

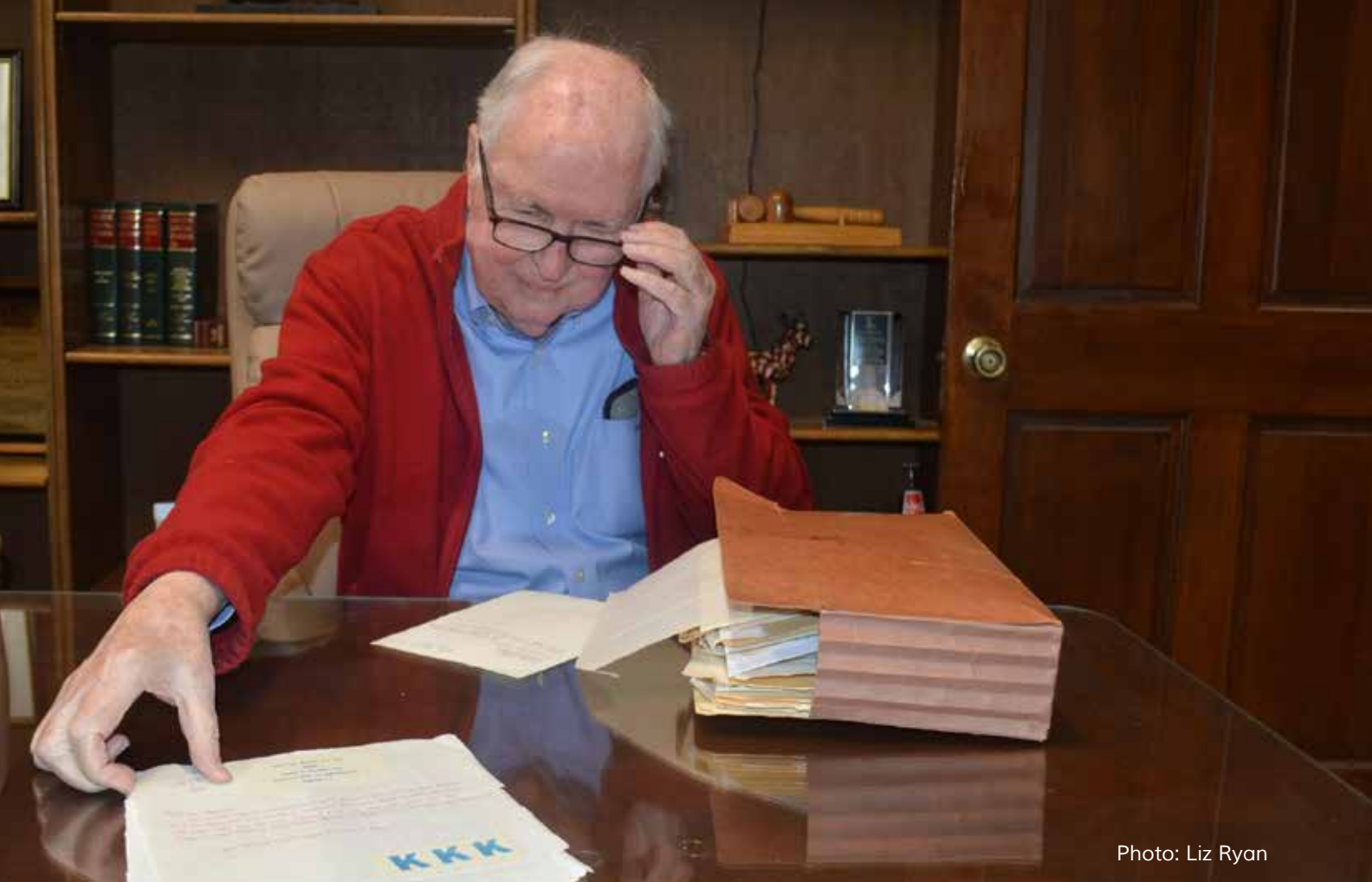


Photo: Liz Ryan

Bill Baxley | 2026 Alabama Humanities Fellow

LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL

By Anil A. Mujumdar

Crafting a tribute to William Joseph “Bill” Baxley II — including his tenure as Alabama attorney general and his voluminous professional achievements over sixty-six years of law practice — in this compressed space feels almost Sisyphean. But despite its comparable difficulty, unlike pushing a boulder up a hill, my task is a meaningful, and happy, one.

That’s because Bill Baxley’s life has much to commend. We’ll start with some of the better-known facts. Yes, he is proud of his Houston County roots and served his home county as its district attorney in his mid-twenties.

He won his party’s nomination for attorney general at age twenty-eight, and he was the youngest person in American history to serve as a state’s attorney general at the time of his election. He later represented Alabama as its lieutenant governor and became a member of the highly selective International Academy of Trial Lawyers.

Baxley is also a veteran. He proudly served his country on active duty in the Air Force, Air National Guard, and then as a commissioned officer in the Judge Advocate General (JAG) Corps in the Army National Guard; he retired as a colonel after more than 30 years of service.

Of course, Baxley's most notable contribution in Alabama is surely his successful prosecution of Robert "Dynamite Bob" Chambliss for Chambliss' role in the murder of four children (Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Morris Wesley) attending a worship service at the 16th Baptist Church in Birmingham on the morning of September 15, 1963. The case fundamentally changed things in Alabama, as Chambliss was the first Alabamian associated with the Ku Klux Klan to be prosecuted by the state, and convicted, for the murder of black Alabamians. Also of great consequence, Baxley was the first attorney general to hire black lawyers to serve in the state's Office of the Attorney General, including the likes of judges Myron H. Thompson, Vanzetta Penn McPherson, and Charles Price.

Beyond the *whats* that demonstrate Mr. Baxley's impact on our state, it's also well worth exploring *who* Bill Baxley is. If you've ever encountered Bill Baxley at one of the innumerable events for which he is the keynote speaker, you could easily mistake him for an attendee rather than the guest of honor. At 85, Baxley still travels extensively to speak to audiences both large and small about a range of topics: the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing, trial skills, civil rights history, wrongful convictions, and civic leadership (among other areas).

Before an event starts, you are more likely to find him offstage — mingling among the people, greeting old friends, and making new ones — rather than onstage with other luminaries. He travels sans entourage and is somehow always on time but never in a hurry, sincerely engaging with anyone who wants to talk as he enters a room. His memory is as long as it is sharp. In small, private settings, whether he is mentoring young lawyers or encouraging civic engagement and public service, he is just as absorbing. It doesn't matter if he's on stage in a large auditorium addressing thousands of spectators or sitting at a small table visiting with one or two or people, he is the exactly the same — that is, himself, always interested in learning about other topics and other people.

Bill Baxley epitomizes what a career invested in civics and jurisprudence looks like. When asked about the first thing he did after taking office as Alabama's attorney general at age 29, he said:

"[T]he night before I got sworn in, they had issued us a certificate of election and a badge and other credentials, including...a little card that had all the major cities in Alabama...and it had a phone number for each city.

"I knew that I would be using that little card very

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frequently. So, I sat down and, in each corner of that little card, I wrote one of those little girls' names that had been killed in the church bombing back in '63. And that was one of the things I was determined I was going to try to solve. And so I wanted to be reminded every time I used that card that I wanted to try to, if I could, solve and prosecute the people that were responsible for killing those little girls.”

This act is a manifestation of an idea birthed with Cicero and advanced through the Renaissance, one of moral duty, a pillar of *studia humanitatis*. Simply put, it's having the courage to do the right thing because it's the right thing to do.

Today, we continue to benefit from Bill Baxley's living legacy of service to others. And, whether we acknowledge it or not, we all owe a debt to him — as Americans and as Alabamians — for infusing true meaning, from aspirational to realized, into our shared pledge of “liberty and justice for all.”

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