



EDMUND PETTUS BRIDGE

Selma, Alabama, USA

32.4049221, -87.0181155



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Executive Summary

The Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, holds the dichotomous and, at times, violent legacy of race in the American South. It memorialises Edmund Pettus, a leader of the White supremacist Ku Klux Klan, and it was a site of pivotal Civil Rights Movement protests in the 1960s. Two petitions to rename the bridge and shed the White supremacist allusion have gained visibility in the US; however, neither the 2015 nor the 2020 petition led to the legal change in the name of the bridge. The 2020 petition was primarily sparked by the death of Representative John Lewis, a prominent Civil Rights Movement organiser who protested on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in the 1960s. This 2020 petition inspired a renaming resolution that saw initial success in the Alabama Legislature, but the resolution eventually faltered, allowing the Edmund Pettus Bridge's name to persevere.

Introduction

The controversial Edmund Pettus Bridge, named after a man who was a leader of the Ku Klux Klan in the late 1900s, stands paradoxically as a historic landmark of the United States Civil Rights Movement in Selma, Alabama. The bridge commemorates iconic moments of the Civil Rights Movement, including the 'Bloody Sunday' march and the subsequent voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery. In 2015, an online petition demanded the bridge be renamed because its current name is antithetical to its national Civil Rights landmark status. Nevertheless, the petition was unsuccessful. In 2020, the campaign to rename the bridge received new national attention in the wake of the deaths of two prominent Civil Rights leaders, John Lewis and C.T. Vivian, both of whom participated in the voting rights campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s in the American South. Despite these renewed efforts, the Edmund Pettus Bridge retains its name for the Ku Klux Klan leader.

Background

Edmund Pettus

Edmund Pettus was a decorated Confederate general, United States senator, and a key leader (Grand Dragon) of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan in the late 1800s.¹ The Ku Klux Klan is infamous for its documented violence against Black communities.² Pettus was born near the Alabama-Tennessee state line in 1821 to a wealthy planter family.³ Pettus's family profited greatly from the practice of slavery as they owned enslaved people and planted cotton.⁴ Subsequently, Pettus himself defended the practice by serving as a Confederate general in the U.S. Civil War, and he moved further south in Alabama to start his own law practice.⁵ Pettus's support of White supremacy was well known; indeed, he was part of an entourage that lobbied the Governor of Mississippi and his older brother (John Pettus, Governor from 1859-1863) in favour of secession.⁶ From 1861 to 1865, 11 Southern states, comprised the Confederacy, fought with states in the North over secession in what became the U.S. Civil War. These Southern states fought to secede from the US after decades of growing tensions as the Confederacy sought to maintain slavery.⁷

After the U.S. Civil War, despite the South's loss, Pettus returned to his adopted home of Selma as a war hero and had great political sway in the area.⁸ He served as chairman of the Democratic National Convention for over twenty years and as the leader of the Alabama sect of the Ku Klux Klan.⁹ The Ku Klux Klan is a 'hate organization' first founded following the U.S. Civil War that 'employed terror in

¹ Ibid.

² Errin Whack, "Who Was Edmund Pettus?" *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 7, 2015.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Britannica, "American Civil War," Britannica, accessed December 19, 2020.

⁸ Errin Whack, "Who Was Edmund Pettus?" *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 7, 2015.

⁹ Ibid.

pursuit of their White supremacist agenda.¹⁰ In the post-Reconstruction era of United States History, the Klan was responsible for countless lynchings and acts of terror that were meant to suppress the newly enfranchised African American population.¹¹ Over the years, their efforts to stamp out all forms of African American participation in Southern political life were largely successful, and Pettus had a significant role in this suppression as a Klan leader.¹² In 1896, Pettus successfully ran for a seat in the United States Senate by utilising White supremacist language.¹³ He served in the U.S. Senate until he died in 1907.¹⁴

In 1940, thirty-three years after Pettus's death, a bridge named after Pettus opened in Selma.¹⁵ The bridge, which crosses the Alabama River, an artery of the cotton trade in the antebellum period, appeared to symbolise the reification of Pettus's White supremacist beliefs.¹⁶ At the dedication of the bridge in 1940, the program for the event announced that the bridge commemorated a 'great Alabamian' and the '...occasion marks another epoch in the growth and advancement of Dallas County.'¹⁷ In contrast, University of Alabama history professor John Giggie commented to Smithsonian Magazine that 'The bridge was named for him, in part, to memorialise his history of restraining and imprisoning African-Americans in their quest for freedom after the Civil War.'¹⁸ Decades following its 1940 opening, the bridge was the site of Civil Rights protests, changing its legacy from solely White supremacy to one that included pivotal moments of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement.

'Bloody Sunday' and Subsequent Marches

The so-called 'Bloody Sunday' march refers to the clash between Civil Rights protesters and Alabama State troopers during the Selma to Montgomery marches in March of 1965.¹⁹ Although three marches were made in Selma to draw attention to African Americans' struggle to attain voting rights, the most famous is the 'Bloody Sunday' march. On March 7, 1965, non-violent activists of the African American community protested their constitutional right to vote, and state troopers and county posse men attacked the unarmed group (Figure 1).²⁰ This attack from officers left many protesters injured and unconscious.²¹ This violent scene primarily unfolded on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and as a result, the bridge's concrete arches became an icon for the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.²²

¹⁰ Britannica. "Ku Klux Klan," Britannica, accessed March 28, 2022.

¹¹ Errin Whack, "Who Was Edmund Pettus?" *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 7, 2015.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, "Selma to Montgomery March," *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, accessed on July 7, 2020.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Allyson Waller, "Death of John Lewis Fuels Movement to Rename Edmund Pettus Bridge," *New York Times*, July 18, 2020.

²² *Ibid.*



Figure 1: 'State Troopers Approaching Protesters'
Image by US Department of State via Flickr [CC BY-NC 2.0](#).

This event, almost entirely televised, contributed significantly to the national public support of the Civil Rights Movement and the later passing of the Voting Rights Acts.²³ This act became one of the most significant federal achievements of this period.²⁴ In later years, efforts grew to memorialise the Selma activists and their impact; however, the bridge itself remains named for Edmund Pettus, a prominent local White supremacist.²⁵ In 2015, an online petition to change the name of the bridge was opened, claiming the existence of an offensive connection between the Selma events, the Civil Rights Movement and a Ku Klux Klan leader.²⁶

History of the Contestation

The 2015 Petition

In 2015, a group of Selma-based community activists known as Students Unite began an online petition to 'remove Selma's KKK memorialization' by renaming the Edmund Pettus Bridge.²⁷ The petition was addressed to the U.S. National Parks Service, the governor of Alabama, the Mayor of Selma (George Evans), and the Alabama legislature. The petition asked these leaders, 'How could a landmark that holds so much significance for the civil rights movement be named after a man who not only supported slavery, but held one of the highest positions within the Ku Klux Klan?'²⁸ After opening in February of 2015, the petition gathered over 150,000 signatures by March.²⁹ The campaign to rename the bridge received a great deal of media attention. Students Unite activist

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Olivia Crellin, "Selma bridge and the battle over its 'KKK name'," *BBC*, March 5, 2015.

²⁶ Chang.org, "Remove Selma's KKK Memorialization: Rename the Edmund Pettus Bridge," *Change.org*, Feb. 19, 2015.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Olivia Crellin, "Selma bridge and the battle over its 'KKK name'," *BBC*, March 5, 2015.

Brandi Hatter published an opinion piece in the Huffington Post, in which she called the Edmund Pettus Bridge 'a symbol of hatred, not heritage.'³⁰ She stated that 'the Confederate battle flag and monuments honoring KKK leaders are not symbols of heritage or history. They act as inspiration, even justification, for the spread of hate and unthinkable violence.'³¹

In addition to the national media coverage, the campaign attracted the attention of White supremacists, who resurfaced in March of 2015 with a message.³² March 7, 2015 marked the 50th anniversary of 'Bloody Sunday,' and civil rights activists and African American celebrities from across the United States flocked to Selma to commemorate the historic day.³³ Even President Barack Obama and his family were in attendance (Figure 2).³⁴ Due to Selma's place in the national spotlight that day, the Alabama chapter of the Ku Klux Klan used the moment as an opportunity to recruit more members.³⁵ Early in the morning of March 7, 2015, the Klan left nearly 4,000 recruitment flyers on the doorsteps of local Selma homes.³⁶ The flyers expounded on the supposed criminality of 'Blacks' and 'Hispanics,' as well as the 'lies said by the Jewish-controlled mainstream.'³⁷



Figure 2: 'Barack Obama at Edmund Pettus Bridge'
Image by Senator McCaskill via Flickr [CC BY-ND 2.0](#).

While the commemorative 'Bloody Sunday' festivities were proceeding elsewhere in Selma, Students Unite had planned to lead a different, smaller protest to Live Oak cemetery, where Edmund Pettus

³⁰ Brandi Hatter, "Symbols of Hatred, Not Heritage," *HuffPost*, Dec. 6, 2015.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Emily Hill, "KKK fliers left at Selma homes on 50th anniversary of 'Bloody Sunday'," *AL.com*, March 8, 2015.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Olivia Crellin, "Selma bridge and the battle over its 'KKK name'," *BBC*, March 5, 2015.

³⁵ Emily Hill, "KKK fliers left at Selma homes on 50th anniversary of 'Bloody Sunday'," *AL.com*, March 8, 2015.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

and Nathan Bedford Forrest, another Ku Klux Klan leader, are buried.³⁸ Although Students Unite promoted the protest as a non-violent event, the demonstration attracted neo-Confederates from across the South who wished to defend Pettus's gravesite.³⁹ Neo-Confederacy, which arose in the late 1900s, is a branch of White nationalism associated with Confederate symbols and the support of southern secession.⁴⁰ One of the neo-Confederate counter-protesters from Tennessee described his journey to Live Oak cemetery as a mission to '...man my barricades.'⁴¹ Ultimately, the Students Unite march to the cemetery was cancelled due to concerns about the neo-Confederate presence there.⁴²

Despite regional opposition to the renaming campaign, the cause was eventually championed several months later by Senator Hank Sanders (Democrat), a legislator in the Alabama State House.⁴³ In an opinion piece written for the prominent Alabama news website AL.com, Sanders reflected that the name of Edmund Pettus stood in stark contrast to the bridge's message of racial equality.⁴⁴ 'We cannot serve two masters with one symbol,' Sanders wrote, 'Symbols are powerful.'⁴⁵ As an alternative, Sanders advocated for the name of the bridge to be changed to 'Journey to Freedom Bridge.'⁴⁶ The idea was first articulated in Sanders's proposed resolution to the Alabama State Legislature on June 3, 2015, nearly four months after the initial petition that sparked the controversy was published online.⁴⁷ Although the resolution passed in the Alabama Senate, it was not introduced for a vote in the House of Representatives, essentially stifling any progress on the bridge's renaming.

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A Revival of the Campaign

The movement to change the name of the Edmund Pettus Bridge was halted for nearly five years until the deaths of two prominent and beloved civil rights leaders reignited the national push to rename it. C.T. Vivian and John Lewis, two African American civil rights activists who were influential in organising the Selma voting rights marches of 1965, both died on July 17, 2020.⁴⁹ C.T. Vivian brought the nation's attention to Selma in the 1960s when he publicly led nonviolent prayer services on the steps of the courthouse that did not allow African Americans to register to vote.⁵⁰ In his most famous confrontation with the authorities, Selma police chief Jim Clark blocked Vivian's path to the courthouse and punched him in the mouth in front of a bevy of photographers.⁵¹ Vivian was arrested

³⁸ Paul Lewis and Mae Ryan, "The Confederates still defending slavery in Selma," *Guardian*, March 10, 2015.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Southern Poverty Law Center, "Neo-Confederate," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed March 28, 2022.

⁴¹ Paul Lewis and Mae Ryan, "The Confederates still defending slavery in Selma," *Guardian*, March 10, 2015.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ AL.com, "Sen. Hank Sanders: Why the Edmund Pettus Bridge must be renamed," *AL.com*, June 6, 2015.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Hank Sanders, "RENAMING THE EDMUND PETTUS BRIDGE THE JOURNEY TO FREEDOM BRIDGE," *Alabama Legislature*, June 2, 2015.

⁴⁸ Brandi Hatter, "Symbols of Hatred, Not Heritage," *HuffPost*, Dec. 6, 2015.

⁴⁹ Collin Dwyer, "C.T. Vivian, Civil Rights Leader And Champion Of Nonviolent Action, Dies At 95," *National Public Radio*, July 17, 2020.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

that day and many other times over the course of his time as an activist.⁵² John Lewis was another giant among the 1960s civil rights activists. As a chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Lewis was at the forefront of countless protests and worked closely with Martin Luther King, Jr. and others in Selma.⁵³ Lewis also experienced a violent encounter with law enforcement at the widely-televised 'Bloody Sunday' protest, which quickly turned violent as Lewis and others were beaten unconscious by police officers.⁵⁴ After working as an activist for many years, Lewis then turned his sights to politics and successfully ran for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, where he served for three decades until his death.⁵⁵

The deaths of Vivian and Lewis gave new steam to the movement to rename the Edmund Pettus Bridge.⁵⁶ In June 2020, protests arose (Figure 3), and a new petition to rename the bridge was started by Michael Star Hopkins, founder of the John Lewis Bridge Project.⁵⁷ The sole purpose of the organisation is to rename the Edmund Pettus Bridge after John Lewis, and thus Hopkins's petition asks Alabama Governor Kay Ivey (Republican) to consider renaming the bridge in honour of Congressman John Lewis.⁵⁸ In the petition, Hopkins writes, 'It's far past time to rename the Edmund Pettus Bridge after Rep. John Lewis, a civil rights icon that nearly gave his life on that bridge.'⁵⁹ In the days following Lewis's death, the number of signatures leapt by nearly 250,000.⁶⁰ By July 22, 2020, five days after Lewis's death, the new petition had almost 500,000 signatures, over twice the number of supporters that the initial Students Unite petition received.⁶¹



Figure 3: '2020 Protesters at Edmund Pettus Bridge' Image by Carwil via Flickr [CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Allyson Waller, "Death of John Lewis Fuels Movement to Rename Edmund Pettus Bridge," *New York Times*, July 18, 2020.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Change.org, "Rename the Edmund Pettus Bridge after Rep John Lewis," *Change.org*, June 11, 2020.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Allyson Waller, "Death of John Lewis Fuels Movement to Rename Edmund Pettus Bridge," *New York Times*, July 18, 2020.

Due to these John Lewis Bridge Project efforts, Representative Prince Chestnut (Democrat) introduced House Joint Resolution (HRJ) 100 to the Alabama Legislature. The resolution suggested naming a portion of the U.S. Highway 80 that goes from Selma to Montgomery and includes the Edmund Pettus Bridge 'The John R. Lewis Memorial 10 Highway.' On May 7, 2021, the resolution passed both the Senate and the House of Representatives.⁶² In reaction to the resolution passing, the John Lewis Bridge Project founder thanked the Alabama Legislature and stated, 'Today, the Alabama Legislature, led by Representative Chestnut (D), took one step closer to ensuring the legacy of John Lewis will live on for generations.'⁶³ However, after the Legislature passed the resolution, an amendment was requested and denied, leading the resolution to stall. The resolution has not been re-visited since, and its official status is 'Lost in House of Origin.'⁶⁴ This means the petition will not move forward with legal approval, leaving the Edmund Pettus Bridge with its original name.⁶⁵

Decision-Making Processes

Regarding the first petition in 2015, locally-based activists created the initial petition to rename the bridge, and a state lawmaker attempted to address their concerns via the legislative process. The final decision laid in the hands of Alabama state legislators, and it appears that the campaign was stifled after the renaming resolution faltered in the House of Representatives. It is unclear how or if the efforts of White supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan played a significant role in changing public opinion or contributing to the failure of the renaming resolution. It is possible that the resolution's failure in the House of Representatives was due partly to constituents' opinions about the bridge, which were not unanimously in favour of renaming.⁶⁶

Five years later, in 2020 and 2021, the main actors in the contestation differed. Still, the parameters remained the same: a nonprofit launched an online petition to ask state officials to rename the bridge. In 2021, Representative Prince Chestnut (D) sponsored HRJ 100 with the Alabama Legislature, proposing renaming the portion of U.S. Highway 80 that stretches from Selma to Montgomery, including the Edmund Pettus Bridge, to 'The John R. Lewis Memorial 10 Highway.'⁶⁷ While the Alabama Legislature passed the resolution on May 7, 2021, the resolution was eventually stalled and 'Lost in the House of Origin' after an amendment was requested and denied.⁶⁸ While the Alabama government took steps towards removing the name of Edmund Pettus and replacing it with the name of a Civil Rights movement leader, the efforts did not lead to fruition. Decision-making dynamics of note, in this case, study include how local activists drive change and how the legislative process can be both determinative and a barrier to activists' proposed change.

⁶² Fox 5 Atlanta Digital Team, "Alabama Legislature passes effort to rename bridge after late Rep. John Lewis," *Fox 5 Atlanta*, May 7, 2021.

⁶³ Fox 5 Atlanta Digital Team, "Alabama Legislature passes effort to rename bridge after late Rep. John Lewis," *Fox 5 Atlanta*, May 7, 2021.

⁶⁴ Alabama Legislature, "Resolution Status for HJR100 (Regular Session 2021)," *Alabama Legislature*, Accessed February 3, 2022.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Olivia Crellin, "Selma bridge and the battle over its 'KKK name'," *BBC*, March 5, 2015.

⁶⁷ WSFA 12 News Staff, "Portion of Highway 80 to be named after John R. Lewis," *WSFA 12 News*, May 7, 2021.

⁶⁸ Alabama Legislature, "Resolution Status for HJR100 (Regular Session 2021)," *Alabama Legislature*, Accessed February 3, 2022.

Summary and Conclusions

In 2015, a group of young people in Selma sparked a public controversy as they demanded that a national civil rights landmark, the Edmund Pettus Bridge, no longer be named after a White supremacist. Although the petition received nearly 200,000 signatures, that support did not prevent the campaign from encountering obstacles.⁶⁹ Thwarted first by a White supremacist protest and later by the Alabama House of Representatives, the 2015 Students Unite campaign to rename the Edmund Pettus Bridge ended unsuccessfully.⁷⁰ The push stalled for five years until the deaths of John Lewis and C.T. Vivian, two famous civil rights-era activists, brought national attention to the Edmund Pettus Bridge once more.⁷¹ In 2020, a new petition was launched by the John Lewis Bridge Project, a 501(c)(4) pushing for the Edmund Pettus Bridge to be renamed to memorialise John Lewis. The petition gained far more momentum than the initial petition ever did and inspired the Alabama Legislature to pass a resolution to rename the portion of U.S. Highway 80 that includes the Edmund Pettus Bridge after John Lewis.⁷² However, despite this accomplishment, the resolution subsequently stalled, and the Edmund Pettus Bridge remains with its original name.⁷³

Research contributed by Jade Woods, Catalina Gaete, and Alexandra Crew.

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⁶⁹ Change.org, "Remove Selma's KKK Memorialization: Rename the Edmund Pettus Bridge," *Change.org*, Feb. 19, 2015.

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

Contact information

Paula O'Donohoe
Program Director

contestedhistories@euroclio.eu
www.contestedhistories.org

EuroClio Secretariat
Bankplein 2
2585EV The Hague,
The Netherlands
secretariat@euroclio.eu
www.euroclio.eu

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