Area Inc., *1990 Downtown Development Plan*, 197-99.

⁴² Louisville Downtown Partnership, *Downtown Louisville Master Plan* (Louisville, 2013), 16-17.

⁴³ Louisville Downtown Partnership, *Downtown Louisville Master Plan*, 16-17.

Arms Museum (now known as the Frazier History Museum).⁴⁴ The *1990 Louisville Downtown Development Plan* influenced the creation of cultural institutions on West Main Street, the expansion of the Commonwealth Convention Center, the redesign of the Riverfront Plaza, and the development of Waterfront Park, creating an environment for downtown revitalization and economic growth.

From the 1990s to the early 2010s, Louisville's government created various tourist attractions in the downtown area. Louisville's government, the Jefferson County government, and the Kentucky state government founded the Downtown Waterfront Corporation in 1986, a quasi-public agency that created Waterfront Park.⁴⁵ From 1994 to 2004, Waterfront Park underwent two phases of construction. During the first phase, from 1994 to 1999, the Downtown Waterfront Corporation acquired fifty-five acres of land.⁴⁶ They used the land to build gardens, a festival plaza, water features, a linear park for walking and jogging, free parking areas, and a harbour with transparent boat docks.⁴⁷ The first phase cost \$58 million, with the city contributing \$19 million and the state contributing \$12.5 million.⁴⁸ The James Graham Foundation gave \$14 million.⁴⁹ The Brown Foreman Corporation and Humana Inc., a healthcare company, gave the remaining \$12.5 million.⁵⁰ During the second phase, from 1999 to 2004, the Downtown Waterfront Corporation acquired seventeen acres of land for \$17 million.⁵¹ They used the land to build restaurants, an esplanade along the river's edge, an amphitheatre, and temporary docking

⁴⁴ City of Louisville, Downtown Development Corporation, and Louisville Central Area Inc, *2002 Downtown Development Plan*, 70-73.

⁴⁵ Rausch, Martin-Rutherford, Norton, Lacy, and Meyer, "Public Sector Interventions," 16.

⁴⁶ Rausch, Martin-Rutherford, Norton, Lacy, and Meyer, "Public Sector Interventions," 16.

⁴⁷ Rausch, Martin-Rutherford, Norton, Lacy, and Meyer, "Public Sector Interventions," 16.

⁴⁸ Rick Bell, *Louisville's Waterfront Park: A Riverfront Renaissance* (Butler Books, 2011), 289-93.

⁴⁹ Bell, *Louisville's Waterfront Park*, 289-293.

⁵⁰ Rausch, Martin-Rutherford, Norton, Lacy, and Meyer, "Public Sector Interventions," 16.

⁵¹ Rausch, Martin-Rutherford, Norton, Lacy, and Meyer, "Public Sector Interventions," 16.

facilities for boaters.⁵² They also built facilities for the University of Louisville's rowing team and other local rowing groups.⁵³ Half of the \$17 million came from federal, state, and city governments.⁵⁴ The rest came from the James Graham Brown Foundation that gave \$4 million, the Brown-Forman Corporation that gave \$1 million, and the W.L. Lyons Brown Foundation that gave \$1.4 million.⁵⁵ Louisville's government helped create Waterfront Park, a public park that transformed the waterfront into an attraction for both locals and tourists.

Louisville's government also helped create Slugger Field. Abramson proposed creating Slugger Field on East Main Street in 1997 and purchased the property for the stadium that same year.⁵⁶ Abramson's government purchased the property for Slugger Field from Brinly-Hardy, a lawn care equipment company that had a factory in the location.⁵⁷ Brinly-Hardy moved its facility to Jeffersonville, Indiana.⁵⁸ Independent researcher Abigail Miskowiec explained that Abramson helped build Slugger Field because he wanted a baseball field near the Ohio River and to give the Louisville Redbirds, the city's minor league baseball team, a more modern venue.⁵⁹ Shafer explained the funding Slugger Field received before breaking ground in a 1997 *Courier-Journal* article. Louisville's government provided \$15.7 million for the stadium by committing \$3 million upfront and \$1.1 million annually to retire \$12.7 million in bonds over 20 years.⁶⁰ Louisville's government got \$8 million, 23.4 percent of the stadium's budget, from Humana, the

⁵² Rausch, Martin-Rutherford, Norton, Lacy, and Meyer, "Public Sector Interventions," 16.

⁵³ Rausch, Martin-Rutherford, Norton, Lacy, and Meyer, "Public Sector Interventions," 16.

⁵⁴ Sheldon Shafer, "Extraordinarily Beautiful: Waterfront Park Work Will Be Dedicated Next Month," *Courier-Journal*, May 6, 2004, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/headline-extraordinarily-beautiful/docview/241187086/se-2>.

⁵⁵ Shafer, "Extraordinarily Beautiful."

⁵⁶ Abigail Miskowiec, "Louisville Slugger Field (Louisville, KY)," *Society for American Baseball Research* (2023), https://sabr.org/bioproj/park/louisville-slugger-field-louisville-ky/#_ednref13.

⁵⁷ Miskowiec, "Louisville Slugger Field."

⁵⁸ Miskowiec, "Louisville Slugger Field."

⁵⁹ Miskowiec, "Louisville Slugger Field."

⁶⁰ Sheldon Shafer, "Mayor: Stadium to be 'Landmark,'" *Courier-Journal*, July 31, 1997, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/july-31-1997-page-1-51/docview/1873856105/se-2>.

Brown-Forman Foundation, and Hillerich and Bradsby Co., a baseball bat manufacturer.⁶¹

Louisville's government also received \$10.4 million, 30.5 percent of the stadium's budget, from the Louisville Redbirds.⁶² Slugger Field officially opened on April 12, 2000.⁶³ Louisville's government helped build Slugger Field, a stadium that has remained the home field of the Louisville Redbirds since its opening.

During his second term as Mayor from 2003 to 2011, Abramson helped open Fourth Street Live! and the KFC Yum! Center. Louisville's government bought the Galleria in 2000 because it hampered the city's retail economy. Policy analysts Carolyn Gatz and Edward Bennett pointed out that the Galleria failed to forestall the near-total collapse of the retail core and contributed to deserted streets, vacant storefronts, and a faltering hospitality industry.⁶⁴ Sociologist John Hannigan added that office building towers and retail department stores did not support downtown growth during the late twentieth century.⁶⁵ Hannigan explained that while workers may visit them during their lunch breaks, most returned to their homes in the suburbs.⁶⁶ Louisville's government bought the Louisville Galleria for \$4 million in 2000 and awarded the property to the Cordish Company, a real estate company.⁶⁷ Fourth Street Live! opened in July 2004 on a \$72 million budget, with Louisville's government providing \$13 million in bonds.⁶⁸ Bonds involve the city borrowing money from investors and repaying them over time, along with interest.⁶⁹ Louisville's government purchased the Louisville Galleria property for \$72 million in

⁶¹ Shafer, "Stadium to be 'Landmark.'"

⁶² Shafer, "Stadium to be 'Landmark.'"

⁶³ Miskowicz, "Louisville Slugger Field."

⁶⁴ Bennett and Gatz, *Louisville, Kentucky*, 21.

⁶⁵ John Hannigan, *Fantasy City: Pleasure and profit in the postmodern metropolis* (Routledge, 2005), 51.

⁶⁶ Hannigan, *Fantasy City*, 51.

⁶⁷ City of Louisville, Downtown Development Corporation, and Louisville Central Area Inc, *2002 Downtown Development Plan*, 47.

⁶⁸ Sheldon Shafer, "It's Fourth Street Live Time," *Courier-Journal*, July 17, 2003, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/july-17-2003-page-42-52/docview/2868388188/se-2>.

⁶⁹ Shafer, "Fourth Street Live Time."

2000, sold it to the Cordish Company, and provided \$13 million to develop Fourth Street Live!, an entertainment district that has remained on Fourth Street ever since.

Sports management scholar Robert Sroka explained how the Louisville Metro Government helped create the KFC Yum! Center.⁷⁰ In 2003, the Louisville Metro Government almost agreed to host the Charlotte Hornets in a proposed sports arena in downtown Louisville.⁷¹ However, University of Louisville Athletic Association (ULAA) Director Tom Jurich and Cardinals basketball coach Rick Pitino wanted the arena on the University's campus.⁷² Jurich and Pitino convinced NBA Commissioner David Stern to reject Louisville's offer to host games at an arena in downtown Louisville.⁷³ The ULAA, Republican Governor Ernie Fletcher, and the Kentucky State Fair Board proposed a campus arena in April 2005, but Louisville's Metro Government opposed and refused to fund it.⁷⁴ Both sides settled on building the arena at the riverfront site.⁷⁵ Sroka explained that the sports arena received funding from a \$349 million bond issue given by the Kentucky Economic Development Finance Authority that loaned the proceeds to the Louisville Arena Authority.⁷⁶ Annual payments from the Louisville Metro Government from 2010 to 2039 and revenues from a tax increment fund (TIF) in downtown Louisville were used to repay debt on the arena.⁷⁷ Louisville's government used the TIF by increasing future property taxes in a targeted area to fund redevelopment.⁷⁸ The city divided the arena's funding into two categories: Category A, naming rights, corporate sponsorship, premium seating

⁷⁰ Jeff Wachter, *A 10-Year Perspective of the Merger of Louisville and Jefferson County, KY: Louisville Metro Vaults from 65th to 18th Largest City in the Nation* (Abell Foundation, 2013), 1.

⁷¹ Robert Sroka, "Getting STIF [ed]: Louisville's Yum! Center, sales-tax increment financing, and megaproject underperformance," *Urban Affairs Review* 56, no. 5 (2020): 1559, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087419830527>.

⁷² Sroka, "Getting STIF [ed]," 1559.

⁷³ Sroka, "Getting STIF [ed]," 1559.

⁷⁴ Sroka, "Getting STIF [ed]," 1559.

⁷⁵ Sroka, "Getting STIF [ed]," 1559.

⁷⁶ Sroka, "Getting STIF [ed]," 1560.

⁷⁷ Sroka, "Getting STIF [ed]," 1561.

⁷⁸ Sroka, "Getting STIF [ed]," 1561.

(including club seats and luxury boxes), and Category B, operational expenses and debt repayment.⁷⁹ The Louisville Metro Government played a key role in creating the KFC Yum! Center by picking its location and funding it with annual payments and a TIF.

Louisville's government helped increase the downtown area's tourism and population from the early 2000s to the 2010s. The *2013 Downtown Louisville Master Plan* stated that downtown Louisville more than tripled its annual visitor count between 2002 and 2011, reaching ten million visitors annually between those years.⁸⁰ During this period, Fourth Street Live, the KFC Yum! Center, and Slugger Field collectively attracted around seven million annual visitors to downtown Louisville.⁸¹ The documents also noted that Waterfront Park had 1.5 million visitors per year since its opening in 1999.⁸² Also, according to the document, the surge in visitor numbers resulted in the establishment of new businesses, including bars and restaurants along Main, Second, and Washington Streets.⁸³ Independent researcher Jeff Wachter pointed out that Louisville's old city, the city before its merger with Jefferson County, experienced a population decline from 2000 to 2010, with downtown Louisville being the only part that saw an increase.⁸⁴ Wachter referenced a census tract from 2000 to 2010 that showed downtown Louisville's population increasing from 24.24 percent to 67.31 percent.⁸⁵ The rest of old Louisville's population decreased from -39.49 percent to -9.50 percent.⁸⁶ The development of tourist attractions like Fourth Street Live, Slugger Field, Waterfront Park, and the KFC Yum! Center brought in more tourists and residents to downtown Louisville.

⁷⁹ Sroka, "Getting STIF [ed]," 1561.

⁸⁰ Louisville Downtown Partnership, *2013 Downtown Master Plan*, 52.

⁸¹ Louisville Downtown Partnership, *2013 Downtown Master Plan*, 54.

⁸² Louisville Downtown Partnership, *2013 Downtown Master Plan*, 55.

⁸³ Louisville Downtown Partnership, *2013 Downtown Master Plan*, 130.

⁸⁴ Wachter, *A 10-Year Perspective*, 8.

⁸⁵ Wachter, *A 10-Year Perspective*, 21.

⁸⁶ Wachter, *A 10-Year Perspective*, 21.

The changes that downtown Louisville experienced reflected the city's civic and economic changes during the 1990s and 2000s. Louisville's government passed a referendum to merge with Jefferson County in 2000 with 54 percent of the vote, leading to the 2003 merger.⁸⁷ Worldport at the Louisville International Airport, the central hub for UPS's package sorting and heavy freight, turned Louisville into a logistics hub.⁸⁸ Journalist Thomas L. Friedman pointed out that, from 1997 to 2005, Worldport caused more than sixty companies to move their operations closer to the hub.⁸⁹ Friedman explained that companies found it easier to ship their products directly from the hub rather than storing them in a warehouse.⁹⁰ In the 1990s, Louisville's healthcare sector expanded, with more businesses entering the market.⁹¹ Louisville's healthcare sector doubled its employees and payroll during that decade.⁹² It became 10 percent of the area's total employment and payroll.⁹³ Bennett and Gatz pointed out in 2008 that two of Louisville's three Fortune 500 companies were from the healthcare sector.⁹⁴ The two companies were Humana, Inc. and Kindred Healthcare, the latter specialized in long-term acute care hospitals and nursing facilities.⁹⁵ During the 1990s and 2000s, Louisville underwent civic and economic changes, including its merger with Jefferson County, as well as the establishment of prominent companies such as Worldport, Humana, and Kindred Healthcare.

Louisville's government revitalized the downtown area by funding and creating new tourist attractions, and it reflected the broader changes made to the city during the 1990s and 2000s. This chapter identified what caused Louisville's government to revitalize the area by

⁸⁷ Wachter, *A 10-Year Perspective*, 1.

⁸⁸ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (Macmillan, 2005), 172.

⁸⁹ Friedman, *The World Is Flat*, 172.

⁹⁰ Friedman, *The World Is Flat*, 172.

⁹¹ Bennett and Gatz, *Louisville, Kentucky*, 20.

⁹² Bennett and Gatz, *Louisville, Kentucky*, 20.

⁹³ Bennett and Gatz, *Louisville, Kentucky*, 20.

⁹⁴ Bennett and Gatz, *Louisville, Kentucky*, 20.

⁹⁵ Bennett and Gatz, *Louisville, Kentucky*, 20.

explaining how, despite having tourist attractions, the city abandoned the Waterfront area, the Louisville Galleria did not attract tourists, and “the porno district” deterred visitors. It identified the role Abramson played in changing the area by referencing how he formed a policy committee for downtown Louisville, proposed building Slugger Field and bought the property for it, and helped build Fourth Street Live! and the KFC Yum! Center. It connected the issues that downtown Louisville had to the city’s struggling economy and cuts in federal spending on urban redevelopment projects. It connected the changes made to downtown Louisville to the civic and economic changes that the city experienced during the 1990s and 2000s. Louisville’s government played a role in helping build the MAC because of its efforts at boosting downtown tourism from the late 1980s to the early 2010s.

Chapter Four: Lonnie Ali

This chapter will analyze the role that Lonnie played in creating the MAC by connecting it to two periods in Muhammad Ali's life. The first period occurred during the 1980s, a time characterized by Ali's string of bad publicity, particularly his ties to business and political scandals, endorsements of Republican politicians like President Ronald Reagan, and health issues. The second period occurred from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, when Lonnie repaired her husband's public image by building relationships with reporters like Thomas Hauser and Peter Tauber. Lonnie's efforts led to books and newspapers focusing on Ali's boxing career and opposition to the Vietnam War during the 1960s and 1970s, and humanitarian work during the early to mid-1990s. This chapter will argue that Ali's string of negative publicity during the 1980s led to Lonnie taking over his business affairs and managing his media interactions. It will also argue that Lonnie's efforts rehabilitated her husband's public image and preserved his legacy.

The Ali of the 1980s did not resemble the Ali of the 1960s and 1970s. During the 1980s, the media's fascination with Ali's boxing, talking, and affiliation with the NOI dissipated. Wallace D. Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad's son, disbanded the NOI in 1976, a year after his father died of heart failure.¹ Wallace transformed the group into a more mainstream Muslim group called the World Community of al-Islam in the West.² This new group allowed white members in, no longer promoted Black supremacy, and followed Sunni Islam principles.³ Louis

¹ Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times* (Simon and Schuster, 2012), 294.

² Jonathan Eig, *Ali: A Life* (Mariner Books, 2017), 408.

³ Eig, *Ali*, 408.

Farrakhan rebuilt the NOI in 1977, but Ali joined Wallace's group instead.⁴ Ali retired from boxing after losing to Trevor Berbick via unanimous decision in 1981.⁵ Ali's doctor, Stanley Fahn, diagnosed him with Parkinson's syndrome in 1984.⁶ Fahn attributed his Parkinson's syndrome diagnosis to the repeated blows he received throughout his career.⁷ The decline of media interest in Ali during the 1980s highlighted the need for someone like Lonnie to preserve the boxer's legacy.

Newspaper articles about Ali during the 1980s focused on his controversies. For instance, from 1981 to 1982, newspapers reported on Ali's ties to an embezzlement scandal involving the Muhammad Ali Professional Sports (MAPS), a boxing promotion.⁸ In 1977, boxing promoter Harold J. Smith persuaded Ali to lend his name to MAPS.⁹ Smith also agreed to give Ali 25 percent of the net profits from all MAPS-sponsored events and personal appearance fees.¹⁰ Smith's promotion featured famous boxers like Gerry Cooney, Ken Norton, Tommy Hearns, Wilfred Benitez, Matthew Saad Muhammad, and Eddie Mustafa Muhammad.¹¹ Wells Fargo National Bank sued Smith in January 1981 for embezzling \$21 million from them to fund the boxing promotion.¹² Smith responded to this lawsuit by going into hiding.¹³ The police found Smith and arrested him in July 1981.¹⁴ The *New York Times* reported on June 2, 1982, that

⁴ Johnny Smith, "Remembering Muhammad Ali: Myths, Memory, and History," in *Reviews in American History* 45, No. 1 (2017), 185, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rah.2017.0025>.

⁵ Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 457.

⁶ Eig, *Ali*, 526.

⁷ Eig, *Ali*, 526.

⁸ Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 422.

⁹ Dave Hannigan, *Muhammad Ali: Fifteen Rounds in the Wilderness* (Pitch Publishing, 2022), 14.

¹⁰ Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 422.

¹¹ Dave Anderson, "The MAPS Boxing Scandal," *New York Times*, February 1, 1981, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/sports-times/docview/121507301/se-2>.

¹² Robert Lindsey, "4 at Wells Fargo Named by Boxing Figure in Fraud," *New York Times*, March 20, 1981, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/4-at-wells-fargo-named-boxing-figure-fraud/docview/424064542/se-2>.

¹³ Lindsey, "Boxing Figure in Fraud."

¹⁴ "Boxing Promoter Indicted in Fraud," *New York Times*, July 31, 1981, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/boxing-promoter-indicted-fraud/docview/121758920/se-2>.

Federal District Judge Consuelo Marshall convicted Smith of twenty-nine counts of fraud and embezzlement.¹⁵ Marshall sentenced Smith to 10 years in prison.¹⁶ Marshall also fined Smith \$30,000 and ordered him to perform three thousand hours of community service.¹⁷ Dean Allison, the lead prosecutor in the Smith trial, told Hauser in 1992 that Ali had “nothing to do with accomplishing the embezzlement, concealing the embezzlement, or any form of criminal activity whatsoever.”¹⁸ However, Michael Ezra pointed out that this scandal showed how businesspeople like Smith targeted Ali to create products based on his name.¹⁹ Ezra explained that during the 1980s, Ali cheapened his brand by overexposing himself through endorsements of low-quality products, including shoe polish, hamburger joints, popcorn, boxing equipment, and candy.²⁰ In his biography about the boxer, Jonathan Eig referenced a 1981 *New York Times* article describing how, while staying at a Meadowlands Hilton suite in New Jersey, various business officials approached Ali to attach his name to their products.²¹ Ali said yes to all of them without consultation or research and signed every contract without getting out of bed.²² The MAPS scandal damaged Ali’s public image by revealing how he became a target for both legitimate and illegitimate business dealings.

Another scandal involving Ali stemmed from his lawyer and close friend, Richard Hirschfield. Sports reporter Dave Kindred investigated Ali after reading Nancy Lewis’s interview of the boxer for the *Washington Post* on June 9, 1988. In the interview, Ali gave his opinion on several politicians, including Douglas Wilder, the Lieutenant Governor of Virginia;

¹⁵ “Smith, Boxing Promoter, Is Given 10-Year Sentence in Bank Fraud,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1982, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/smith-boxing-promoter-is-given-10-year-sentence/docview/122039397/se-2>.

¹⁶ “Smith, Boxing Promoter.”

¹⁷ “Smith, Boxing Promoter.”

¹⁸ Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 425.

¹⁹ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 161.

²⁰ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 161.

²¹ Eig, *Ali*, 471.

²² Eig, *Ali*, 471.

Charles S. Robb, Democratic candidate for the Senate; and Strom Thurmond, South Carolina Senator.²³ Kindred questioned the validity of the interview because Ali never showed interest in politics, except for endorsing presidential candidates.²⁴ Soon after, Kindred discovered that someone imitated Ali in hundreds of phone calls to at least fifty-one politicians, Capitol Hill staffers, and journalists.²⁵ Kindred linked the phone calls to Hirschfeld for four reasons.²⁶ First, he knew that Ali and Hirschfeld had visited seven U.S. senators in 1988. Hirschfeld did most of the talking during those meetings while Ali stood there silently.²⁷ Second, he knew that Hirschfeld had impersonated Ali in the past.²⁸ Third, he knew Hirschfeld wanted more U.S. senators to pressure the Justice Department to investigate a federal prosecutor in Norfolk, Virginia, who had probed him on fraud charges.²⁹ Fourth, he knew that Hirschfeld sued the U.S. government on Ali's behalf in 1984 for \$50 million.³⁰ Hirschfeld sued the U.S. government for damages related to Ali's conviction and suspension from boxing from 1967 to 1970.³¹ Kindred's investigation of Lewis's interview led him to discover that the lawyer had impersonated Ali for personal gain.

Hirschfeld's criminal history damaged Ali's public reputation. Hirschfeld created the Hirschfeld Bank of Commerce in 1974, which went bankrupt after the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) charged Hirschfeld with stock fraud.³² Hirschfeld and Herbert Muhammad, Ali's manager from 1966 to 1981, created the boxing training camp Champion Sports

²³ Dave Kindred, *Sound and Fury: Two Powerful Lives, One Fateful Friendship* (Free Press, 2006), 287.

²⁴ Nancy Lewis, "Ali Still Has a 1-2 Punch with Words," *The Washington Post*, June 9, 1988, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/ali-still-has-1-2-punch-with-words-ex-champ-says/docview/307045974/se-2>.

²⁵ Kindred, *Sound and Fury*, 288.

²⁶ Kindred, *Sound and Fury*, 288.

²⁷ Kindred, *Sound and Fury*, 288.

²⁸ Kindred, *Sound and Fury*, 288.

²⁹ Kindred, *Sound and Fury*, 288.

³⁰ Kindred, *Sound and Fury*, 288.

³¹ Kindred, *Sound and Fury*, 288.

³² Kindred, *Sound and Fury*, 272.

Management in 1983.³³ Hirschfeld and Herbert closed Champion Sports Management in 1984 after the SEC charged Hirschfeld with stock fraud again.³⁴ In 1991, a federal jury sentenced Hirschfeld to six years in federal prison for tax evasion and conspiracy.³⁵ The charges stemmed from his claim of a \$42 million tax write-off from a nonexistent lawsuit.³⁶ Hirschfeld fled to the Canary Islands in 1995 after U.S. prosecutors attempted to charge him with obstructing justice.³⁷ U.S. prosecutors charged him with obstructing justice because Hirschfeld forged letters to secure his parole.³⁸ Spanish police officers arrested Hirschfeld in December 1997, but rejected the U.S.'s request to extradite him.³⁹ U.S. authorities arrested Hirschfeld on October 1, 2004, after finding him at a waterfront mansion in Fort Lauderdale.⁴⁰ Hirschfeld committed suicide on January 11, 2005, while awaiting federal charges.⁴¹ Hirschfeld damaged Ali's reputation because of his involvement in embezzlement scandals and letter forgery.

Ali disappointed his admirers when he endorsed Ronald Reagan in the 1984 presidential election and George H.W. Bush in the 1988 election.⁴² Andrew Young, the former leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), denounced Ali for supporting "candidates whose policies are harmful to the great majority of Americans, Black and white."⁴³ Former SNCC activist Julian Bond added that he did not understand Ali's endorsement because "Ronald

³³ Kindred, *Sound and Fury*, 272.

³⁴ Kindred, *Sound and Fury*, 272.

³⁵ United States v. Richard M. Hirschfeld, 964 F.2d 318 (4th Cir. 1992), Accessed via *Scribd*, <https://www.scribd.com/document/321134010/United-States-v-Richard-M-Hirschfeld-964-F-2d-318-4th-Cir-1992>.

³⁶ Hirschfeld, 964 F.2d 318.

³⁷ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 163.

³⁸ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 163.

³⁹ The Associated Press, "Fugitive Lawyer Awaiting Extradition," *Daily Press*, February 24, 1997, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/fugitive-lawyer-awaiting-extradition/docview/342923208/se-2>.

⁴⁰ Matt Schudel, "Flashy Fugitive Richard Hirschfeld Dies," *The Washington Post*, January 13, 2005, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/flashy-fugitive-richard-hirschfeld-dies/docview/409881769/se-2>.

⁴¹ Schudel, "Fugitive Richard Hirschfeld Dies."

⁴² Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 162.

⁴³ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 162.

Reagan and George Bush have been tragedies for African Americans.”⁴⁴ Ali never explained his endorsement of Bush. Ali never gave an in-depth explanation for his endorsement of Reagan, other than stating that Reagan kept “God in schools” and that Wallace told him to vote for Reagan.⁴⁵ Wallace said in a 1988 interview that he supported President Reagan because “on the whole, the Reagan Administration has been good for the country.”⁴⁶ Ezra pointed out that Ali disappointed progressives like Young and Bond because they admired Ali for opposing the Vietnam War on racial grounds, befriending activists like Malcolm X, and calling out systemic racism during the 1960s.⁴⁷ It also represented a change from Ali’s political views from a few years earlier, as he endorsed Jimmy Carter during the 1980 presidential election.⁴⁸ Ali endorsed Carter because he credited him with hiring more Black Americans than any previous presidential administration and resolving the Iranian hostage crisis.⁴⁹ Ali’s endorsement of Republican Presidential candidates like Bush and Reagan disappointed progressives who previously admired the boxer for using his platform to speak out against the Vietnam War and anti-Black racism.

After marrying Ali in 1986, Lonnie limited media access to reporters who admired her husband while cutting business ties with those who exploited him. Lonnie invited Tauber to her and Ali’s house in Berrien Springs, Michigan, in 1988 to write an article about the boxer.⁵⁰ Tauber admired Ali’s stance against the Vietnam War.⁵¹ Tauber described Ali in a note he gave

⁴⁴ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 162.

⁴⁵ “Muhammad Ali Switches His Support to Reagan,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1984, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/muhammad-ali-switches-his-support-reagan/docview/122454577/se-2>.

⁴⁶ C. W. Cornell, “Black Islamic Evangelization in the American South” (PhD diss., University of Arkansas, 2018), 38, <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/2785/>.

⁴⁷ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 162.

⁴⁸ Michelle Young, “Ali Endorses Carter as ‘Right White,’” *Chicago Defender*, October 29, 1980, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/ali-endorses-carter-as-right-white/docview/2538473982/se-2>.

⁴⁹ Young, “Ali Endorses Carter.”

⁵⁰ Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 371.

⁵¹ Kindred, *Sound and Fury*, 281.

Kindred in 2006 as a “Universal teacher... [on] how to walk with dignity down that road of aging and infirmity all must go.”⁵² Lonnie and Ali hired Hauser to write a biography about the boxer in 1988.⁵³ Hauser wrote in 2016 that besides “John F. Kennedy... I don’t think there’s a person on the planet [whose presence] ... would have affected me in that manner.”⁵⁴ Ali and Lonnie sued Herbert in 1993 for forging his signature in fundraising letters for the Muhammad Ali Foundation, a charity and education foundation that Herbert established based on the boxer’s name.⁵⁵ Ali and Lonnie also sued Hirschfeld and Herbert in August 1999 to annul a contract they signed with the two in 1988.⁵⁶ The contract gave Herbert and Hirschfeld 40 percent of naming rights for any movie about the boxer.⁵⁷ The Ali family settled their lawsuit with Hirschfeld and Herbert in October 1999, with details of the settlement not publicly revealed.⁵⁸ Lonnie built relationships with reporters who admired her husband while severing business ties and suing individuals who exploited him.

The *New York Times* published Tauber’s article about Ali on July 17, 1988. In the article, Tauber pointed out that Ali remained healthy and wealthy, and the public did not know the “real Ali.” Tauber stated that, before meeting Ali, he feared the boxer had entered the “final tragic chapter” of his life.⁵⁹ However, Tauber erased his fears after meeting and interacting with Ali.⁶⁰ Tauber recalled a conversation he had with Lonnie, where he told her that Ali’s good health

⁵² Kindred, *Sound and Fury*, 281.

⁵³ Thomas Hauser, “Reflections on Time Spent with Muhammad Ali,” in *Muhammad Ali: A Tribute to the Greatest* (Simon and Schuster, 2016), 131.

⁵⁴ Hauser, “Reflections,” 131.

⁵⁵ Hannigan, *Muhammad Ali*, 252.

⁵⁶ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 163.

⁵⁷ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 163.

⁵⁸ Don Cronin, “Run, Run, Run,” *USA Today*, October 22, 1999, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/run/docview/408767511/se-2>.

⁵⁹ Peter Tauber, “Ali: Still Magic,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1988, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/ali-still-magic/docview/426894388/se-2>.

⁶⁰ Tauber, “Ali.”

surprised him.⁶¹ Lonnie responded, “Muhammad is fine. But people think he’s dying.”⁶² Lonnie also told Tauber that she and her husband owned lots of property and income from diverse investments, revealing Ali’s continued wealth.⁶³ Tauber referenced Lonnie, Herbert, boxing promoter Don King, and boxing historian Jimmy Jacobs, telling him there “was a ‘real Ali’ almost unknown to the public.”⁶⁴ Tauber wrote, “One by one, they all told me much the same thing: ‘If you can show the real Ali, it’ll blow people’s minds.’”⁶⁵ Tauber’s article helped reshape Ali’s public image by pushing back against the narrative of Ali’s downfall.

Lonnie did not hire Hauser solely because of his admiration for Ali. She also hired him because of his experience as a boxing and political journalist and her desire to preserve her husband’s legacy. In his book *Muhammad Ali: A Tribute to the Greatest*, Hauser wrote that Lonnie hired him because of his past writings on boxing, race relations, education, and foreign policy.⁶⁶ Hauser also wrote that Lonnie hired him to write the book because Ali did not interact with the media like he once did, and she did not want her husband to become “a relic of the past.”⁶⁷ While writing the book, Hauser travelled with Ali around the world and spent ten weeks in the boxer’s home.⁶⁸ After finishing his first draft in September 1990, Hauser went on a ten-day trip to Berrien Springs to meet with Ali, Lonnie, and Howard Bingham, the boxer’s friend and personal photographer.⁶⁹ Hauser read them every word of his manuscript to them aloud.⁷⁰ In 2009, Hauser told Ezra in a telephone interview that the Ali family promised not to censor his

⁶¹ Tauber, “Ali.”

⁶² Tauber, “Ali.”

⁶³ Tauber, “Ali.”

⁶⁴ Tauber, “Ali.”

⁶⁵ Tauber, “Ali.”

⁶⁶ Hauser, “Reflections,” 130.

⁶⁷ Smith, “Remembering Muhammad Ali,” 179.

⁶⁸ Hauser, “Reflections,” 131-39.

⁶⁹ Hauser, “Reflections,” 136-37.

⁷⁰ Hauser, “Reflections,” 136-37.

material and let him keep editorial control.⁷¹ Hauser added that he allowed Ali to write a rebuttal paragraph to any material he objected to, but the boxer never did.⁷² Ali and Lonnie influenced and helped publish Hauser's book.

Hauser wrote one of the most influential and popular books about Ali. Ezra credited Hauser for popularizing the "Ali story" because of how well the biography sold. Ezra described the "Ali story" as a narrative based on two parts of Ali's life retold by friends, family, and people who admired him.⁷³ The first part involved retelling how Americans vilified Ali during the 1960s.⁷⁴ Most Americans supported the U.S. invasion of Vietnam and perceived groups like the NOI to be hateful.⁷⁵ Then, in the second part, Americans increasingly embraced Ali during the 1970s because, by the early 1970s, most of them opposed the Vietnam War, and, by the mid-1970s, Ali left the NOI and renounced its core beliefs.⁷⁶ Hauser's book made it to the *New York Times* bestseller list.⁷⁷ By 2004, the book had sold over 150,000 copies in the U.S.⁷⁸ Hauser maintained a relationship with Ali after the book's publication.⁷⁹ Hauser and Ali wrote the book *Healing: A Journal of Tolerance and Understanding* in 1996.⁸⁰ *Healing* featured quotes from philosophers like Voltaire, writers like Augustus Thomas, and activists like Martin Luther King Jr. to explain what underpinned Ali's views on prejudice and racism.⁸¹ Ezra explained the significance of Hauser's 1991 biography by identifying how well the book sold and how it established the "Ali story" trend.

⁷¹ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 168.

⁷² Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 168.

⁷³ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 2-3.

⁷⁴ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 2-3.

⁷⁵ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 2-3.

⁷⁶ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 2-3.

⁷⁷ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 165.

⁷⁸ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 165.

⁷⁹ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 182-83.

⁸⁰ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 182-83.

⁸¹ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 182-83.

As Ali became more reclusive during the early to mid-1990s, there were more newspaper articles about his diplomatic and humanitarian missions in Iraq, South Africa, and North Korea. In November 1990, Ali travelled to Iraq to foster dialogue and prevent a conflict between the U.S. and Saddam Hussein's regime.⁸² Ali did not prevent a conflict between the U.S. and Iraq, but he convinced Hussein to release fifteen hostages held in Baghdad for four months.⁸³ In 1993, Ali visited South Africa after right-wing extremist Janusz Waluś assassinated the South African Communist Party leader Chris Hani.⁸⁴ Ali attended his funeral and visited Hani's widow, Limpho Hani.⁸⁵ He also gave locals pamphlets with religious messages and his signature.⁸⁶ In 1995, Ali visited North Korea to attend Collision in Korea, a professional wrestling event hosted by wrestling promotions New Japan Pro Wrestling (NJPW) and World Championship Wrestling (WCW).⁸⁷ Antonio Inoki, the owner of NJPW and a member of Japan's House of Councillors, created the event to promote peaceful relations between North Korea and Japan.⁸⁸ Inoki and Ali became friends after facing each other in a special rules fight in 1976.⁸⁹ Inoki attended Ali's wedding to Veronica in 1977 and accompanied Ali on his mission to Iraq.⁹⁰ Ali also allowed Inoki to use the song "Ali Bomaye" for his wrestling entrance music.⁹¹ The song originated from *The Greatest* (1977), a biographical film that had Ali playing himself.⁹² While writers like

⁸² Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali & Company: Inside the World of Professional Boxing* (Hastings House, 1997), 8.

⁸³ Hauser, *Muhammad Ali & Company*, 8.

⁸⁴ Sean Jacobs, "'Get Used to Me': Muhammad Ali and the Paradoxes of Third World Solidarity," *Radical History Review* 1; 2018 (131): 207, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-4355353>.

⁸⁵ Hannigan, *Muhammad Ali*, 228.

⁸⁶ Hannigan, *Muhammad Ali*, 228.

⁸⁷ Hannigan, *Muhammad Ali*, 262.

⁸⁸ Hannigan, *Muhammad Ali*, 261.

⁸⁹ Josh Gross, *Ali vs. Inoki: The Forgotten Fight That Inspired Mixed Martial Arts and Launched Sports Entertainment* (BenBella Books, 2016), 277-78.

⁹⁰ Gross, *Ali vs. Inoki*, 277-78.

⁹¹ Gross, *Ali vs. Inoki*, 277-78.

⁹² Gross, *Ali vs. Inoki*, 277-78.

Tauber and Hauser noted Ali's improving health and past accomplishments, other newspaper articles focused on his humanitarian work during the early to mid-1990s.

Lonnie helped create the MAC to preserve her husband's legacy and protect his public image. The Ali of the 1980s did not resemble the Ali of the 1960s and 1970s because he left the NOI, retired from boxing, and his battle with Parkinson's syndrome hampered his ability to speak. Ali damaged his public image during the 1980s due to his ties to business and political scandals, as well as his endorsements of Reagan and Bush. When Lonnie married Ali in 1986, she took over the boxer's business and media dealings to protect her husband's public image. She also hired boxing journalist Hauser to write an authorized biography about Ali in 1988 because she did not want her husband to become a relic of the past. Lonnie improved Ali's public image during the early to mid-1990s because books focused on the boxer's life and career during the 1960s and 1970s, and newspapers focused on the boxer's humanitarian work. Hauser's book, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times*, became the most influential piece of popular media during this period because it shaped how historians, journalists, and documentary filmmakers retold Ali's life and career. Ali's string of bad publicity during the 1980s caused Lonnie to take over her husband's business and media dealings, and her efforts helped rehabilitate his public image and preserve his legacy.

Chapter Five: Principles

This chapter will analyze books, commercials, and newspaper articles about Ali after the 1996 Olympics. It will identify parts from these pieces of popular media, including how they romanticize Ali's past and present him as a role model and humanitarian. It will explain how these depictions turned Ali into a profitable business commodity and a beloved public figure in Louisville. It will situate Ali's depiction as part of the broader American sanitization of the civil rights movement since the 1980s. After his appearance at the 1996 Olympics, books, commercials, and newspaper articles romanticized Ali's past by portraying him as a role model and divine figure. These depictions made Ali's brand more profitable and turned him into a beloved public figure in Louisville. These depictions stemmed from how Americans sanitized the civil rights movement, credited individuals like Martin Luther King Jr. for the movement's achievements, as opposed to collective action, and dismissed its relevance to contemporary social and political issues.

Ali's appearance at the 1996 Olympics turned the retired boxer into a corporate commodity, with documentaries, movies, commercials, and books released about him. On July 19, 1996, Ali lit the Olympic torch during the opening ceremony of the 1996 Olympic Games, and it received a positive response in the U.S. media.¹ George Vecsey wrote in the *New York Times* on July 21, 1996, that "Muhammad Ali floats above the Summer Games, no longer an elusive butterfly but a great glowing spaceship... [who] casts his light on... all the people who walk these streets with just a little more zip in their step, now that they have seen Ali."² Howard

¹ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 180.

² Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 180.

Bingham told the *Courier-Journal* on July 22, 1996, that Bill Clinton had said, “They didn’t tell me who would light the flame, but when I saw it was you, I cried.”³ In 2009, the sports television network ESPN declared it the eighth-most memorable moment in sports in the past twenty-five years.⁴ In October 1996, after 22 years of production, PolyGram Filmed Entertainment released *When We Were Kings*, a documentary about the “Rumble in the Jungle” fight.⁵ In 2001, Columbia Pictures released the biographical drama film *Ali*.⁶ The film depicted Ali from 1964, when he defeated Sonny Liston for the World Heavyweight Championship, to 1974, when he regained the championship from George Foreman.⁷ David Remnick’s book *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero* came out after the 1996 Olympics, and it became one of the highest-selling books about Ali.⁸ During the late 1990s and early 2000s, Ali appeared in commercials for Apple, Adidas, and IBM.⁹ Movies, documentaries, and books from the late 1990s and early 2000s highlighted how the media shaped Ali’s renewed fame following the 1996 Olympics.

Following his appearance at the 1996 Olympics, Ali continued to engage in humanitarian work and received awards for his efforts. In August 1997, shortly after the First Liberian Civil War (1996-1997), Ali did a humanitarian mission in Liberia.¹⁰ Ali donated medicine, clothing, and toys to refugees displaced by the war.¹¹ In 1998, Ali did a humanitarian mission in Cuba

³ Dave Kindred, “How Muhammad Ali Brought Light,” *Courier-Journal*, July 22, 1996, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/july-22-1996-page-5-48/docview/1873649093/se-2>.

⁴ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 180.

⁵ Thomas Hauser, “The Olympic Flame,” in *Muhammad Ali: A Tribute to the Greatest* (Simon and Schuster, 2016), 149.

⁶ Eig, *Ali*, 530.

⁷ Eig, *Ali*, 530.

⁸ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 165.

⁹ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 193.

¹⁰ Margueritte Shelton, *Muhammad Ali: A Humanitarian Life* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), 147.

¹¹ Shelton, *Muhammad Ali*, 147.

because of the country's socioeconomic issues after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.¹² During his visit to Cuba, Ali donated medicine and medical equipment to local hospitals and health clinics and met President Fidel Castro.¹³ Ali won the Arthur Ashe Courage Award in 1996, an ESPY award named after tennis player Arthur Ashe and given to those whose contributions to the world “transcend sports.”¹⁴ Ali won the United Nations (UN) Messenger of Peace Award in 1998, an award given to celebrities who have raised awareness of global issues.¹⁵ Further recognition followed in the 2000s, with Ali winning the Black Entertainment Television (BET) Humanitarian Award in 2002 and receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President George W. Bush in 2005.¹⁶ In addition to the books, movies, and documentaries, the awards Ali received for his humanitarian work during the late 1990s and early 2000s solidified his renewed fame after the 1996 Olympics.

Following the 1996 Olympics, books, commercials, and newspaper articles portrayed Ali as a moral authority, a role model, and a divine figure. Remnick's book analyzed how the boxing press struggled to label Ali as a “good negro” or “bad negro,” categories they had previously assigned to boxers like Sonny Liston and Floyd Patterson. Patterson, according to Remnick, played the “good negro” because he followed Christianity and preached integration.¹⁷ Liston, according to Remnick, played the “bad negro” because of his criminal background and organized crime ties.¹⁸ Remnick then explained that while most sportswriters expected Ali to be a “good negro” or “bad negro,” the boxer's ability to handle the press caught the media off guard.¹⁹ Ali

¹² Shelton, *Muhammad Ali*, 168.

¹³ Shelton, *Muhammad Ali*, 168.

¹⁴ Shelton, *Muhammad Ali*, 168.

¹⁵ Shelton, *Muhammad Ali*, 140.

¹⁶ Shelton, *Muhammad Ali*, 162.

¹⁷ David Remnick, *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero* (Vintage Books, 2015), 15.

¹⁸ Remnick, *King of the World*, 15.

¹⁹ Remnick, *King of the World*, 15.

did this, according to Remnick, with his unique personality, his willingness to call out racism, and his refusal to allow the boxing press to define him by his race.²⁰ Remnick helped shape Ali's image as a role model by portraying him as someone who defied the boxing media's attempts to categorize him as either a “good negro” or “bad negro” during the 1960s.

Remnick's book shared a similar theme to the Ali-themed commercials from the 2004 Adidas “Impossible is Nothing” ad campaign. For instance, the commercial “Laila” featured narration by Laila Ali, a professional boxer and Ali's daughter, discussing the importance of conviction while showing her in a boxing match against her father. The commercial used computer alterations to stock footage of one of Ali's past fights. Laila said in the commercial that while most people picked Sonny Liston to beat him in 1964 and George Foreman to beat him in 1974, Ali never doubted himself and went on to win against both opponents.²¹ Laila ends the commercial by stating that “my father looks impossible in the eye and defeats it again and again. What do you think I'm going to do when they say women shouldn't box? Yeah, that's right. Rumble, young girl, rumble.”²² The other commercial, “Long Run,” showed a young Ali jogging with his training camp while Laila, the narrator, talked about following your path and not listening to detractors.²³ In the commercial, Laila stated that “while rare, there have been people who listen to themselves as opposed to following others, and those people teach us that once you set out a path for yourself... it is okay to believe in yourself because there is no can't, won't, or

²⁰ Remnick, *King of the World*, 15.

²¹ “Adidas Impossible Is Nothing: Ali vs. Ali,” advertisement, featuring Muhammad Ali, created by Adidas, posted April 26, 2011, by Sriram Darbha, YouTube, 0:25–0:54, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAPOqW34OKg>.

²² “Ali vs. Ali,” 0:48–1:07.

²³ “Adidas – Impossible Is Nothing: R.I.P. Muhammad Ali,” advertisement, featuring Muhammad Ali, created by Adidas, posted November 27, 2017, by M20100706, YouTube, 0:12–1:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifuO7QB0i6w>.

impossible.”²⁴ Both commercials about Ali contributed to his image as a role model by showing his conviction in the face of doubt that contributed to his success as a boxer.

Sports reporters like Robert Lipsyte and Pat Forde compared Ali’s behaviour to that of other Black athletes such as Mike Tyson, Dennis Rodman, Riddick Bowe, and Oliver McCall. Lipsyte wrote in the *New York Times* on October 20, 1996, that because of his speaking engagements and humanitarian work, Ali no longer posed a “danger to the sensibilities of the republic, no thuggish Mike Tyson, no punkish Dennis Rodman, just a sweet-faced shuffler who emanates an open-armed, nonjudgmental inclusiveness.”²⁵ Forde wrote in the *Courier-Journal* on July 14, 1997, that he wanted the Ali Cup, an amateur boxing tournament scheduled in Louisville two months later, to fix boxing’s tarnished image.²⁶ Forde described 1997 as the “year of the ear” for boxing, a reference to Tyson biting off Evander Holyfield’s ear during their rematch on June 28, 1997.²⁷ Forde referenced Bowe’s 11-day stint in the Marines and McCall’s emotional breakdown during his rematch against Lennox Lewis as events that tarnished boxing’s public image in 1997.²⁸ Lipsyte and Forde complimented Ali for improving boxing’s image with his humanitarian work and speaking engagements, and criticized Bowe, Tyson, and McCall for tarnishing it.

In addition to Lipsyte and Forde’s articles, commercials for Pizza Hut in 1997 and IBM Linux in 2004 positioned Ali as a role model for young people. The Pizza Hut commercial featured Ali encouraging young people to respect and learn from their elders. The commercial

²⁴ “R.I.P. Muhammad Ali,” 0:35-0:50.

²⁵ Robert Lipsyte, “Ali Is Still Floating, Now Far Above Reproach,” *New York Times*, October 20, 1996, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/ali-is-still-floating-now-far-above-reproach/docview/109594593/se-2>.

²⁶ Pat Forde, “Ali Could Lift Reeling Boxing Off the Canvas,” *Courier-Journal*, July 14, 1997, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/july-14-1997-page-29-40/docview/1873854181/se-2>.

²⁷ Forde, “Ali.”

²⁸ Forde, “Ali.”

featured Ali, an actor playing a young boxer, and Angelo Dundee, Ali's boxing trainer from 1960 to 1981.²⁹ The commercial began at a boxing gym where the young boxer retorted to Dundee's criticism of his fighting technique with the line: "You're full of it old man. What do you know about boxing?"³⁰ Dundee responded, "Cool down kid. Let's go get a pizza."³¹ Dundee and his trainee then went to Pizza Hut, where a server gave them a pizza and said, "It's from the man in the corner."³² Then, the camera cut to Ali having lunch with a group of children.³³ While the camera stayed on Ali, the server said, "he says you taught him everything he knows."³⁴ The IBM Linux commercial showed a child watching one of Ali's post-fight interviews from the 1960s, where the boxer repeatedly stated that he "shook up the world."³⁵ The camera then cut to the child sitting across from Ali, and the commercial ended when Ali told the child to "shake up the world."³⁶ The Pizza Hut and IBM commercials presented Ali as a role model who encouraged children to "shake up the world" and to respect their elders.

Ezra pointed out that writers like Hauser, Davis Miller, and Hana Ali, Ali's daughter, presented the boxer as a divine figure after the 1996 Olympics. Hauser wrote in *Healing* that "I look at this man and I say to myself 'God is trying to tell us something.'"³⁷ In *The Tao of Muhammad Ali* (1996), Miller wrote, "We struggle. Always. We are doing the best that we can. And we dream of transcendence. And for me, there was a time when the dream was incarnate."³⁸

²⁹ Hauser, *Muhammad Ali*, 36.

³⁰ "Pizza Hut Muhammad Ali Commercial," advertisement, featuring Muhammad Ali, created by Pizza Hut, posted January 27, 2011, by The Commercial Lover, YouTube, 0:20–0:24, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6byv3f4wyU>.

³¹ "Pizza Hut," 0:25-0:30.

³² "Pizza Hut," 0:40-0:44.

³³ "Pizza Hut," 0:40-0:44.

³⁴ "Pizza Hut," 0:40-0:44.

³⁵ "Muhammad Ali IBM Commercial," advertisement, featuring Muhammad Ali, created by IBM, posted January 31, 2006, by nysef816, YouTube, 0:00–0:16, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BesI6NEPWIM>.

³⁶ "Muhammad Ali IBM Commercial," 0:17-0:26.

³⁷ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 182-83.

³⁸ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 183.

Hana wrote in her non-fiction book *More Than a Hero* (2000) that “He’s a prophet, a messenger of God, an angel... [because] throughout my life there has never been one moment that the presence of my father’s angelic soul has gone uncherished.”³⁹ Ezra acknowledged that Ali called himself a god during the build-up to his first fight against Joe Frazier.⁴⁰ Ezra also referenced scenes from *When We Were Kings*, where Burundi Brown described the boxer as a prophet.⁴¹ However, Ezra noted that these comments from the 1970s were about Ali’s skill as a boxer.⁴² In contrast, Miller, Hauser, and Hana presented Ali as a divine figure because of his ideas, values, and beliefs. Ezra used comments made by Hauser, Miller, and Hana to explain how authors went beyond describing the boxer as a role model by portraying him as a divine figure.

Ali’s media portrayal, as well as the advertising and opening of the MAC, turned the boxer’s public image into a profitable business commodity. Trademark and licensing businesses built around Ali’s brand produced yearly revenues of \$4 million to \$7 million in 2001.⁴³ Lonnie sold Ali’s naming rights to CKX Entertainment in 2006 (now known as Sony Pictures Television Nonfiction), a company that owned and developed entertainment content and intellectual property.⁴⁴ CKX owned 85 percent of Elvis Presley Enterprises, an organization that conducted business and managed assets related to Elvis Presley, and the television show *American Idol*.⁴⁵ CKX bought an 80 percent stake in trademarks and licensing agreements about Ali’s name and likeness for \$50 million.⁴⁶ CKX formed the company GOAT Enterprises to trademark and

³⁹ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 183.

⁴⁰ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 182.

⁴¹ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 182.

⁴² Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 182.

⁴³ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 191.

⁴⁴ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 191-92.

⁴⁵ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 191-92.

⁴⁶ James Deans, “Muhammad Ali Rights Snapped Up by CKX,” *The Guardian*, April 11, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2006/apr/11/marketingandpr>.

license properties related to the boxer.⁴⁷ However, after filing for bankruptcy in 2013, CKX sold off the Ali and Elvis brands to Authentic Brands Group, another licensing company.⁴⁸ Ali's enduring fame and brand led to him and Lonnie earning \$50 million when they sold 80 percent of the boxer's naming rights to CKX.

It also made the boxer more beloved in Louisville. Ali died on June 3, 2016, and his death impacted Louisville.⁴⁹ Ali's funeral happened at the KFC Yum! Center in a crowd of 15,000 people.⁵⁰ Celebrities like Clinton, Spike Lee, Jim Brown, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Whoopi Goldberg, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar attended the funeral.⁵¹ The pallbearers for Ali's funeral included Lennox Lewis, Will Smith, and Mike Tyson.⁵² Approximately 100,000 people lined the streets as a hearse carrying Ali's casket made its way past his childhood home to Louisville's Cave Hill Cemetery.⁵³ On the day of Ali's funeral, the city closed Bardstown Road, the Watterson Expressway, and areas near Cave Hill Cemetery.⁵⁴ The city also enforced street closures and no-parking zones around Main Street, River Road, and Grand Avenue.⁵⁵ Kahnke told *WHAS11 News* in 2017 that no homicides occurred in Louisville during the week of Ali's death.⁵⁶ Kahnke explained, "I think it was a way for others to respect Muhammad Ali and to

⁴⁷ Deans, "Ali Rights Snapped Up."

⁴⁸ Rosemary Pennington, "Mourning the Greatest: 'Unforgivably Black' and Peacefully Muslim Muhammad Ali," *Popular Communication* (2024): 89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2024.2343690>.

⁴⁹ Associated Press, "Muhammad Ali Memorial Service Honours 'The Greatest,'" *CBC*, June 16, 2016.

⁵⁰ Associated Press, "Muhammad Ali Memorial Service."

⁵¹ Associated Press, "Muhammad Ali Memorial Service."

⁵² David Mercer, "Muhammad Ali Funeral: Will Smith to be Pallbearer at Service," *The Independent*, June 7, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/muhammad-ali-funeral-will-smith-to-be-pallbearer-at-service-a7068441.html>.

⁵³ Associated Press, "Muhammad Ali Memorial Service."

⁵⁴ Allana J. Barefield, "Street Closures Announced for Ali Funeral," *Courier-Journal*, Jun 09, 2016, <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/boxing/muhammad-ali/2016/06/08/street-closures-announced-ali-funeral/85594724/>.

⁵⁵ Barefield, "Street Closures."

⁵⁶ Michaela MacDonald, "The Effect of Muhammad Ali's Death on Louisville," *WHAS11*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.whas11.com/article/news/local/the-effect-of-muhammad-alis-death-on-louisville/417-444962511>.

maybe for a tiny, seven-day period show a respect for life...⁵⁷ Ali's death impacted Louisville because it led to 15,000 people attending his funeral, the city closing numerous roads during the funeral, and no murders occurring in Louisville during the week of his death.

The Louisville Regional Airport Authority changed the name of the Louisville International Airport to the Louisville Muhammad Ali International Airport in 2019. Jim Welch, chair of the Airport Authority Board, stated that after studying the matter for over a year, they renamed the airport after Ali because of his fame and humanitarian work.⁵⁸ Welch explained that this name change told "the world how proud we are to associate 'The Greatest' with not only our great city, but our great airport."⁵⁹ Greg Fischer, Mayor of Louisville Metro from 2011 to 2023, agreed with the decision because he saw research showing how Ali had greater name recognition than Louisville.⁶⁰ The Airport Authority Board also signed an agreement with Muhammad Ali Enterprises, LLC to use Ali's name.⁶¹ The Muhammad Ali International Airport debuted a new logo on June 7, 2019, that featured a silhouette of Ali against the background of a butterfly.⁶² The city unveiled the logo during a ceremony at the Ali Festival.⁶³ Lonnie, MAC officials, and Fischer were in attendance.⁶⁴ Renaming Louisville's airport exemplified the city's appreciation for Ali.

⁵⁷ MacDonald, "Muhammad Ali's Death."

⁵⁸ "Mayor Fischer Celebrates Decision to Rename Louisville Airport to Honor Muhammad Ali," Louisville Metro Government, January 16, 2019, https://web.archive.org/web/20190122044413/http://www.flylouisville.com/wp-content/uploads/Release-Mayor-Fischer-celebrates-decision-to-rename-Louisville-airport-to-honor-Muhammad-Ali-1-16-19_FINAL_FOR_WEB.pdf.

⁵⁹ "Mayor Fischer Celebrates Decision."

⁶⁰ "Mayor Fischer Celebrates Decision."

⁶¹ "Mayor Fischer Celebrates Decision."

⁶² Sarah Ladd, "Louisville Airport Unveils Muhammad Ali Logo to Go with New Name," *Courier-Journal*, June 7, 2019, <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/local/2019/06/06/louisville-muhammad-ali-international-airport-unveils-logo/1367078001/>.

⁶³ Ladd, "Louisville Airport."

⁶⁴ Ladd, "Louisville Airport."

Locals have also created Ali-inspired murals and jerseys, and the city also welcomed a museum that recreated the boxer's childhood home. During their 2019 season, the Louisville Cardinals football team introduced new uniforms inspired by Ali's black and white boxing shorts.⁶⁵ During the sixth week of the Cardinals' 2024 season, the team wore new red and gold uniforms to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the "Rumble in the Jungle."⁶⁶ Artist Margaret Morley painted the Kentucky Rushmore mural in 2013 on Bardstown Road.⁶⁷ The mural showed Ali with Abraham Lincoln, Colonel Sanders, and a Thoroughbred.⁶⁸ Artist Shepard Fairey painted a seven-story mural of Ali on West Chestnut Street in 2023.⁶⁹ Fairey also created the "Hope" poster for President Barack Obama during his 2008 election campaign.⁷⁰ The Muhammad Ali Childhood Home Museum opened in 2016 in Ali's childhood home in the West End.⁷¹ The Ali family sold it to Jared Weiss, a real estate investor, in 2012.⁷² Weiss then partnered with attorney George Bochetto to transform the house into a museum that displayed how Ali and his family lived there for 20 years.⁷³ The museum showed furnishings, appliances, and artwork.⁷⁴ The Muhammad Ali Childhood Home Museum closed in September 2017.⁷⁵ Bochetto and Weis launched a fundraising campaign in November 2020 to reopen the museum,

⁶⁵ Andrew Lind, "Louisville Cardinals Unveil Muhammad Ali-Inspired Alternate Uniforms," *Sportslogos.net*, August 19, 2019, https://news.sportslogos.net/2019/08/19/louisville-cardinals-unveil-muhammad-ali-inspired-alternate-uniforms/college/#google_vignette.

⁶⁶ Alexis Culbt, "Louisville Football to Honor Muhammad Ali with This 'Rumble in the Jungle' Uniform Combo," *Courier-Journal*, October 4, 2024, <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/sports/college/louisville/2024/10/04/louisville-smu-rumble-in-the-jungle-muhammad-ali/75513171007/>.

⁶⁷ "Muhammad Ali Around Town," *Louisville*, <https://www.gotolouisville.com/blog/ali-around-town/>.

⁶⁸ "Muhammad Ali Around Town."

⁶⁹ Quenton Robertson, "New Mural of Muhammad Ali Unveiled in West Louisville," *Wave News*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.wave3.com/2023/04/26/new-mural-muhammad-ali-unveiled-west-louisville/>.

⁷⁰ Robertson, "New Mural."

⁷¹ Johnny Diaz, "Muhammad Ali's Childhood Home Goes on the Market," *New York Times*, June 4, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/04/sports/muhammad-ali-childhood-home-sale.html>.

⁷² Diaz, "Muhammad Ali's Childhood Home."

⁷³ Diaz, "Muhammad Ali's Childhood Home."

⁷⁴ Diaz, "Muhammad Ali's Childhood Home."

⁷⁵ Diaz, "Muhammad Ali's Childhood Home."

but it failed to secure enough money.⁷⁶ After Ali's appearance at the 1996 Olympics, locals created Ali-inspired jerseys and murals, and the Muhammad Ali Childhood Home Museum opened in the West End.

Despite its significance, Ali's media portrayal after the 1996 Olympics left out his support for segregation during the 1960s, his ties to authoritarian regimes during the 1970s, and his failed diplomatic mission in Africa during the 1980s. Ali opposed integration, and integrationists like Floyd Patterson and Roy Wilkins, the leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), criticized him for those beliefs. Ali told a reporter in 1964 that he did not believe in integration because "Tigers stay with tigers; red ants stay with red ants. Cubans stay with Cubans."⁷⁷ Ali argued that even if integrationists dismantled Jim Crow, Whites still oppressed Blacks under that scenario.⁷⁸ In a 1964 article that Patterson, a lifelong member of the NAACP, wrote for *Sports Illustrated*, he accused Ali and the NOI of preaching "hate and separation instead of love and integration."⁷⁹ Patterson continued by writing that he wanted to defeat Ali in boxing because "maybe the Black Muslims would repudiate him [which]... would be my contribution to civil rights."⁸⁰ Wilkins echoed Patterson's statement by referring to Ali as "an honorary member of the White Citizens Council" because his advocacy for racial separation sounded akin to those who wanted Jim Crow laws to remain.⁸¹ Sports scholar Othello Harris connected the criticisms that Ali received from integrationists, such as Patterson and Wilkins, to the pushback that the NOI received from Black Americans during the

⁷⁶ Diaz, "Muhammad Ali's Childhood Home."

⁷⁷ Thomas Hietala, "Muhammad Ali and the Age of Bare-Knuckle Politics," in *Muhammad Ali: The People's Champ*, ed. Elliot J. Gorn (University of Illinois, 1995), 129.

⁷⁸ Hietala, "Muhammad Ali," 129.

⁷⁹ Hietala, "Muhammad Ali," 130.

⁸⁰ Hietala, "Muhammad Ali," 130.

⁸¹ Mike Marqusee, *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties* (Verso Books, 2016), 9.

civil rights period, as most of them supported integration.⁸² Harris explained that members of the NOI disagreed with how integrationists depicted them, believing they countered hate by advocating self-reliance, defence, and Black pride.⁸³ Media portrayals of Ali following the 1996 Olympics ignored both his support for segregation and the pushback he received for it.

Ali participated in boxing events funded and promoted by authoritarian regimes. Zaire President Mobutu Sese Seko, who funded and promoted the “Rumble in the Jungle,” took advantage of Ali’s public reputation. The “Rumble in the Jungle” fight played a part in Mobutu’s “authenticity” campaign that promoted Zaire as an African state that escaped the shackles of European colonialism.⁸⁴ According to sports historian Lewis Erenberg, Mobutu wanted to capitalize on Ali’s public reputation by using Pan-Africanism as a political instrument.⁸⁵ Mobutu changed his name from Joseph-Desire Mobutu and renamed the Congo to Zaire while also claiming to admire Patrice Lumumba, the previous President who had criticized U.S. and Belgian influence.⁸⁶ Mobutu did the “authenticity” campaign to attract foreign investment in the country’s vast mineral wealth of copper, diamonds, cobalt, and uranium.⁸⁷ Ali worked with other authoritarian regimes like Ferdinand Marcos, who funded “Thrilla in Manila.”⁸⁸ Cultural studies scholar Grant Farred pointed out that Ali negotiated with the South African government to have a fight in the country on two occasions, one in 1972 and one in 1978, but neither took place.⁸⁹ Farred explained that the anti-apartheid movement tarnished the apartheid regime’s image, and

⁸² Othello Harris, “Muhammad Ali and the Revolt of the Black Athlete,” in *Muhammad Ali: The People’s Champ*, ed. Elliot J. Gorn (University of Illinois, 1995), 58.

⁸³ Harris, “Muhammad Ali,” 58.

⁸⁴ Lewis A. Erenberg, *The Rumble in the Jungle: Muhammad Ali and George Foreman on the Global Stage* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), 84.

⁸⁵ Erenberg, *Rumble in the Jungle*, 89.

⁸⁶ Erenberg, *Rumble in the Jungle*, 87.

⁸⁷ Erenberg, *Rumble in the Jungle*, 85.

⁸⁸ Smith, “Remembering Muhammad Ali,” 185.

⁸⁹ Farred, Grant, *What’s My Name: Black Vernacular Intellectuals* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 77.

the apartheid regime sought to improve its image by hosting a boxing card headlined by Ali.⁹⁰ Ali also knew about the oppressive nature of South Africa's apartheid regime. He declined the 1972 bout after Dennis Brutus, an anti-apartheid activist, and Abdulrahim Farah, chair of the United Nations Special Committee on Apartheid, convinced Ali to boycott the regime.⁹¹ Media portrayals of Ali following the 1996 Olympics overlooked his involvement in fights like the "Rumble in the Jungle" and the "Thrilla in Manila," and his negotiations with South Africa's apartheid regime.

Ali received negative publicity after not convincing African nations to support the U.S. boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow, Russia. The U.S. boycotted the 1980 Olympics in response to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, a war that lasted from 1979 to 1989.⁹² In early 1980, President Jimmy Carter sent Ali to gather support for the U.S. boycott from African nations like Tanzania, Kenya, Nigeria, Liberia, and Senegal.⁹³ Ali failed this mission, with none of the countries joining the boycott.⁹⁴ African news outlets criticized the U.S. for condemning the twenty-two African countries that boycotted the 1976 Montreal Olympics.⁹⁵ The 1976 boycott happened because the Olympic Games included New Zealand, whose rugby team toured apartheid South Africa.⁹⁶ At every press conference attended by Ali, reporters asked why they should support the boycott when the U.S. had condemned their boycott four years ago.⁹⁷ Ali responded that he did not know anything about the Montreal boycott.⁹⁸ *Time Magazine*

⁹⁰ Farred, *What's My Name*, 77.

⁹¹ Farred, *What's My Name*, 78.

⁹² Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: A Tribute to the Greatest* (Simon and Schuster, 2016), 48.

⁹³ James Alexander Ivey, "'Welcome, Ali, Please go Home:' Muhammad Ali as Diplomat and African Debates on the 1980 Moscow Olympic Boycott," *African Studies Review* 66, no. 2 (2023): 490, <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2022.111>.

⁹⁴ Ivey, "'Welcome, Ali,'" 490.

⁹⁵ Ivey, "'Welcome, Ali,'" 495-97.

⁹⁶ Ivey, "'Welcome, Ali,'" 495-97.

⁹⁷ Ivey, "'Welcome, Ali,'" 495-97.

⁹⁸ Ivey, "'Welcome, Ali,'" 495-97.

described the trip as “the most bizarre diplomatic mission in recent U.S. history... [and Ali floundered] like a Golden Gloves novice against a ring-wise pro.”⁹⁹ Ali regretted the diplomatic trip after learning more about the relationship that the U.S. had with South Africa.¹⁰⁰ Ali accused Carter of sending him to Africa to take a “whipping” over the U.S. backing the South African apartheid regime.¹⁰¹ Ali’s media portrayal after the 1996 Olympics ignored his diplomatic mission in Africa, likely because it failed and revealed his limited understanding of the political and social issues affecting Africans during the early 1980s.

Following the 1996 Olympics, Ali’s public image became depoliticized because of corporate commercialization and his withdrawal from political discourse. In the 2004 essay “The Lost Legacy of Muhammad Ali,” Hauser, who stopped speaking to Ali in 1998, argued that corporate America misconstrued the boxer’s history and global impact.¹⁰² Hauser suggested that Ali could function as a bridge between the Western and Islamic worlds during the War on Terror because of his political activism during the 1960s and his popularity in the Western world and Muslim-majority countries.¹⁰³ However, according to Hauser, this did not happen because of corporate America’s “rediscovery” of him after the 1996 Olympics.¹⁰⁴ Hauser described the volumes of books, movies, and documentaries produced after the 1996 Olympics as sanitizing Ali’s image in a way that made his past distant from contemporary issues.¹⁰⁵ Ali also played a part in presenting his past as distant from contemporary issues because he refused to discuss politics. Ali never endorsed a politician after 1988, the year he endorsed George H.W. Bush for

⁹⁹ “Diplomacy: Ali’s Whipping,” *Time Magazine*, February 18, 1980, <https://time.com/archive/6855693/diplomacy-alis-whipping/>.

¹⁰⁰ Ivey, “Welcome, Ali,” 492.

¹⁰¹ Ivey, “Welcome, Ali,” 492.

¹⁰² Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 173.

¹⁰³ Thomas Hauser, “The Lost Legacy of Muhammad Ali,” in *Muhammad Ali: A Tribute to the Greatest* (Simon and Schuster, 2016), 182.

¹⁰⁴ Hauser, “Lost Legacy,” 183.

¹⁰⁵ Hauser, “Lost Legacy,” 183.

President and Orrin Hatch for Utah's Senator.¹⁰⁶ In 2003, during a visit that he and Lonnie made to Western High School in Louisville, Ali refused to take a stance on the Iraq War.¹⁰⁷ Lonnie stated during the visit, "I just hope what (President Bush) did was the right thing... [because] you have to hope our government has more information than we do."¹⁰⁸ In a 2002 interview, Ali said when it comes to politics, "I dodge those questions... [because] I don't want to say... the wrong thing and hurt my businesses and things I'm doing."¹⁰⁹ Ali's commercialized portrayal and his reluctance to engage in political conversations highlighted how the boxer sought to avoid controversy to increase his financial gain.

The media portrayal of Ali following the 1996 Olympics shared similarities with the media portrayal of King and the civil rights movement since the 1980s. Civil rights historian Jeanne Theoharis argued that the sanitization of the civil rights movement started after Reagan signed Martin Luther King Jr. Day into law in 1983.¹¹⁰ With another election approaching the following year, Reagan wanted to garner more support from African American voters, many of whom disliked his views on the civil rights movement and his policies.¹¹¹ During the 1960s, Reagan opposed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, two landmark pieces of legislation from the civil rights era.¹¹² Reagan also described the Voting Rights Act as "humiliating to the South" in 1980.¹¹³ In 1981, the Reagan Administration reversed a policy from

¹⁰⁶ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 162.

¹⁰⁷ Chris Kenning, "Champ Won't Take Sides in War with Iraq," *Courier-Journal*, March 26, 2003, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/headline-war-with-iraq-teh-home-front-champ-wont/docview/241090393/se-2>.

¹⁰⁸ Kenning, "Champ Won't Take Sides."

¹⁰⁹ Kindred, *Sound and Fury*, 179.

¹¹⁰ Jeanne Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History* (Beacon Press, 2018), 4.

¹¹¹ Theoharis, *Beautiful and Terrible History*, 4.

¹¹² Theoharis, *Beautiful and Terrible History*, 4.

¹¹³ Richard Johnson, "The 1982 Voting Rights Act Extension as a 'Critical Juncture': Ronald Reagan, Bob Dole, and Republican Party-Building," *Studies in American Political Development* 35, no. 2 (2021): 224, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X21000079>.

the Nixon Administration that allowed the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to deny tax exemptions to schools that discriminated based on race.¹¹⁴ Reagan saw an opportunity to gain the support of African American voters by signing Martin Luther King Jr. Day into law.¹¹⁵ The SCLC pushed for its adoption by gathering three million signatures in 1971.¹¹⁶ Stevie Wonder, one of the most popular musicians in the U.S., pushed for its adoption by releasing the song “Happy Birthday” in 1981.¹¹⁷ Wonder’s song advocated for the holiday by emphasizing King’s contributions to civil rights and the necessity of promoting peace and unity.¹¹⁸ Reagan signed legislation to create the holiday on November 2nd, 1983, and the country first observed it on January 20, 1986.¹¹⁹ According to Theoharis, Reagan signed legislation that established a holiday for King’s birthday to distract people from his other policies that discriminated against Black Americans.

Communications scholars Denise M. Bostdorff and Steven R. Goldzwig pointed out that Reagan centred King’s legacy around the 1964 “I Have a Dream” speech. Bostdorff and Goldzwig argued that Reagan’s comments about King and the civil rights movement presented racial injustice as an issue that the U.S. had supposedly eliminated after abolishing Jim Crow.¹²⁰ They referenced a 1986 speech at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School in Washington,

¹¹⁴ Howell Raines, “Reagan Aides’ Slip Blamed for Dispute on Tax Exemptions,” *New York Times*, January 17, 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/01/17/world/reagan-aides-slip-blamed-for-dispute-on-tax-exemptions.html>

¹¹⁵ Theoharis, *Beautiful and Terrible History*, 4.

¹¹⁶ “Drive to Memorialize King Birthday Gains Support,” *Jet*, January 21, 1971, <https://books.google.ca/books?id=vjcDAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA10&dq=%22Southern%20Christian%20Leadership%20Conference%22%20%22million%20signatures%22&pg=PA10#v=onepage&q=%22Southern%20Christian%20Leadership%20Conference%22%20%22million%20signatures%22&f=false>.

¹¹⁷ C. W. Miranker, “Thousands Honor Martin Luther King,” *The Telegraph*, January 16, 1981, <https://books.google.ca/books?id=QKcrAAAIBAJ&lpg=PA8&dq=%22stevie%20wonder%22%20%22happy%20birthday%22&pg=PA7#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

¹¹⁸ Miranker, “Martin Luther King.”

¹¹⁹ Theoharis, *Beautiful and Terrible History*, 4.

¹²⁰ Denise M Bostdorff and Steven R. Goldzwig, “History, Collective Memory, and the Appropriation of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Reagan’s Rhetorical Legacy,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2005): 676, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2005.00271.x>.

D.C., Reagan told students and faculty that the civil rights movement succeeded because “Our national conscience told us to change and start to be fair.”¹²¹ They also referenced various interviews Reagan had during the 1980s, where he quoted the passage from King’s speech: “I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”¹²² Bostdorff and Goldzwig referenced those comments to explain that Reagan wanted to convince people that anti-Black racism ended after the civil rights movement and to give weight to his ideas by attaching them to King, despite their differing views on race, class, and capitalism.¹²³ King believed that class and race were interlocking forms of oppression in a capitalist society.¹²⁴ In speeches and interviews during the 1980s, Reagan misconstrued King’s views and the legacy of the civil rights movement, contributing to a broader public misunderstanding of this period in U.S. history.

Politicians like Eric Holder and celebrities like Bill Cosby promoted a particular interpretation of the civil rights movement during the 1990s and 2000s. They suggested that civil rights activists adhered to principles that focused on political action, while contemporary Black Americans focused on criminal activity. During a speech on Martin Luther King Day in 1995, Holder asked, “Did Martin Luther King successfully fight the likes of Bull Connor so that we could lose the struggle for misguided or malicious members of our race?”¹²⁵ Cosby said during a speech at the NAACP Gala in 2004 that the civil rights movement had “people who marched and were hit in the face with rocks and punched in the face to get an education... [and] now we get these knuckleheads walking around who don’t want to learn English.”¹²⁶ Theoharis explained

¹²¹ Bostdorff and Goldzwig, “Martin Luther King, Jr,” 676.

¹²² Bostdorff and Goldzwig, “Martin Luther King, Jr,” 676.

¹²³ Bostdorff and Goldzwig, “Martin Luther King, Jr,” 676.

¹²⁴ Cornel West, “Introduction: The King We Don’t Know,” in *The Radical King*, ed. Cornel West (Beacon Press 2015), xii-xiii.

¹²⁵ Theoharis, *Beautiful and Terrible History*, 20.

¹²⁶ Theoharis, *Beautiful and Terrible History*, 20.

that statements like these blamed Black Americans for their struggles.¹²⁷ Cosby and Holder, according to Theoharis, were concerned about “Black-on-Black crime” and felt that the “Black community” needed to take responsibility for internal issues.¹²⁸ Holder and Cosby’s comments romanticized the civil rights period while blaming Black Americans for their struggles during the 1990s and 2000s.

Books, commercials, and articles about Ali during the late 1990s and early 2000s, while significant to Ali’s public image, reinforced a broader narrative about the civil rights movement that simplified it and its relevance to contemporary issues. This chapter identified how popular media romanticized Ali’s past and presented him as a role model and humanitarian. It did so by referencing commercials from Pizza Hut, IBM, and Adidas, newspaper articles by Forde and Lipsyte, and books by Remnick, Hauser, Hana, and Miller. It explained how these pieces of popular media made Ali’s brand a profitable business commodity by referencing the amount of money Ali’s name generated in 2001, the deal Ali and Lonnie made with CKX in 2006, and Authentic Brands Group’s purchase of Ali’s naming rights in 2013. It explained how Ali became a more beloved public figure in Louisville by referencing how the boxer’s death impacted the city, renaming the Louisville International Airport to the Louisville Muhammad Ali International Airport, the creation of Ali-inspired murals and local sports jerseys, and the Muhammad Ali Childhood Home Museum. It connected Ali’s depiction to how Americans have sanitized the legacy of the civil rights movement since the 1980s by referencing the history behind Martin Luther King Jr. Day and speeches from Reagan, Cosby, and Holder. The MAC’s emphasis on Ali’s principles stemmed from the authors, reporters, and corporations that shaped the boxer’s

¹²⁷ Theoharis, *Beautiful and Terrible History*, 20.

¹²⁸ Theoharis, *Beautiful and Terrible History*, 20.

legacy during the late 1990s and early 2000s, and these depictions should be understood in connection with the sanitization of the civil rights movement.

Conclusion

This thesis separated the history behind the MAC into two parts. The first part lasted from 1992 to 1996, when Bather proposed building a museum about Muhammad Ali, incorporated the MAC, formed its Board of Directors, and made himself its first President. This part in the history of the MAC also included how members of Louisville's government convinced Bather to resign, how Ali and Lonnie recreated the board, and how the new MAC board withdrew from earlier agreements. This included the agreements to buy Paloger's Ali memorabilia collection and to keep their exhibit at the Louisville Galleria open from 1995 to 1998. The second part lasted from 1997 to 2005, the years when the planning and construction of the MAC took place. From 1998 to 2001, the MAC's planners sought to open an \$80 million museum and cultural centre at the Riverfront Plaza. From December 2001 to November 2005, the MAC's planners switched their proposed museum and cultural centre to North Sixth Street, trimmed its budget, and broke ground for construction. The MAC opened on November 19, 2005, during a grand opening gala celebration at the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts in downtown Louisville. This thesis traced the history of the MAC from 1992 to 2005, a period encompassing the museum and cultural centre's origins and planning phase.

This thesis analyzed the history of the MAC by connecting it to three larger historical themes. The first theme focused on Louisville's efforts to revitalize its downtown area from the late 1980s to the early 2010s. During that period, Louisville's government strengthened the Riverfront Plaza and the Commonwealth Convention Center, and built sports arenas, museums, parks, and the MAC to boost tourism in the downtown area. The second theme focused on Lonnie's role in Ali's media and business affairs from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s.

Throughout the 1980s, reporters focused on Ali's ties to business and political scandals, his endorsement of President Ronald Reagan in the 1984 presidential election, and his battle with Parkinson's syndrome. After Lonnie married Ali in 1986, she took over her husband's media and business affairs, hired writers like Hauser to write about her husband, and got involved in planning the MAC. The third theme focused on the books, commercials, and newspaper articles that romanticized Ali's legacy from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. These media depictions sanitized Ali's legacy while leaving out more controversial parts of his past, such as his opposition to integration during the 1960s, his ties to authoritarian regimes, and his failed attempts at diplomacy. These media depictions provided insight into comments from public figures about the civil rights movement since the 1980s, as well as how the MAC's planners promoted the museum and cultural centre as an institution that centred on Ali's principles. This thesis showed the significance of the MAC's history from 1992 to 2005 by analyzing it with downtown Louisville's revitalization, Lonnie's efforts to restore her husband's public image, and Ali's resurgence in popularity after the 1996 Olympics.

This thesis corrected inaccuracies in the accounts from MAC officials and scholars. Lonnie told the *New York Times* on November 18th, 2005, that during "the mid-90s, [when] a distant relative [Bather] put on an Ali memorabilia show in Louisville," a group of entrepreneurs approached them about building a permanent museum.¹ Lonnie stated that she and her husband rejected these proposals because they wanted to create a museum and cultural centre about Ali's values and beliefs.² Kahnke told *Fort Knox News* on April 7th, 2017, that Ali and Lonnie wanted the MAC in Louisville due to the boxer's upbringing in that city.³ Ali lived in Louisville from

¹ Dao. "Louisville's Prodigal Slugger."

² Dao. "Louisville's Prodigal Slugger."

³ Catrina Francis, "Muhammad Ali Center Showcases Boxer's Six Core Principles," *U.S. Army*, April 7, 2017, https://www.army.mil/article/185648/muhammad_ali_center_showcases_boxers_six_core_principles.

1942, his birth year, to the early 1960s, when he moved to Chicago.⁴ These were inaccurate descriptions of the museum and cultural centre's early history because, before Lonnie and Ali became involved in planning the MAC, Bather had incorporated it, formed its first Board of Directors, and intended to open it in downtown Louisville. Ezra, citing a 1999 *New York Times* article, claimed that the MAC opened on an \$80 million budget.⁵ In 1999, the MAC's planners were attempting to open the museum and cultural centre at the Riverfront Plaza on an \$80 million budget, with the government of Louisville providing them \$10 million of land. However, the MAC's planners lowered their proposed budget from \$80 million to \$41 million in 2002 and opened the museum and cultural centre on a \$54 million budget in 2005. MAC officials inaccurately described its origins, and Ezra inaccurately described the opening budget of the museum and cultural centre.

This thesis used more primary sources about the MAC than scholars like Ezra, Hahner, McCormack, Rosner, and Rogers. Hahner cited the MAC website and six articles from the *Courier-Journal* about the museum and cultural centre.⁶ Ezra referenced a 1999 *New York Times* article about Louisville's government providing the MAC's planners with \$10 million of land.⁷ Ezra also referenced documents from the MAC website about the mission and purpose of its facilities.⁸ Rosner and Rogers referenced sources related to the MAC, including its guest book, reviews of the museum from Yelp and TripAdvisor, and press kits.⁹ Apart from the MAC's website and two articles about a 2017 protest at the MAC's amphitheatre, McCormack did not use any primary sources for his research.¹⁰ McCormack primarily used secondary sources about

⁴ Eig, *Ali*, 6.

⁵ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 228.

⁶ Hahner, "From the Louisville Lip," 92-98.

⁷ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 228.

⁸ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 228.

⁹ Rosner and Rogers, "Striking Combinations," 31-32.

¹⁰ McCormack, "I'm a Muslim," 160-61.

museums and cultural facilities to analyze the MAC.¹¹ In contrast to Hahner, Ezra, McCormack, Rosner, and Rogers, this thesis used more *Courier-Journal* articles. It also used archival sources from the University of Louisville, the MAC, Louisville's government, and *Ancestry's Historical Newspapers Collection*. Earlier scholars who wrote about the MAC did not conduct in-depth primary source research, presenting a gap in research that this thesis addressed through its use of newspaper databases and archival sources.

This thesis expanded on points made by Hahner and Ezra. Hahner criticized Louisville's government for neglecting the West End in its urban development plans, but she never explained the government's desire to revitalize the downtown area. She never acknowledged the problems with tourism in downtown Louisville during the 1980s. She also never discussed how Louisville's government relied on funding from foundations and corporations for urban development projects because of the spending cuts that the U.S. government made during the 1980s. Besides referencing *Courier-Journal* articles about the MAC, Hahner only referenced two sources about urban development in downtown Louisville: Shafer's 2002 *Courier-Journal* article "Private Investors Warm to Downtown's Redevelopment," and the *Louisville Downtown Development Plan—Preliminary Recommendations* from 2001.¹² This thesis expanded on Hahner's points by using secondary sources and additional *Courier-Journal* articles that focus on downtown Louisville from the 1980s to the 2010s. This thesis also used the *1990 Downtown Development Plan*, the *2002 Downtown Development Plan*, and the *2013 Downtown Master Plan*. These sources reported on developments made in downtown Louisville and created policy guidelines for Louisville's government. This thesis expanded on Hahner's point by using more sources about the history and development of tourist attractions in downtown Louisville.

¹¹ McCormack, "Fighting Injustice and Intolerance," 17-18.

¹² Hahner, "From the Louisville Lip," 96.

Ezra did not analyze the social and political implications behind Ali's portrayal in popular culture during the 1990s and 2000s. Ezra suggested that the sanitization of the civil rights movement influenced Ali's portrayal in popular culture during the 1990s and 2000s.¹³ However, Ezra never referenced any secondary sources, comments from politicians, or newspaper articles from the 1980s to the 2000s about the civil rights movement. On the other hand, this thesis drew on secondary sources on the civil rights movement in public memory, including works by Bostdorff, Goldzwig, Cornel West, and Theoharis. Bostdorff and Goldzwig argued that President Ronald Reagan appropriated King's words and memory to promote a post-racial America.¹⁴ West curated a collection of writings from King that criticized capitalism and promoted democratic socialism for his book *The Radical King*.¹⁵ In West's introduction to the book, he criticized how the public centred King's legacy on the "I Have a Dream" speech while overlooking his more radical beliefs.¹⁶ Theoharis argued that popular narratives about the civil rights movement reduced this history to a short and simplistic tale.¹⁷ These narratives, according to Theoharis, emphasized individuals over collective action and portrayed the movement as having ended anti-Black racial oppression in the U.S.¹⁸ Ezra believed that the sanitization of the civil rights movement influenced Ali's portrayal in popular culture, but he never explained why.

This concluding chapter summarized the thesis and its significance within MAC scholarship. This thesis focused on the history of the MAC from 1992 to 2005. It explained how Bather proposed the MAC in 1992 and incorporated it in 1994. It also explained how the MAC's planners created the museum and cultural centre from 1997 to 2005. It analyzed the history of

¹³ Ezra, *Muhammad Ali*, 170-171.

¹⁴ Bostdorff and Goldzwig, "Martin Luther King, Jr," 661.

¹⁵ West, "Introduction," ix-xvi.

¹⁶ West, "Introduction," ix-xvi.

¹⁷ Theoharis, *Beautiful and Terrible History*, xxii-xiv.

¹⁸ Theoharis, *Beautiful and Terrible History*, xxii-xiv.

the MAC in relation to three historical trends: Louisville's efforts to redevelop its downtown area, Lonnie's efforts to improve Ali's public image, and the boxer's portrayal in popular culture following the 1996 Olympics. This thesis corrected inaccuracies in the accounts from MAC officials and scholars, used more primary sources about the MAC, and expanded on points made by scholars like Ezra and Hahner. This thesis explained the history of the MAC, analyzed its significance to other historical trends, addressed research gaps on the topic, and expanded on relevant points made by earlier scholars.

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