

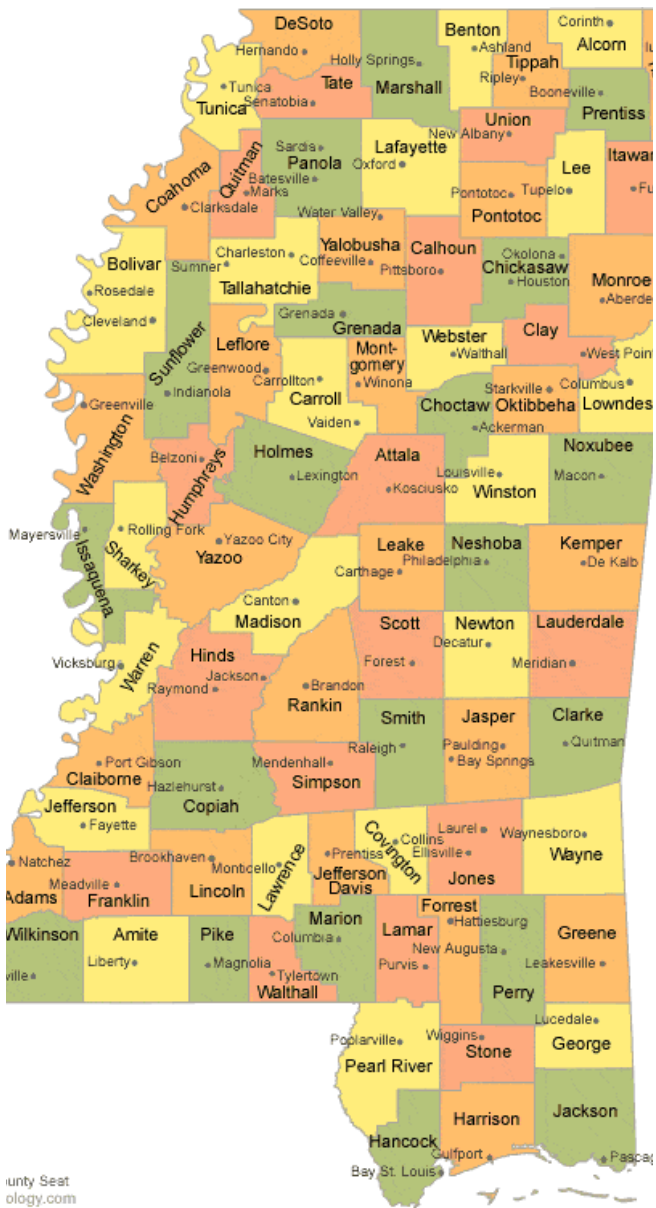
**STANDING FIRM  
IN THE DIXIE: THE  
FREEDOM STRUGGLE IN  
LAUREL, MISSISSIPPI**

**DERRION ARRINGTON**

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# Contents

Introduction: A Small-Town Struggle	1
Chapter 1: The City Beautiful	9
Chapter 2: Progressive No More	27
Chapter 3: Mobilizing the Youth	44
Chapter 4: Hotter Than the Devil	57
Chapter 5: A Constant Fight for Liberty	75
Chapter 6: One Who Sheds Blood	91
Chapter 7: Going Back to the County	113
Chapter 8: Bread with Butter	133
Chapter 9: Saving a Staple, Ridding a Problem	149
Chapter 10: Never Being Content	171
Chapter 11: The System	186
Epilogue	199
Acknowledgments	206
Abbreviations	208
Notes	210

Standing Firm in the  
Dixie

# Introduction

## A SMALL-TOWN STRUGGLE

But martyrs and fugitives from injustice are not Mississippi's only heroes. There are others who, undaunted by vile harassments, threats of intimidation and even physical assaults, including shotgun blasts, have remained in the state to carry on the Fight for Freedom.  
— Crisis Magazine, March 1966

On February 11, 1962, Benjamin Murph, James Brown, and Glen Thomas visited Heidelberg, Mississippi, to deliver speeches at Shady Grove Baptist Church at the behest of Reverend L. D. Duckworth. Murph entered the church through the twin entrance flanked by four brick columns, taking a seat at the forefront of the closely arranged room beneath the oscillating ceiling fans. The air was filled with gentle music from the organ played by choir director Rosa L. Thames, following a performance by the Junior Choir. As this unfolded, Reverend Duckworth stepped to the lectern, guiding the congregation to read from the Book of Nehemiah. He recounted the tale of Nehemiah restoring the walls of ancient Jerusalem, symbolizing the restoration of belief, honor, and improved behavior among the people post-exile. He urged his congregation to emulate Nehemiah to advance their community. In his turn, Murph approached the pulpit, emphasizing the duty of each individual to take part in voting, professing, “We want bread to go along with ballots. As long as we believe that we are not getting all the rights we’re guaranteed under the Constitution, we will continue to demonstrate, even if it takes 15 or 50 [years].”<sup>1</sup>

Murph’s words echoed the need for rights that should have been

available to African Americans since emancipation nearly a hundred years prior. Symbolically, the “bread” indicated a shift for African Americans towards active political participation and a hardworking legislature. African Americans had yearned to vote for so long, but racial disparities shifted the narrative of their struggle for civil rights, leading to frustration with accepting only partial victories, or “half-loafs.” However, this struggle was one that extended well beyond the 1960s. In the 2005 *Journal of American History* article “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” authors discussed an earlier idea introduced by Dowd in a 2001 *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece. This concept, known as the long civil rights movement, has garnered significant interest from researchers focusing on civil rights since 2005.<sup>2</sup>

By 1965, the twin objectives of the civil rights movement—ending segregation and securing voting rights—had been achieved. Historian Adam Fairclough notes that the story often told focuses on the journey from Montgomery to Selma and is sometimes extended to encompass the events from Montgomery to Memphis, charting Dr. Martin Luther King’s life from 1965 until his death in 1968. However, this timeframe has faced criticism in recent times. Starting with community-centric studies in the late 1970s and 1980s, these investigations brought to light several key points. These movements largely relied on local resources and organizations, not just on the presence of national figures or groups. This evidence supports the view that the civil rights movement was a more grassroots effort, emerging from the bottom up instead of being driven by notable leaders and the federal government. In 1986, Historian Clayborne Carson highlighted this perspective, suggesting that the ‘civil rights movement’ term should be expanded to include the broader ‘black freedom struggle,’ which shows a consistent pattern of protest rather than discontinuity.<sup>3</sup>

Establishing a civil rights and labor foundation in Jones County, Laurel, Mississippi, is the focus of this book. *Standing Firm in the Dixie: The Freedom Struggle in Laurel, Mississippi*, explores the struggle between America’s broad democratic ideals and persistent racial struggles, including conflicts over segregation, civil rights, and gentrification. This book contributes to broader scholarly debates

over the relationship between organized labor and the Black Freedom Struggle, as well. By examining Laurel's rich labor militancy and Civil Rights history, this book considers how these intertwined struggles shaped a southern state's political and social landscape notorious for its opposition to African American enfranchisement. The African American Freedom Struggle unfolds more breadth and depth than the standard narrative. The movement varied tremendously at the grassroots level and faced differences in activists' class and regional backgrounds.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the 20th century, community-based civil rights activism consistently experienced many roadblocks amidst their pursuit of freedom. Often orchestrated from the increase of mass white resistance from local government officials and the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK)—which, in some cases, the two were indistinguishable. African American Laurelites swelled the ranks of the Labor and Civil Rights Movement, playing key roles both behind the scenes and in public demonstrations. At the core of these demonstrations was the belief that human rights included the desegregation of public space and the right to improve one's economic conditions. This principle survived the onslaught of the early cold war years and persisted during even the darkest days of Jim Crow Mississippi.<sup>5</sup>

*Standing* introduces new names to the long list of activists in the Magnolia State such as Dr. Benjamin Murph, Susie B. Ruffin, and Eberta Spinks. It complicates black leadership with ground level descriptions of the daily task of organizing, managing and decision-making that exposed rivalries, disagreements, and compromises and coalitions. This local story reveals the layered—and sometimes fraught—relationships between and within civil rights organizations from the national to the local levels and adds those tangled threads to relations with government officials—from federal to local—and those dedicated to thwarting the progress of black civil and human rights.<sup>6</sup>

This book also works as a case study on race. Laurel had a majority white populace and labor workforce throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Contrastingly, many histories of the Mississippi Delta tell a narrative from the view of a black majority. African Americans in Laurel benefited from the wages given to them during the early 20th



century. Still, Laurel's history holds much exceptionalism and historical imagination. Laurel did build a significant economic foundation without the institution of slavery, but the progressive narrative is only moderately true. African American mettle in a white-dominated city, often depicted as one with fear and trepidation, lacks nuance, and climatic acts of white violence partly conceal the resistance they showed.

Grasping the complexities of racial dynamics within the workforce can be put into simpler terms. After his visit to the Soviet Union in 1926 and declaring himself a Bolshevik, W. E. B. Du Bois immersed himself in Marx's theories, even teaching about Marx at Atlanta University in the 1930s. In his important 1935 work, "Black Reconstruction in America," Du Bois explained that the U.S. labor scene has two opposing forces: one pushing for equal rights for African Americans, and the other looking to improve conditions for white workers alone by, for instance, reducing job competition. In his earlier writings, Du Bois identified a complex conundrum within the modern economy, a product of capitalism's disordered nature, which muddies the true nature of class conflict. According to him, the real divide was not simply between employees and management, but also sharply between Black and white laborers. Essentially, workers do not face each other simply as isolated individuals or a unified working class ready to challenge their bosses, but rather as distinct racial groups with intersecting economic interests and societal identities.<sup>7</sup>

Standing Firm in the Dixie contains eleven chapters. Chapter 1: This section of the book looks back on how Laurel, Mississippi, came to be in 1882. Founded by John Kamper, a lumberman from Germany, he set up a mill in the heart of a forest rich with yellow pine, which was an important step in building the New Orleans and Northeastern Railroad. After running the mill for six years, Kamper sold it to the Eastman and Gardiners, a family from Clinton, Iowa. They gave Kamper's mill a new name, The Eastman Gardiner Company. Their arrival marked a transformation for Laurel, taking it from a small village to a bustling sawmill community. The family's progressive ways were a welcome change, promoting unity across racial lines and shaping Laurel into a modern Southern town. While they did follow the segregation rules of the time, the Eastmans and Gardiners also introduced plans to uplift

Laurel's African American residents. However, when the Great Depression hit, the open-minded spirit of Laurel faded, as unemployed white residents grew angry about Black individuals having jobs. Tension escalated to the point where, by 1934, many Black residents felt compelled to move to places like Chicago and Pennsylvania. Despite some Black families leaving, new ones from other regions moved to Laurel and started their businesses within the already thriving Black neighborhood. But during World War II, Mississippi was a hotbed for violence against Black people, leading the nation in lynchings. State leaders like Governor James Vardaman and Senator Theodore Bilbo saw such acts as acceptable. The lynching of J.B. Grant and Howard Wash in Laurel signaled a strong stance against the rights of Black people and marked a definite push against their right to vote.

Chapter 2: In 1945, Laurel was shaken by a profound injustice when Willie McGee, a delivery man, faced allegations of raping Willette Hawkins, a white woman. McGee was swiftly convicted and given the death penalty, triggering widespread outrage and protests that included local citizens, international observers, and even the Communist Party. The controversy surrounding McGee's trial turned it into a widely discussed issue, prompting the formation of the Laurel-Jones County branch of the NAACP and marking the rise of Dr. Benjamin E. Mumph. As the 1950s and 60s unfolded, Laurel's African American community actively engaged in protests and boycotts, aligning with the broader Civil Rights Movement's surge. Groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) came to support Laurel's local efforts. The black youth focused on breaking down segregation barriers in the town during this period of vigorous student-led activism. This era also witnessed the emergence of Sam Bowers and the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, adding to the town's complex civil rights history.

Chapter 3: In the latter part of 1963, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) along with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) made plans to bring in several hundred college students, mostly white, from the North to assist in Mississippi for the summer. This initiative was part of the Freedom Summer Project. Over 60,000 Black citizens from Mississippi bravely joined local gatherings, picked

out candidates, and took part in a separate Freedom Election that occurred at the same time as the usual 1964 national elections. A number of African American households, including those of Eberta Spinks, Susie Ruffin, and Carrie Clayton in Laurel, Mississippi, opened their doors to these visiting volunteers. Spinks' home, in particular, became a hub, known as the Laurel Freedom House, and served as a base for efforts to get more voters registered. It also provided temporary housing for student leaders such as Lester McKinnie, Jesse Harris, David Goodyear, and Gwendolyn Robinson. Robinson stepped up to lead the Summer Project when McKinnie was forced out of Jones County. Throughout this intense summer, locals in Laurel faced arrests, violence, and harassment for joining sit-ins, marches, and drives to register more voters. By 1965, the hostility escalated with the Ku Klux Klan and police becoming more violent, shooting into homes like that of Benjamin Murph, attacking and shooting the northern volunteers, and setting fire to churches.

Chapter 4: In the hot summer of 1967, the Ku Klux Klan started to spread their influence in the workplace. They disrupted a strike at Masonite, the largest employer in town, turning it into a fierce conflict that made black workers feel unsafe. The Klan members terrorized them by firing into their houses, assaulting plant managers, and even murdering a plant security officer. As a result of the chaos created by the Klan, Bob Zellner, a one-time white secretary for the SNCC and labor organizer, arrived in Laurel with his group GROW. Alongside Susie Ruffin, they supported the black replacement workers. Meanwhile, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), with Ruffin's leadership in Laurel, expanded its voter base. She worked as a columnist and organizer for the party. While the local movement's activity dwindled, some residents started embracing the Black Power Movement.

Chapter 5: Historians of integration in Mississippi have often studied cities, but rarely small towns. However, rural counties such as Jones County faced just as much resistance to integration. During Mississippi's forced integration era, there were four Jones County high schools: R. H. Watkins High School, Northeast Jones High School, South Jones High School, and West Jones High School. Although these schools were forced to fully integrate at the turn of the

1970s, white school administrators, teachers, and students were not forced to treat African American students and teachers as equals. Benjamin Murph became president of the Biracial Committee that was formed to establish a means of interracial communications. By 1972, Murph died after battling a sickness for the last five years, and Ruffin became the president of the NAACP and community leader for the integration projects. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, white high school students remained in a cultural vacuum surrounded by their white peers, which impressed upon them notions of racial superiority over their black counterparts in the public high schools. Ruffin's continuous activity at City Council meetings left whites jaded. Her disputes of Laurel's progress in race relations reached the Wall Street Journal. Chapter 6: In the last two decades, Laurel has gained some key moderate influences. Near the end of the 70s, Arwilla Davison made major contributions to the African American community by saving money to build a small nursing home for elderly black residents. Her status soared when she teamed up with President Jimmy Carter. Together with Susie Ruffin and Manuel Jones, Laurel worked hard to strengthen the African American neighborhood. But when Ruffin passed away in 1989, it left Manuel Jones to lead the local branch of the NAACP. The NAACP organized a month-long boycott against shops in Laurel, claiming they were racially biased. This sparked a campaign to merge schools and a big march to city hall. This was also the beginning of the 1980s where Laurel gain black councilpersons.

Chapter 7: In 1989, Governor Ray Mabus rejected funding for one of the country's two remaining charity hospitals. However, those backing the old system, which had been around for 73 years, did not give up. Omeria Scott, chairperson of the Committee for the Continued Funding and Operation of the Charity Hospital, led these efforts. Over 30 days, protests were held in Vicksburg, Meridian, and Laurel, including one at the state's Capitol. Despite these actions, the governor stood by his decision, leading to the hospital's closure. Chapter 8: Three years on, Scott won a seat in the Mississippi House of Representatives, representing the 80th District. In the 1990s, still pushing for equality, Scott, along with Manuel Jones, tackled racial discrimination in Laurel. They campaigned against segregated water fountains at the

county courthouse, fought against job discrimination, and challenged the labeling of African Americans as “black.”

Chapter 9: By the 1990s, Laurel’s downtown was mostly abandoned, with businesses shuttered and buildings crumbling. In the last decade, a grassroots movement began. The Klan was also convicted of past murders of civil rights advocates. Chapter 10: In 2005, Melvin Mack won in an upset victory versus 12-year incumbent Susan Vincent to become Laurel’s first black mayor. His first ten months was dedicated to the beautification of the Laurel and cracking down on crime. Chapter 11: By 2013, Mack retired after 30 years as a public servant and the eight years as mayor.

Three years later, Erin and Ben Napier launched a HGTV show called, “Home Town” where they created historical-inspired designs for furniture, home goods and wedding stationery. By the time they completed the first season of their HGTV show, the couple had the highest rated pilot in the network’s history. Meanwhile, there were extensive talks in removing the Mississippi state flag. In 2020, Mayor Johnny Magee signed an executive order to remove the Mississippi State Flag from government owned buildings.

Benjamin Murph once stated, “The laws of Mississippi are liquid when applied to white people, [but] when applied to Negroes, they are frozen like ice.” Those words applied to the average black “citizen” throughout the Post Reconstruction era. *Standing* shows resistance from a small town in the name of freedom. Recognizing the story of race in American explains why the notion of freedom is especially significant for African Americans. Looking at the history of Black resistance and expression of agency is crucial. By focusing on the pursuit for freedom in the study of Black history and experiences, it shifts our attention to what Black Americans are striving towards. What constitutes freedom? It means individuals and communities receiving respect, acting with dignity, and having a quality of life that all humans deserve.



# 1

## THE CITY BEAUTIFUL

Paradoxically enough, our country spends millions annually in effort to build up Negro morale, both in and out of the army, yet, foolishly, destroys the blueprint of its program by tolerating brutal killings without even a pretense of a fair trial.

- Private Merle Monroe, November 1942

Education is not a thing apart from life—not a ‘system,’ nor a philosophy; it is direct teaching how to live and how to work.

– Booker T. Washington, 1901

On October 11, 1862, the Confederate Congress endorsed the Twenty Negro Law, excusing one white man per plantation with at least 20 slaves from joining the army. Jasper Collins from Moselle in Jones County was furious, declaring the law made the war a burden for the rich and a struggle for the poor. Originally, Jones County was lightly populated, with just 1,309 free individuals and 161 slaves noted in the 1830 census. The settlers there struggled to amass wealth, as they encountered dense forests of virgin pines, which thrive in sandy, acidic grounds where large-scale farming doesn't do well. Thus, big plantations didn't emerge in Jones County like in other parts of Mississippi. By 1860, the white population reached 2,916 alongside 407 slaves, representing only 12 percent—the lowest number and percentage within the state.<sup>8</sup>

Jasper Collins was one of the first from Jones County to stop fight-

ing and leave the Confederate army for good. Newt Knight, a farmer of meager means who was born near Leaf River in Jones County, took a similar path. By 1863, Knight had encouraged a large number of soldiers to desert, which added to the tense atmosphere in the area. This tension led to violent encounters involving ex-slaves, poor white people, army deserters, and Confederate forces. The large-scale desertions earned Jones County the label “The Free State of Jones.” However, Knight was more driven by class differences than racial issues. He managed to unite both African Americans and poor whites in opposition to the Confederacy, leveraging their shared struggles against class inequality. The Civil War disrupted traditional class structures, with Abraham Lincoln’s party aiming to restrict slavery in western territories and arguing that the South’s dependence on slaves robbed nonslaveholding whites of their freedom. Before the war, poor whites not only vied with slave labor but were also set against freed African Americans by the slaveholding elite.<sup>9</sup>

The concept of Redemption signified a critical juncture in the pursuit of maintaining white dominance by establishing a new racial balance. This system was intended to safeguard Mississippi’s financial, political, and social stakes in a post-slavery era. The state introduced segregation policies strategically, aiming to cause a rift between low-income whites and African Americans. Sociologist William Julius Wilson noted that redirecting the antipathy of poor whites towards African Americans lessened the chances of them being antagonistic towards the ruling class. In an effort to maintain white dominance, Black Codes were established to limit the rights of African Americans in areas of property ownership, business transactions, leasing, and free movement. A key aspect of these codes was the criminalization of unemployment, specifically for jobs not validated by whites. Lawmakers in Mississippi erected these prejudicial hindrances to assure the poorer white populace stayed feeling superior to African Americans. By doing so, it undermined any potential cross-racial political partnerships that could challenge the dominance of the white upper class. These laws essentially acted as another racial incentive.<sup>10</sup>

Mississippi’s progress relied heavily on the cheap labor of African Americans. The state was stuck in the difficult legacy left by the con-



flict. The plantation system in the Mississippi Delta began in the 19th century when white settlers looking for fertile land brought slaves to clear out the untamed forest and tame the Mississippi River with flood controls. When slavery ended, sharecropping trapped many African Americans in a different kind of bondage, as landowners and leaders benefited from accessible, inexpensive labor. This exploitation led to the Delta becoming a hub for cotton farming, a key part of the South's economy and workforce. Despite their own struggles, some poor whites would form groups to scare off black farmers who were their economic rivals. These former slaves lacked the means to buy land and often had to sharecrop to get by.<sup>11</sup>

Despite Mississippi remaining a largely rural state, its railroad infrastructure, which had been demolished during the Civil War, was reconstructed, leading to new investments. Towns expanded modestly and niche industries, such as lumber in the Piney Woods region, began to flourish. This southeastern area was monikered Piney Woods due to the proliferation of various pine species like longleaf, shortleaf, loblolly, and slash. Historically, Mississippi's regions might have been named for their soil types, but the tall pine forests, stretching from the Gulf Coast to Jackson and reaching west to near Natchez, came to define the locale economically.<sup>12</sup>

Laurel, the Jones County seat located in Mississippi's Piney Woods, earned the moniker "The Yellow Pine Capital of the World" due to its abundant timber reserves. Founded in 1882 by John Kamper, a German immigrant who fought for the Confederacy, Laurel was spared the adversity of slavery and Reconstruction. Although lynching escalated in the post-Civil War South, Laurel saw only one such

abducted and killed by a mob after murdering his wife and children. The white elite in Laurel, mainly lumber industrialists, had little incentive to allow extensive extrajudicial killings of African Americans, who made up a large segment of their workforce. Yet, across Mississippi, the end of slavery fundamentally transformed the economic standing of millions of freed African Americans, enabling them to compete with whites in various sectors, chiefly agriculture. However, this new status also increased their susceptibility to discrimination and



The commissary cars set up at the Eastman, Gardiner & Co. camp at Summerland in 1906 (Courtesy of the Johnny Adamo Collection)

racist violence.<sup>13</sup>

Laurel, unlike the Mississippi Delta, developed its economy via the timber trade, though they both relied heavily on the work of Black laborers. Between 1885 and 1890, African Americans seeking jobs came by train or from nearby rural areas. They set up in simple living quarters—called the “backyard” or “back alley” where workers lived among the residences of more affluent whites—close to Kamper’s mill, owned by the Kamper & Lewin Manufacturing Company. For six years, these laborers supplied wood for the New Orleans and Northeastern railroad until Kamper sold his shares to the Eastman and Gardiner families from Clinton, Iowa, on April 1, 1891. The Gardiners bought the mill and acres of land at a low price, which delighted Kamper, who ecstatically celebrated the sale of the mill he disdained. Historian Frank J. Sullivan recorded Kamper’s eagerness to trick a “Yankee” buyer, playing into a stereotype that Northerners were wealthy but foolish, a notion viewed as acceptable since the end of the Civil War. When the Eastman and Gardiners reached Laurel, they encountered the dawn of the U.S. Progressive era, a time when the country was shifting from a uniform rural landscape of farmers to a diverse, industrial nation thriving in urban areas.<sup>14</sup>

Encouraged by the beliefs of the Eastman and Gardiner families, it led to favorable reactions among some members of the African American community. Their 1892 textile mill embodied cutting-edge technologies, while Laurel provided a steady stream of workers and raw materials. Nevertheless, the budding industries in Laurel faced danger due to widespread turmoil in the country’s economy and society at the close of the century. After the Reconstruction era ended and Jim Crow



African American and white workers for the Eastman and Gardiner Company (Courtesy of the Lauren Rogers Museum)

laws took hold, African American rural workers throughout the South leaned into the Populist movement. In Mississippi, white supremacy led to conservative reforms that demanded black passivity. Against this backdrop, African Americans formed their own organizations to enhance black education and faith communities, critical to their upliftment in the 1890s. The importance of these independent institutions was underscored by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling in 1896, which endorsed “separate but equal” segregation, making the existence of such black establishments a noteworthy stride in their journey towards freedom.<sup>15</sup>

### **A Black Community**

Established by African American timber workers in 1892, the African Methodist Episcopal Church became a cornerstone for the locals, eventually adopting the name Allen Chapel in honor of the AME founder Richard Allen. It was the first of several churches to set roots, including St. Elmo Missionary Baptist Church in 1895, followed by St. Paul Methodist Church, Mallalieu United Methodist Church, and St. John Baptist. The allure of Protestant fundamentalism, with its focus

on biblical accuracy, uniformity in beliefs, missionary endeavors, and the pursuit to win over souls, captivated many leaders in the African American religious community. Among those was E.D. Hubbard, a skilled 35-year-old sawyer at the Eastman Gardiner mill, who was driven to establish Second Baptist Church in 1902.<sup>16</sup>

Upon his election as president of the Black Mississippi Baptist Mission, Hubbard took on the role of pastor at Second Baptist Church, a role that demanded all his attention and led to his departure from his job as the head sawyer at Eastman Gardiner mill in 1904. Hubbard devoted his time to traveling across Mississippi to establish and restructure churches, ensuring that the Baptist belief system was properly ingrained in the congregation members. Among African Americans, educators and clergy were viewed as the most learned and respected professionals. With respect and higher pay compared to agricultural or industrial workers, some pastors could earn between \$480 to \$600 annually and even have a house in certain cases. Meanwhile, lesser-known black ministers who typically served in small or rural churches with multiple congregations might make between \$75 to \$300 each year. Pastorship provided them with a sense of autonomy. These clergy were famously celebrated by W.E.B. Du Bois in "Of the Faith of the Fathers" from his influential book "The Souls of Black Folk." Here, Du Bois praised them as distinct individuals who fulfilled various community roles and vividly represented the emotions of an oppressed people.<sup>17</sup>

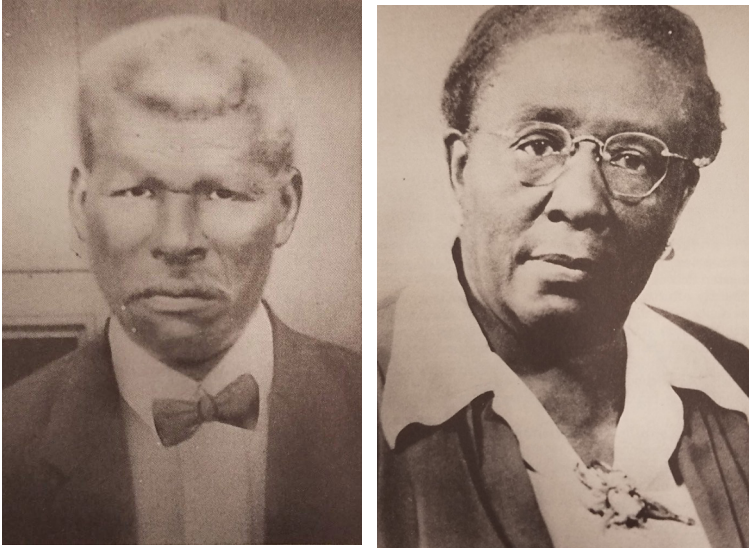
Through missionary support, there was a remarkable surge in education for African Americans in the South, as literacy rates jumped from 5% to roughly 70% between 1870 and 1900. As the 20th century began, animosity from whites towards African American education was surging in the Southern states. The 1903 election of James K. Vardaman as governor in Mississippi was a worrying sign for Booker T. Washington, educator and founder of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, indicating a widespread white rejection of all forms of black education in the region. Vardaman vigorously fought for white dominance, insisting education "only spoils a good field hand." He suggested that education increased craftiness among African Americans, instilled unrealistic expectations, an aversion to hard work, in-

dolence, and subsequent criminal behavior. Stripping away his convoluted arguments, Vardaman's core concern was that educated African Americans might weaken the established racial hierarchy.<sup>18</sup>

In his response to Vardaman, W.L. Pryor, in an article titled "On the Race Question," addressed the widespread racial discrimination fueled by the 1890 Constitution's voting restrictions. Pryor's editorial aimed to lessen the state-sanctioned racism by stating, "The Negroes are as far from participation in governmental affairs in this state as though they were a colony in Africa." This followed a period where African Americans, having faced violence and intimidation, had largely disappeared from politics in the South. Under Democratic control, Pryor's words possessed a safeguard that devalued progressivism in parallel. "Blacks seldom make good citizens, and though all the education obtainable were crowded into their heads, they are Negroes still."<sup>19</sup>

Under George W. Brown's guidance, a lumberman and educator, Laurel created four schools to educate Black youth from 1899 to 1906. The aim was to mirror the educational model of the renowned Tuskegee Institute. On March 15, 1905, influential Jones County merchants rallied a crowd at the St. Elmo Baptist Church in Laurel. Notable speakers such as Captain T.J. Hardy, B.F. Fridge, E.D. Hubbard, and the newly appointed principal, D.J. Randolph, spoke positively about the idea of an industrial school for African American students styled after Tuskegee. By 1906, Laurel had established the Southside School, with the educator Sandy T. Gavin from Alcorn University as its principal. Southside became the first educational facility built specifically for the education of Black children in Laurel.<sup>20</sup>

White supporters advocated for the creation of vocational schools as a way to enhance the craft for working-class African Americans. "This move on the part of these men should be encouraged. The industrial school, as everyone knows, teaches the negroes how to work. Unlike many others which simply give a veneer of education, unfitting them for any work except teaching makes better citizens out of them." Samuel Chapman Armstrong established an institute that promoted hard work and moral advancement through manual and ethical training. The surge in vocational work assigned in schools was deliberate,



Sandy T. Gavin and Nora Davis (Courtesy of Cleveland Payne, *Laurel: A Black Community, 1882- 1962*)

serving to uphold white dominance after slavery and to ensure African Americans would accept a lower social position. Booker T. Washington further developed this educational model, which found acceptance among Northern conservative circles and white Southerners during the 1890s. But Southern whites feared the Northern influence on African Americans' education. They also understood the inevitable social shift after African Americans' emancipation and encouraged "southern men to teach the Negro; whom we rely on after all as our laborers."<sup>21</sup>

Growth in white support for black industrial education was a sign of subtle social change. Richard Henry Watkins, a white professor born in Brookland, North Carolina, who was hired in 1907 by Silas Gardiner, took on the top administration role at Laurel Separate School District. His tenure saw the start of kindergartens and the development of teacher training with the University of Chicago, benefiting white education. White children received a public education in return for family tax dollars; funded through efforts by Nora Davis and Sandy Gavin.



Starting with 43 students, the school's increase to 1,100 students and 18 faculty members by 1920 heralded the introduction of a broader educational program that included secondary education courses.<sup>23</sup>

As African Americans gained access to better schooling facilities, they simultaneously lost governance over their children's education to the county superintendent, previously managed by their local board of trustees. This loss sparked doubts among many African Americans about surrendering one of their few autonomous establishments. Nonetheless, the development of Laurel motivated them to take part in the New South's progress. At the height of its economic boom in the early 20th century, Laurel was home to five of the largest lumber mills in the Southeast, thanks to companies like Eastman-Gardiner, Lindse Wagon, Gilchrist-Fordney, Wausau Southern Lumber, and Marathon, as well as the inception of Masonite Cooperation. This booming period between 1904 to 1915 placed Mississippi third in national lumber production, earning Laurel the nickname 'Liberal Laurel.' However, the allure of the North as a 'promised land' of equal status drew African Americans to migrate, escaping the Jim Crow South. By 1918, the *Chicago Defender*, a premier African American newspaper, became widely read in Mississippi. Even those who couldn't read in Laurel, especially older men, would purchase copies of the revered *Chicago Defender*.<sup>24</sup>

America held back from entering the fray of World War I until 1917, yet it started sending support to Europe as the war began. Laurels' own Lindsey Wagon Company was recognized for its contributions to trench building on the European frontlines. With immigration on hold, the labor market tightened at a crucial moment when armament and supply factories needed more hands. A wartime economic boost called for additional workers, prompting close to half a million African Americans to make their way to the north by the summer of 1919, with a notable group migrating from Laurel. With more American men sent off to battle, their factory positions went vacant, thus highlighting African American labor's contribution. In 1923, the Southern Pine Association underscored this workforce's value, recommending better homes, education, and wages to keep a consistent and happy labor force.<sup>25</sup>

African Americans in Laurel made nearly \$10 weekly from mill work, while sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta made about a fifth of that. Wages in Laurel rose from \$1.35 to \$1.65, peaking at \$2. However, southern economic growth hinged on exploiting workers. Lumber companies mainly hired black family men, who felt compelled to work due to family responsibilities and the challenges of segregation. These laborers, lacking alternatives, were forced into wage work to support their families. During 1923, lumbermen sought to balance work with family obligations by operating small-scale farms alongside their milling jobs in the forest. They owned modest plots where they cultivated crops. These workers resided in transient settlements, a consequence of the intensifying railroad-based logging industry. Constantly on the move due to Eastman and Gardiner's operational shifts to new lumber areas, the workforce experienced frequent relocations. This lifestyle meant lengthy stints deep in the forest away from families. A breakthrough occurred with the introduction of pre-made housing components by Eastman and Gardiner, providing workers with the means to quickly construct private homes along the railroads, a significant improvement over earlier boxcar housing.<sup>26</sup>

Eastman-Gardiner created Cohay camps to boost their profits while providing a stable place of employment for workers and their families. The camp hosted 137 white and 96 African American families. Taking its name from "Ohahay," the Native American word for a creek near Raleigh, Mississippi, the company arranged for the construction of small living spaces measuring 8x20 feet, featuring several windows, two doors, and a coating of fire engine red paint. These dwellings had a distinctive feature, a "four-inch Eastman Hole" in the floor center and the ceiling. On days when the camp moved, a steel cable threaded through these holes allowed a steam loader to lift and transfer the entire room to a new location on the rails. The pine lumber rooms, uniform in size and hue, were set up within the campgrounds. Families could rent each room for three to four dollars per month and align multiple units to resemble a larger house. Many added portable picket fences painted white to suggest stability to their homes. The most proactive amongst them also raised cows, chickens, pigs, and cultivated gardens.<sup>27</sup>



In the Cohay region of Laurel, a distinct pattern of residence emerged, with African Americans settling primarily beyond the railway tracks in an area colloquially deemed the ‘black side.’ The local community encompassed areas like KC Bottom, Kingston, Queensburg, Southside, Harvest Quarters, and Warren Quarters. Despite segregation forcing African Americans into less desirable areas, it also led to the creation of black business zones. These “Negro Main Streets” sprouted as African Americans started small service establishments in these districts. The local lumber industry also played a role, providing social contributions that enabled African Americans to develop a commercial district along Front Street in the heart of downtown Laurel. Between 1923 and 1926, a prominent entrepreneurial center emerged there. Jim Crow kept African American spending within this area, turning it into a flourishing economic center. Known as the Front Street Establishment, it spanned twenty-five blocks and became a vibrant center for African American entrepreneurs who opened various businesses including barbershops, taxi services, stores, cafes, hotels, and funeral parlors.<sup>28</sup>

African Americans gained control of their own educational institutions, but they still faced predominantly white-led academic environments. In 1927, the Julius Rosenwald Fund initiated the construction of vocational schools for African Americans in the south. The program stipulated that local communities must match Rosenwald donations with their own resources, including labor and materials, and secure additional funding from local school boards. Following the announcement, African American community leaders, including the determined Sandy Gavin, began fundraising efforts. They canvassed neighborhoods and even had mill workers give up a day’s wage to support the cause. Former Southside School attendee D.L. Taylor became a fervent supporter, coining catchy slogans like “Ray! Ray! Ray! Get out of the way! All we want is a day of your pay!” Over four years, various fundraising activities, including molasses candy-making events, selling penny socials, and held plays and concerts at Eagle Park. The effort culminated with African American students marching and chanting jubilantly for a brick school equal to those attended by their white counterparts.<sup>29</sup>

A combination of local government support and private donations successfully established a Vocational High School for African American children in 1927. The school began with a financial boost from a \$35,000 bond and the gift of nearly 240 acres for its campus. The Rosenwald Foundation appointed Bertha and Jonas Johnson, former students of Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee, to lead the project. They had already set up the Prentiss Institute in 1907 and planned for the new school's manual arts building, home economics building, and a large area for agricultural production with housing for staff. Henry Louis Polk took the initial step of starting classes in a residential building, until the Oak Park Vocational High School, part of the Laurel City Schools, opened on September 16, 1928. It welcomed 325 students and 10 instructors, making it the first municipally maintained agricultural and vocational school for black students.<sup>30</sup>

While African Americans saw such investments as fair and effective, they were mainly valued for their labor. In the 1920s, school systems placed students into different levels of educational tracks, with vocational training considered the lowest. This subjected African Americans to the damaging outcome of reduced expectations, another layer of discrimination. White reformers wanted to limit the educational opportunities and subjects Black students could learn at school. Many industrial philanthropists focused primarily on vocational education for low-skilled jobs as an alternative to the liberal education laced with literate goals and critical thought that were increasingly viewed as dangerous. The manipulation of African Americans' socio-economic and political lives by whites was crafted to enforce a societal agreement in the South that did not question established disparities in wealth and authority. The creation of Oak Park was significant, but it also showed that the problems with educational equality and the reluctance to provide scholarly training to Black students were part of Laurel's views on race and education.<sup>31</sup>

### **Lynching and War**

In August 1929, the U.S. experienced the worst economic downturn in the nation's history, thus halting further development of the new mill. When the stock market crashed, "the demand for construction

ceased, resulting in a slashing of the company's production schedule." On March 3, 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the self-styled "tree-grower," addressed the nation for the first time during one of his famous "Fireside Chats." Many believed that the language in Roosevelt's first inaugural address alluded to a mandate for sweeping reform. Subsequently, he began instituting his "New Deal," a series of economic programs intended to offer relief to the unemployed and recover the national economy. Clinging onto the bullish orator of the president, on June 6, the Southern Pine Association called a general industry-wide mass meeting of all southern pine manufacturers, explaining the provisions and ramifications of the pending legislation. Charles Green's, president of the Eastman Gardiner Company, guarded optimism was reflected in his remarks about the lumber industry's plight, noting that "our President is certainly making an effort to bring us back on our feet" and urged the lumbermen to "meet him half-way" and "the only way we can do it is to cooperate in this plan to the fullest extent, be broad-minded and overlook these difficulties and meet them as well as we possibly can."<sup>32</sup>

Historically, the majority of African American voters supported the Republican Party. However, President Franklin Roosevelt's election shifted their allegiance. Roosevelt welcomed African American guests to the White House and worked closely with black advisors. Many African Americans felt invigorated by Roosevelt's proactive approach to the Great Depression. His informal radio broadcasts gave them a new sense of inclusion. The National Industrial Recovery Act, introduced by Roosevelt on June 16, 1933, was a key element of his progressive New Deal. It granted workers the right to unionize and negotiate employment terms. While some employers feared this was a move towards Communism, workers saw its potential. On August 11, industrial action struck the Eastman Gardiner mill as employees demanded better pay and hours. Tough working conditions, inequality in wages, and deaths at work led African Americans to reconsider their worth and align labor rights with civil rights, leveraging the Labor Movement to fight for improved wages, conditions, and broader rights.<sup>33</sup>

Mass production, restrictive immigration policies, and the global

conflicts of World War I and II led to a great northern migration of African Americans in search of employment in America's burgeoning industries. In 1935, around 5,000 individuals left Laurel, for northern cities, one of them being Erie, Pennsylvania. Here, Reverend Ernest Franklin Smith, who founded the Good Samaritan AME Zion Church, served as a bridge for these migrants to set up homes. From his church, Smith encouraged Laurel citizens to relocate to Erie's thriving African American community. Notably, a significant segment of Erie's black population—about 1,000 out of 11,600—had roots in Laurel, with many retaining familial ties. This prevalence of former Laurel residents led one Erie local to comment, "I'm surrounded by so many Laurelites here; it's like a second home." Smith made trips between Erie and Mississippi to promote this movement at religious and informal gatherings, often discreetly due to the disapproval of Southern employers faced with losing their labor force.<sup>34</sup>

While African Americans were leaving the South in large numbers, Mississippi Governor Hugh White spoke at the Farm Chemurgic Conference in Jackson. He incorrectly commended Mississippi for avoiding lynchings over a fifteen-month span. Contradicting his claim, the *Chicago Defender* had chronicled a "football-crazed crowd," which held a "pre-Christmas celebration" for lynching of J.B. Grant, a 17-year-old African American from Laurel, just four months earlier. He was found hang by his own belt from a railroad trestle.<sup>35</sup>

A.J. Carter, Grant's employer at the local tourist camp, reported to the police that he left for a downtown picture show and did not come back. The first inquiry into the teenager's tragic end yielded no answers regarding who was responsible. Chief J.E. Brown and Sheriff Charles Thompson believed that the young man was likely killed by strangulation at a different location and then transported by a vehicle to make it seem like a suicide, asserting that he could not have done it himself. A coroner's jury gave a verdict of death by strangulation by unknown assailants. Sheriff Thompson in Laurel put up a reward for information leading to the arrest of those who committed the lynching, yet the motive was still undisclosed.<sup>36</sup>

The House passed a bill to prohibit lynching in 1937 following the execution-style punishment of Grant. A large group of Senators

agreed with the idea of a lynching ban, but some were able to halt progress through certain delaying tactics. Senator Bilbo fiercely opposed this bill, describing it in his written correspondence as “damnable, unthinkable, and unconstitutional.” The Grant lynching prompted a Laurel lawyer to write Senator Bilbo after speaking with several people about the hanging. The lawyer had found that “all thought we ought not to oppose the passage of the antilynching law.” He continues, “I believe a majority of our people are opposed to lynching.” On April 15, 1937, despite stiff opposition from the South, the House passed the Gavagan Antilynching Bill, allowing the federal government to step in and prosecute those involved in lynching, including any officials who fail to act. This marked the climax of a long fight led by the NAACP for such legislation.<sup>37</sup>

In the twenty years following the close of World War I, another three million African Americans moved throughout the United States. As the nation geared up for conflict, African American trade union leader A. Philip Randolph resisted the prevalent job bias in the sectors producing war materials. Alongside NAACP leader Walter White and additional civil rights advocates, Randolph set the stage for a March on Washington aimed at promoting equal job opportunities. To prevent the potential disruption of the war efforts, President Franklin D. Roosevelt discussed the matter with Randolph and White on June 18, 1941. Subsequently, on June 25, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, banning job discrimination on racial grounds in the defense industry. The executive order mandated equal employment opportunities for all, irrespective of race, religion, color, or national origin. Additionally, Roosevelt created the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) to handle complaints about discrimination, but the commission was limited to recommending changes rather than enforcing them, due to strong white supremacist attitudes.<sup>38</sup>

On December 7, 1941, the United States was thrust into World War II following an unexpected air strike by Japan on the Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawaii. Although the nation spoke of pursuing noble goals, the rhetoric of defending democracy contrasted sharply with the continued existence of discriminatory Jim Crow laws within the country. As African American communities rebuilt and relocated, they

found new ways to express their political opinions. They were particularly drawn to the wartime message that America was battling to protect democracy from Germany's explicit racism. Starting with D.L. Taylor, a significant number of Laurel's African American citizens joined the Armed Forces. Despite the challenges Black soldiers faced, many from Laurel responded to the nation's call to serve. The *Laurel-Leader Call* printed an article stating, "Thirty-five Negro soldiers receive a rousing sendoff... the Oak Park High School Band played military numbers."<sup>39</sup>

With the support of Laurel's African American residents and the local industrial plants, the Laurel Army Airfield was established in 1942, constructed by the Works Project Administration (WPA). It became a training hub for soldiers from all over the country and a key location for strategic bomber groups. Similarly, the nearby Camp Shelby not only offered extensive training opportunities but also held German prisoners of war. These events highlight societal interests, yet reveal stark racial injustices, as German prisoners often experienced better conditions than the base's black workforce and soldiers, enjoying leisure activities while the African Americans were restricted to low-level jobs and separate entrances.<sup>40</sup>

The Second World War significantly boosted the industrial sector of Laurel, opening up new markets and economic prospects, much like the town experienced during World War I. Laurel's industry received numerous military and civilian contracts, expanding the town's industrial base. In this period, the timber industry, which had made only slight improvements in the 1920s and 1930s, gained broader acceptance because the war showed the durability and adaptability of particleboard. Masonite Corporation's materials were vital for both overseas and home front operations. Owing to the military's high demand, regular production of hardboard came to a halt in favor of Masonite hardboard, which was used extensively in the construction of about 150,000 Quonset huts across European and Pacific war zones. The company also created many items specifically for military use, including dense material loads used in the Manhattan Project. While Masonite was central to Laurel's war effort, other industries also played key roles. For instance, the Green Lumber Company had up to 1,500

workers producing prefab military dwellings non-stop. Besides the considerable industrial labor force, numerous Laurel citizens served in various capacities, both domestically and overseas during the war.<sup>41</sup>

Like other communities across the country, African Americans saw the war as a chance to pursue better prospects. The federal government's control of the wartime economy provided African Americans with chances to combat long-standing labor market discrimination. The demand for workers in factories throughout the nation, driven by the military's needs, saw hundreds of thousands being recruited. Yet, when hired, Black workers were often given the most poorly paid roles. Still, African American residents of Laurel made modest strides in racial and military achievements while serving in the Pacific and European theaters. Upon their return, they aimed to reshape their economic and social standing.

The experiences of World War II and the subsequent Cold War made it clear to U.S. leaders that problems with civil rights within the country had significant worldwide consequences. The *Pittsburgh Courier* championed a dual victory for African Americans: defeat of fascism overseas and of racism within the nation. For Communists around the globe, the wrongdoing of racist violence by vigilantes became powerful propaganda. They used it to stir up tension within the U.S. and to tarnish the reputation of American justice in other countries. The brutal death of Howard Wash, a dairy farmer aged 42, by lynching in Laurel on October 17, 1942, became a turning point for the federal government's role in tackling such crimes. Convicted for murdering his boss, Clint Welborn, Wash was forcefully taken from his jail cell by an angry white mob, taken to a bridge, and lynched. The next day, the local sheriff, J Press Reddoch, was in a hurry to act. He was either honestly upset by his failure to stop the violent mob or felt the pressure because state police were around. He claimed he could identify most of the crowd that took Wash. Rather than wait for a grand jury, Reddoch wanted to arrest the mob members on murder charges right away. This was only the second attempt by the U.S. Government, since 1903, to bring lynching perpetrators to justice under the Constitution. Despite these efforts, the ones responsible were not convicted.<sup>42</sup>

In the 1940s, although lynchings became less common, the terror

against African Americans did not stop. They resisted Jim Crow laws, shifting public views forced Mississippi's die-hard segregationists to alter their methods. They couldn't use old tactics, so they covertly resorted to violent monitoring and law enforcement tactics cloaked in 'law and order' rhetoric. These strategies were part of larger U.S. shifts that set the stage for increased policing, the stigmatization of black people as criminals, and the rise of widespread imprisonment. In addition, the tense atmosphere of the Cold War era was not just a result of international espionage and military deployments, but also of domestic surveillance by the FBI and the actions of alarmist politicians and anxious Americans nationwide.



## 2

# PROGRESSIVE NO MORE

The NAACP is about as welcome as a rattlesnake in these circles. We have very little support from white citizens, and I would say about 90 percent of the Negroes in our state are skeptical.... Many of our people are afraid to be seen at a NAACP meeting. Yet we are willing to fight and fight uncompromisingly.

– Dr. Benjamin E. Murph, *Crisis Magazine*, 1952

Willie McGee, a barely literate trucker from Pachuta, Mississippi, sat quietly on the bus to Jones County Jail, having been arrested for sexual assault against Willette Hawkins on November 1, 1945. Fearing a repeat of a past miscarriage of justice, he was swiftly moved to Hinds County Jail. Despite a show of fairness to avoid overturning a predestined conviction, under the Fourteenth Amendment, the U.S. Supreme Court had mandated fair legal representation and impartial juries for defendants and dismissed forced confessions. However, McGee was kept isolated for a month while officers pressured him into confessing. A week before trial, County Attorney Albert Easterling, Postmaster Horace McRae, and Troy Hawkins confronted McGee, insisting he confess his guilt, using fear to press him into agreeing.<sup>43</sup>

On the afternoon of December 3, a visibly shaken McGee was escorted by armed guards, thought to be state militia members, into the Jones County Courthouse. A reporter on scene noted McGee's fearful appearance and unsteadiness. His defense argued that his mental state



Willie McGee in court, 1945 (Courtesy of the University of Southern Mississippi)

warranted evaluation and requested a sanity hearing. Judge F.B. Collins summoned twelve local men, though they were not mental health experts to assess McGee. They quickly concluded he was faking his condition and fit for trial. The proceedings ended swiftly on the same day, with a homogeneous jury finding him guilty and recommending death by electrocution after a mere three minutes of discussion.<sup>44</sup>

The McGee case underscored the stark racial divides of the time. The trial served as affirmation for Mississippi whites worried by African Americans' recent gains in status. To enforce domination, influential white supremacists revived punitive laws. McGee faced allegations of raping a white woman, rumored to be his secret lover, who purportedly threatened to make false accusations against him if he spurned her. The case of McGee illustrated the immediate fallout for defying the strict social codes upheld by Mississippi officials. Lacking substantial evidence, the jury hastily condemned McGee to the electric chair, with his execution scheduled for January 7, 1946. Yet, after the initial two trial outcomes were overturned by the Mississippi Supreme Court for procedural issues, and several years of appeals,

including to the U.S. Supreme Court, McGee faced a protracted legal battle.<sup>45</sup>

White supremacy reinforced its position using violence openly, with acts such as lynchings and unrest designed to maintain dominance over African Americans in all aspects of life. Although lynchings became less common post-1930, African Americans still faced intense scrutiny. The argument among scholars is that an improved court system succeeded lynching, increasing the odds of prompt, strict punishment for significant crimes, including executions sanctioned by the state. Willie McGee's impending execution sparked a fresh push for justice in Laurel, mirroring wider actions across the state. The McGee trial received widespread attention from across the country, yet local journalists sought to understate the racial strife to preserve Laurel's reputation for being open-minded. A 1946 article in the *Laurel Leader-Call* dismissed the persistent focus on racial issues in politics as overblown. Contrary to avoiding tension or critiquing the media's lack of sensitivity, it suggested that the community in Laurel actively participated in the unfolding events.<sup>46</sup>

Prewar Mississippi served as an interim for the NAACP. Mississippi hosted a meager 129 members, but by the late 1940s, the NAACP erected branches throughout the state. Throughout the 1940s, the NAACP saw enormous growth in membership, recording roughly 600,000 members by 1946. In David Beito and Linda Royster Beito's *Black Maverick*, they argue that the NAACP's association with the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL) spurred the growth of the Mississippi NAACP. While it mainly functioned as an organization that facilitated independent committees and sponsored public rallies, it also encouraged African Americans to take the risk of open participation in the NAACP.<sup>47</sup>

### **The NAACP in Laurel**

In 1947, Reverend R.T. Thomas of Morning Star Baptist Church established the NAACP's Laurel-Jones County Branch. Recognized for his civil rights contributions in Mobile, Alabama, Thomas stood up after African American WWII veteran Timothy Hood's murder for ripping down a Jim Crow sign. Firmly against segregation, Thomas's

powerful sermons stirred tensions, leading to C.L. Jordan, an irate white church leader, suing to bar him from preaching. Despite support from District Attorney Quitman Ross to oust Thomas for alleged racial hatred, Chancellor Roy Noble dismissed the suit, citing church matters as beyond his court's authority.<sup>48</sup>

An article from the *Jackson Advocate* highlighted that the Laurel-Jones County Branch had surpassed others in Mississippi, and Thomas was acclaimed for his public speaking and valiant leadership. His reputation led to roles emceeding many social functions. The winter of 1949 witnessed Thomas and NAACP executives welcoming the state wide NAACP conference at Laurel's Allen Chapel. The event buzzed with excitement. Forecasted as a grand affair, it drew a record attendance for the NAACP in Mississippi. Enthusiastic clapping greeted Areina Mallory, the Saints Industrial School president, as she commended the NAACP's critical role in advocating for Christian Democracy in America. The conference endorsed plans for expanding membership and setting up a state-specific legal fund to support civil rights cases against African Americans. The NAACP stood out as the preeminent organization ready to champion educational equity, suffrage, and black liberation. The energy and motivation spurred many to join the movement. Furthermore, Dr. Benjamin Ellery Murph, a local dentist, began his tenure as vice president of the Laurel-Jones County Branch in early 1948.<sup>49</sup>

Murph emerged as a key figure in shaping Laurel's Black political consciousness. Born on July 7, 1908, to Lillian B. Murph, an educator, and James W. Murph, a respected leader in AME church affairs, in Greensboro, North Carolina, Murph, from a young age, exhibited a sharp mind. He earned his bachelor's from what is now known as South Carolina State University and went on to get a medical degree from Meharry Medical College of Dentistry. While studying, he helped establish the Xi Psi Chapter of the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. Murph shared Rev. Thomas's conviction that the Southern states must put an end to racial bias and ensure legal fairness for African Americans.

A distinguished figure in civil rights, Murph, a dentist and entrepreneur, was a paragon in his community—always clad in sharp suits

and engaged in nurturing connections with both young and old. A man of deep faith, he held multiple roles at his church and led youth as a Cub Scout leader. In a notable act of service in 1943, he offered free dental care to fellow African Americans. His business, like others in the black community, operated independently and catered exclusively to African American customers, providing a space to contribute to societal change and offer robust support to the civil rights struggle.<sup>50</sup>

Murph often met Rev. Thomas at various church gatherings and revivals. Thomas was not just a preacher in Laurel; he also served in nearby Hattiesburg. The wrongful case against Willie McGee was the catalyst that prompted Murph to rebel against the establishment. With the McGee trial nearing its end in 1950, Thomas revealed his plans to leave for Mobile. The absence of active social guidance in Laurel was apparent, fueling the desire among citizens to push their cause further. On February 5, 1951, a distinguished group of professionals, entrepreneurs, and community activists assembled at Allen Chapel AME for an NAACP meeting. Percy Greene, who led the Jackson Advocate, delivered the keynote speech. Amidst frequent applause, which stretched the speech out, he lauded the significant work done toward complete citizenship rights. He applauded figures like Thurgood Marshall for their civil rights leadership, all linked to the NAACP, and urged Laurel residents to get involved. In the aftermath, the local NAACP chose its new branch president. It was tough to find someone as capable as Thomas, but Dr. Murph accepted the president's role for the Laurel-Jones County NAACP with honor.<sup>51</sup>

Murph's election came at a crucial time; his respected social position inspired African Americans in Laurel to engage more actively in civil rights efforts. On the day after his victory, Murph displayed an NAACP sign-up sheet on his clinic door. Leveraging his roles as a dentist and church leader, he often brought up the NAACP during dental visits and church socials to encourage attendance at monthly meetings. Mississippi experienced a modest rise in NAACP numbers, with an increase of 849 members—the lowest in the region yet marking a significant jump from the earlier count of 200 in the early 1950s.<sup>52</sup>



Dr. Benjamin Murph performing dental work (Courtesy of Sandra Davis Murph)

On May 7, 1951, the local movement that had been driven by deepseated racial tension saw its culmination. Prior to Willie McGee's execution, his legal battle had become emblematic of the racial injustices of the Jim Crow era and the tensions of the Cold War period, where a contentious back-and-forth put a man's life in jeopardy. McGee's case, which underwent three court hearings over six years, drew attention and support from notable figures like William Faulkner, Paul



Robeson, and Albert Einstein, and was followed by media outlets internationally. In his final hours, McGee found solace with Rev. T.W. Patterson, an African American pastor from Laurel, who shared the 23rd Psalms with him and offered prayers. McGee passed away without uttering a word, seated in an electric chair set up inside the courthouse, the same place where an exclusively white jury had taken only minutes to find him guilty. About fifty people watched inside, while some from the crowd outside climbed trees for a glimpse through the court windows. At 12:10 am, following his execution, he was declared dead. The mobile electric chair, part of a set that included a generator and other necessary items, was transported from one county to the next. Between 1940 and 1952, Mississippi used this chair to execute seventy-five inmates, disproportionately African Americans, leading to it being termed a “legal lynching.”<sup>53</sup>

The execution of McGee served as a stark reminder of the era’s framework of social hierarchy. Carroll Gartin, who held roles such as Mayor of Laurel and Lieutenant Governor, stood against Communism fervently during the McGee trial and openly criticized McGee’s communist supporters. Despite such views, Gartin maintained that children in Mississippi deserved a strong education, regardless of their race. The landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* shook the core of Southern customs by prohibiting school segregation. While some Southern moderates encouraged a measured and lawful acceptance of the ruling, a deep-seated reluctance to adopt integrated schools pervaded.<sup>54</sup>

In June, Martin threw his hat into the ring for the gubernatorial seat of Mississippi, facing off against the long-time officeholder, James Eastland, a plain-spoken Democrat fond of cigars. Both Martin and Eastland had a similar vision for keeping the South segregated. However, Martin unexpectedly adopted a starkly different tone than his typical gentle approach in his opening speech. The campaign began on the evening of June 15 amidst a festive environment in his hometown of Laurel. Entertainment at the event included local musicians like the Hurt Family and the Laurel Melody Boys.<sup>55</sup>

As the evening unfolded, Martin took the stage at 8 pm and promptly took jabs at Eastland’s senatorial track record. The audience

was taken aback and then thrilled when Martin endorsed the principles of white supremacy, especially praising the controversial Theodore G. Bilbo and slamming Eastland for abandoning Bilbo when he faced opposition in the Senate. Martin's commitment to keeping segregation intact was met with exuberant applause. Following his speech, a wave of supporters showed their affection with kisses and handshakes. A journalist from the *Laurel Leader-Call* was dumbfounded, observing, "He isn't that type of guy at all."<sup>56</sup>

Despite his passionate ploys, Gartin received a blow to his campaign for his stance on education. As a seasoned campaigner, Eastland used Gartin's position against him. The *Brown* decision helped Eastland in two ways. He could now convincingly argue that he was better positioned to protect white supremacy. Secondly, most Mississippians did not consider Gartin's message of moderation a virtue just a few months after *Brown*. He effectively painted Gartin as "soft on integration and a pawn for organized labor." His strategy swayed white segregationists and the election respectively.<sup>57</sup>

Moderate voices in the South sought to avoid conflict and protect their economic base. Unlike their segregationist counterparts, these moderates presented their views in a less overt fashion. Since its establishment, The *Laurel Leader-Call* newspaper endorsed moderate perspectives, declaring on June 18, 1954, that Mississippi would become a pacifying influence and solve its issues with unity and faith. Historian Anders Walker has presented the idea that these moderates cleverly navigated the legal system to dodge standoffs with the federal government, thereby indirectly keeping some aspects of racial division where direct opposition didn't work. They focused on economic exclusion to maintain racial order without resorting to violence. Their tactics brought up a significant issue: the potential to transform discriminatory laws into protective measures for civil rights. This middle position felt like a betrayal to segregationists and passive to civil rights advocates, who both saw neutrality as a lack of patriotism and commitment.<sup>58</sup>

After the landmark *Brown* verdict, Mississippi counties generally pulled back on school equalization projects, but the Jones County School District had not yet finished its efforts. By the end of 1954, the



district had restructured the schools for African American students into the Shady Oak and Roosevelt systems. According to Laurel's Mayor Gordon Berry, the three extra miles that African American students had to travel for schooling made it clear that they were not getting the same opportunities as white students. Due to a tight budget, the district was unable to build new, modern schools for students from eighth to twelfth grade, leading to serious overcrowding. The black schools received outdated textbooks and equipment passed down from white schools, revealing the spurious separate but equal education system as a mere silencing strategy against black criticism.<sup>59</sup>

Foreseeing challenges from southern states, the Supreme Court initially delayed prescriptive measures for its ruling. Postponing the merging of segregated schools after the *Brown* ruling was a calculated tactic, aimed at fostering wider approval in a community still rooted in segregation. It called upon attorneys from states with segregation to outline desegregation strategies. After additional court sessions, on May 31, 1955, the justices decreed that desegregation should advance in "all deliberate speed."<sup>60</sup>

### **The Emmett Till Generation**

In May 1955, in Jackson, Mississippi, the Mississippi State Conference Board of the NAACP held a sparsely attended meeting. The attendees included Vera Mae Pige, her daughter Mary Jane, John Frazier of Greenville, Amos Brown of Jackson, Benjamin Murph and his Freedom Choir. The session concluded with Pige and Murph being appointed as Youth advisors for Mississippi. Following this event, the NAACP's field secretary, Medgar Evers, began setting up Youth Councils throughout the state to bolster both adult-led chapters and youth participation in local activities. Evers believed that involving the youth was essential for success in the fight against segregationist Jim Crow laws. On August 31, 1955, the Youth Movement of the 1950s gained momentum after the discovery of 14-year-old Emmett Till's corpse in the Tallahatchie River, weighed down with a cotton gin fan tied to his neck with barbed wire. His mother, Mamie Till Bradley, made the choice for an open-casket funeral in Chicago that allowed

thousands to witness the brutalized remains of her son. Activist Joyce Ladner termed those galvanized by this event as “The Emmett Till-Generation.” Youth councils became very active in areas like Jackson, Meridian, McComb, Vicksburg, and Laurel. From 1956 to 1959, total NAACP membership in Mississippi nearly doubled, jumping from around 8,000 to 15,000 dues-paying members.<sup>61</sup>

On September 2, 1957, during a sultry afternoon, about 50 individuals met at Laurel’s St. Paul Methodist Church for that month’s NAACP meeting. The agenda was clear and targeted. After numerous unsuccessful attempts at integrating and the ongoing obstructive stance of white legislators, the traditional tactic of seeking justice in court was gradually replaced by more direct actions. These methods encompassed bus boycotts, sit-ins, and freedom rides, all banking on the power of collective action, nonviolent protest, and deliberate defiance of the law. This change was also a side effect of the local government’s efforts to outlaw and harass mainstream civil rights organizations across the Deep South.<sup>62</sup>

Martin Luther King, Jr., president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), drove those sentiments home during the forty-seventh annual NAACP convention in San Francisco on “The Montgomery Story” weeks after the federal district court in Alabama ruled in *Browder v. Gayle* that bus segregation was unconstitutional. Murph, who was in attendance, played a special recording of the speech for the attendees present at the meeting. King’s premise was apparent. “Wherever segregation exists, we must be willing to stand up in mass and courageously and non-violently protest against it. And I might say that I must admit that this means sacrifice and suffering.” Some African Americans were wary of willfully breaking the law, but others found it the only practical way to hold forceful demonstrations.<sup>63</sup>

During the 47th annual NAACP convention in San Francisco, Martin Luther King Jr., president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, delivered a stirring. This moment followed the Alabama court’s ruling against bus segregation in *Browder v. Gayle*. Murph, who attended the event, played a special audio re-



The Laurel Youth Council, 1957 (Courtesy of Sandra Davis Murph)



The Laurel NAACP Youth Council in choir robes (Courtesy of Sandra Davis Murph)

ording for those who were not present. King stressed the importance of confronting segregation with united, fearless, and nonviolent resistance, despite the potential for personal loss and pain. Although some African Americans were reluctant to flout the law, many others deemed it an effective means to conduct strong protests.

In September 1957, Murph established the Laurel Youth Council, which was inaugurated at an event at the Morning Star Baptist Church.



The NAACP Youth Council, 1959 (Courtesy of Sandra Davis Murph)

Robert Hearn, the Youth Council president, oversaw the ceremony with Albert Power of Jackson as the guest speaker. The Laurel Youth Council quickly rose to prominence as the most vibrant and sizable Youth Council in the state. By November, Murph formed the NAACP Freedom Choir, influencing Oak Park students' activity in local and church events that supported the mission of the NAACP. Members gained unique insights into the civil rights movement, partly due to the council's choir touring with Murph. They performed at various events, including for Catholic churches and at NAACP meeting nationwide, with Murph guiding the youth as a pioneer of their generation's activism.<sup>64</sup>

The Youth Council, largely made up of Oak Park students, faced accusations from some white community members of stirring racial tension. African American, confronting the stark injustices of segregation, often turned to their religious convictions, finding solace and strength in singing to challenge racism. These songs dated back to 19th-century traditions of negro spirituals, which emboldened the community with aspirations of emancipation. Such customs played a crucial role in fostering a culture of resilient opposition through black prophetic revivalism. At Oak Park, choir director Hattie V. J. McInnis was known for her rigorous and methodical training. She helped the choir to excel, particularly in state competitions from her appointment

in 1931. It was a requisite for Oak Park students involved in public music classes to learn and sing both the national and school anthems. As the choir students' participation with the NAACP was questioned, McInnis forced a decision: sing with Oak Park's choir or with the Youth Council Chorus. Committed to the cause, even with their respect for McInnis, Janet Murph, Alton Ray, Gilmer Robinson, and Donnie Watkins influenced their fellow students to return their robes and uphold their roles in the freedom struggle.<sup>65</sup>

In a correspondence to Roy Wilkins, Murph expressed his favor over the graduating youth. "We are waging a mighty battle for the ones of the Youth for the righteous cause of NAACP. We have won a major victory here by sheer courage. This battle has been lost in other places. We are looking to the future when these who have stuck by us so courageously will be leaving for college, and we will be able to feature others who will take the place of these." In an effort to expand their ranks, NAACP chapters across Mississippi launched membership drives that led to the opening of a new central office in Jackson. The Laurel-Jones County branch saw significant growth, achieving a roster of 332 by the close of 1957 and forming a youth wing with 85 members. This rapid expansion under Murph's guidance won recognition from Medgar Evers. "It is our hope that his excellent leadership and success with the youth will inspire the hearts of others so that in the ensuing year, we will see the dawn of a bright tomorrow as a result of the birth and growth of more Youth Councils in Mississippi."<sup>66</sup>

### **Reaction to Brown**

The notable growth of the NAACP and the *Brown* decision caught the eyes of influential local whites, prompting them to actively work to weaken the civil rights group's momentum. Established by the Mississippi government in 1956, the Sovereignty Commission's objectives were to safeguard Mississippi's independence and its allies from federal overreach, ensuring a positive representation of the state and its policies on racial division. To oversee the state's image, they employed detectives and local spies to watch and interfere with civil rights efforts throughout the state. This Commission kept detailed observation records on a large number of individuals suspected to be

part of civil rights groups.<sup>67</sup>

The Laurel Police Department (LPD) started to keep a close watch on the NAACP. Local sleuths including O.L. Neatherly from the Chamber of Commerce, D.P. Granberry, an oil businessman from Laurel, and even Zack J. Van Landingham, a former FBI agent, focused on following the activities of the Black community. Van Landingham investigated extensively in Laurel, conferring with Mississippi Representative John Neal and Deacon Meatherly, a Chamber of Commerce official, to understand the local dynamics of racial interactions. Meatherly highlighted Benjamin Murph as a prime instigator of racial activism. Murph, also a Cub Scout Master, was implicated by Meatherly in questionable financial dealings, such as using Boy Scouts fundraising as a front for channeling money to the NAACP.<sup>68</sup>

The Sovereignty Commission's probe into Laurel's civil rights activity intensified in March 1958 when Laurel Chief of Police Jeff Montgomery came into possession of Murph's briefcase, which contained copious NAACP correspondence, names, and addresses of all local members. Chief Montgomery anxiously gifted Murph's briefcase to members of the Citizens Council. "Dr. Murph's file, which is in this briefcase," said Investigator Van Landingham, "is being examined, and pertinent parts will be reviewed in the instant file." The uncovering of Murph's briefcase heightened the need for vigilant local monitoring. Upon discovering this fortuitous event, both Sheriff Lonnie Meador of Jones County and Lieutenant Governor Carroll Gartin became involved in the surveillance efforts. The local NAACP branches were forced to convene in secret, mostly gathering weekly at the First Allen Chapel AME Church. The fear of prior violence made members cautious in openly engaging in grassroots activities. Gladys Austin, an educator, refused to openly recruit for NAACP events, fearing job loss. Murph, understanding the members' concerns, maintained their anonymity and discreetly collected membership fees at night to appease the apprehensive members.<sup>69</sup>

The probe did not only focus on adults; fear tactics were used on the youth as well to force instant confessions of their NAACP connections. LPD saw it as their duty to hinder further steps toward integration once the Civil Rights Act of 1957 was enacted by Presi-



dent Dwight Eisenhower. On September 18, 1958, six Youth Council members were forcefully removed from classes and questioned by the LPD for four hours. The Mississippi NAACP stated this was the most extreme measure yet, equating the LPD actions with Nazi operations, and decried the abuse perpetrated against the youths. “We deplore and condemn these bigoted actions and also those responsible for the heinous crime against these young people.”<sup>70</sup>

On April 5, 1959, Laurel-Jones County marked the start of their fifth annual NAACP membership drive. Medgar Evers kicked off the event with an inspiring speech at St. Elmo Baptist Church, where approximately 100 people gathered. Speaking at the Laurel branch meeting, Medgar Evers highlighted that one of the biggest obstacles to African American’s progress in Mississippi was what he described as “Uncle Toms and Aunt Thomassenas.” Evers stressed the necessity for African Americans to understand that securing and maintaining their rights requires sacrifice and diligence. He also pointed out that both black and white Mississippians had a role to play in achieving equality, warning that suppressing African Americans also limits the potential of whites. Their goal was to welcome 350 new members, hoping to reach an ambitious 500 before the NAACP’s 50th convention.<sup>71</sup>

During this time, Murph contributed by sending 76 youth memberships to the organization’s national office. On a copy of an NAACP memorandum forwarded to King outlining the achievements of the Youth Council, King wrote that their “activity during 1958–59 made them outstanding examples of NAACP youth in action.” By the midpoint of the drive, Murph had energetically rallied 608 individuals, making Laurel the state’s largest NAACP chapter. He brought together a team of local leaders including pastor, businessmen, and teachers—Fred Hopkins, Willie Jones, Reverend and Mrs. T. D. Brown, Reverend R. D. Holloway, Sam Sanders, and Reverend J. E. Cameron—to assemble the campaign committee. Guided by their leadership, the branch set a new record, enrolling 415 new members in the 1959 drive.<sup>72</sup>

As the NAACP’s membership rose, so too did the opposition to equal rights for all races. On the morning of January 2, 1960, new local officials to their oath at the Laurel Courthouse. The presiding

Judge Casey administered the oath to the incoming team of local officials, with Lonnie E. Meador, previously the Circuit Clerk, emerging as a significant challenge to the movement's agenda. On January 26, Murph reached out to Meador seeking his commitment to improving the situation for African Americans. Confused, Meador questioned the nature of "cooperation." When Murph elaborated, Meador swiftly cut him off, adamantly asserting that he would not allow racial integration in Jones County.<sup>73</sup>

Dissatisfaction was voiced against the political ventures led by African Americans, even facing underhanded resistance from the Oak Park leadership. Some Youth Council members were allegedly threatened with failing grades for their activism. Still, Murph took steps to improve the branch's appeal to younger members by looking for a choir director to help them sound more professional. With assistance from NAACP deputy executive director, Gloster Current, and NAACP field director, Clarence Laws, Jackson Acox of New Orleans was brought in. When his arrival in December 1959 became known to the Oak Park administration, they coincidentally planned a basketball game for the same day to lure away the regular attendees of NAACP events. Murph saw the move's effectiveness as a reflection of the members' ingrained social habits, leading to a noticeable loss in numbers in favor of the basketball game that night. By 1960, the Laurel-Jones County NAACP emerged as Mississippi's largest chapter with 608 members.<sup>74</sup>

Laurel's voting drive saw about a thousand African Americans join the voter rolls. Yet, Leonard Caves, the Jones County registrar, exerted great effort to deter them, often resorting to intimidation or bureaucratic obstacles like misplaced applications. A former educator who became the circuit clerk in 1959, Caves registered merely 15 out of 60 African Americans between January and March 1960. When NAACP's Maycie Gore attempted registration, she faced outright hostility, as Caves affirmed that he was not "registering any niggers today." Despite repeated attempts, Caves maintained his unyielding stance as registrar.<sup>75</sup>

Before this period, Laurel had yet to witness the emergence of sit-ins that displayed the impact of peaceful, community-led protests



in the South. On April 15, under the guidance of Ella Baker from the SCLC's office in Atlanta, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was created following a gathering at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. This event brought together 126 representatives from 58 sit-in locations across 12 states. Notable attendees who later became key figures in the organization included Diane Nash, Marion Barry, John Lewis, and Lester McKinnie. McKinnie was a standout for his strong beliefs and multiple arrests during protests. For instance, he was arrested and accused of striking a police officer in the stomach. McKinnie found the accusations humorous, stating, "Why would I attack a policeman with him armed with a club and a half a dozen others standing around?"<sup>76</sup>

McKinnie, similar to other college students, initially doubted the legitimacy of a career in grassroots activism. Yet, he came to realize that students had the unique financial liberty to act. On his journey from Nashville, Tennessee, McKinnie boarded a Greyhound on May 24, 1961, to join them in Jackson. Subsequently, he participated in a protest against segregation held at the Mississippi state capital. When the Freedom Rides concluded in Jackson, it attracted many campaigners, including those experienced from Nashville. Throughout the summer and fall of 1961, he worked with Nashville planners to prompt students into protesting various segregated Jackson establishments.<sup>77</sup>

# 3

## MOBILIZING THE YOUTH

Civil rights happened because youth got involved. The youth stood up and helped to break the pattern that their parents had got accustomed to living. The next generation has to take that stand for whatever it is, socially, that they are involved in.

– Octavia Spencer

The year before SNCC arrived in Laurel, President Eisenhower signed the 1960 Civil Rights Act, establishing federal oversight for discriminatory voting practices. Nonetheless, the process to challenge voter denial was daunting, with proof of racial discrimination required. This led the local NAACP chapter to intensify their voter outreach and enrollment drives. Murph convened meetings at black churches, rallying community members to inundate the voter registrar's office. African Americans were allotted one registration day monthly, known as Black Day. In March 1962, a day saw only nine out of 198 African Americans even get a chance to take the voter registration test, with all ultimately failing. Leslie Dunbar, Executive Director of the Southern Regional Council (SRC), criticized the registration procedures as being racially biased, not aimed at gauging voter qualifications. He documented in excess of 500 rejections of African American registrants, implying that concealed actions by white officials may have caused more unaccounted-for rejections.<sup>78</sup>

On April 7, representatives from the NAACP convened at their main office in New York to devise a six-point plan titled Operation



R. Jess Brown, Medgar Evers, Charles Darden, and Dr. Murph in Jackson, Mississippi (Courtesy of Sandra Davis Murph)

Mississippi, aimed at dismantling segregation. The initial strategy required NAACP members to actively work on increasing voter enrollment and participation. The focus was on helping students to engage in the voter registration process. This included preparing potential voters for literacy tests, establishing schools for citizenship education, promoting the importance of registering, and collecting statements about African American efforts to register. Medgar Evers led vigorous campaigns in Laurel to encourage African Americans to pay their poll taxes, which was necessary for voting rights. Thanks to these efforts, Laurel saw the number of black voters rise to more than 2,000 within a year, a significant increase.<sup>79</sup>

On April 15, 1962, Bob Moses, SNCC's director of the Mississippi Voter Registration Project, assigned Lester McKinnie and Diane Nash to coordinate efforts in Laurel. Before Nash left for Cleveland, Mississippi to join her husband, James Bevel, she and McKinnie conducted workshops every Tuesday night in Laurel. They initiated the Laurel Nonviolent group as a SNCC branch. This group took a struc-

tured approach, setting up two panels: the Student Action Committee (SAC) and the Adult Advisory. The SAC was in charge of engaging students, while the Adult Advisory kept an eye on student activities during protests. The Adult Advisory Board had 15 members from various segments of the Laurel community, functioning as counselors for SAC and arranging for legal representation. On Tuesdays, about 12 to 20 students would meet to focus on issues like racial equality, nonviolent protest, self-defense, and registering to vote. They were intent on testing the downtown businesses but avoided overnight stays in jail.<sup>80</sup>

Two key pillars form the foundation of nonviolent protest. The first is a moral stance rooted in spirituality, which holds that causing harm to others is wrong and that acts of love towards adversaries can create positive changes in both individuals and communities. The second pillar is based on leveraging economic, social, and political influence on demand reforms of laws and policies that are perceived as unfair. Individuals who oppose repressive measures possess powers independent of the state that can pressure governing bodies to acknowledge the need for reforms.<sup>81</sup>

Early in the 20th century, scholars have connected nonviolent actions to prominent organizations—those supporting peace efforts and labor unions. In mid-April, activists in Laurel started a series of protests to discuss collective salaries with the local Chamber of Commerce. These efforts did not succeed, as the Chamber's president, J.W. West, asserted that they held no sway over the decisions of downtown retailers. SNCC distributed leaflets urging a boycott of stores maintaining racial segregation. Despite not always having the support or cooperation of some community figures, McKinnie directed his team to partner with the more supportive NAACP in Hattiesburg. Despite the challenges, many activists in SNCC stayed in Laurel, and eventually, there was collaboration between the groups. Expressing his challenges, McKinnie communicated with SNCC's executive secretary James Forman. "Jim, the Negroes in Laurel are like many other cities, waiting until someone else starts something, and then if it is effective, they will get on the bandwagon. Every minister seems to be Uncle Tom-ish; it's absurd. So, I am working mostly with the common layman."<sup>82</sup>

In late Spring, Margaret Lindsey, secretary for the Laurel Nonviolent Movement, supported the merchant boycott with a spirited article in the Laurel Newsletter. “Why buy segregation?” She asked, “Why spend your hard-earned money at a store that perpetuates racial separation and inequality? Would you give money to an organization that actively worked against your church or country? Of course not. Then why give money to businesses which actively work against you?” In Laurel, the F.W. Woolworth Company and S. H. Kress Store allowed African Americans to place pick-up orders. Still, they limited their facility socially—they did not let African Americans sit at the lunch counters, drink out of the water fountain, or use the restrooms. White-owned businesses throughout Laurel did not hire African Americans to work for them, often limiting them to custodial roles regardless of their qualifications. She stressed that maintaining patronage at these businesses was a tacit endorsement of the racial status quo. “If policies aren’t changed,” she desperately cried, “perhaps we have no one to thank but ourselves.”<sup>83</sup>

McKinnie’s approach to fighting racial discrimination in Mississippi saw pushback from the white and black residents. Benjamin Murph, although aligned in purpose, was critical of McKinnie’s tactics, believing Laurel to be excessively perilous. With Murph at the helm, Laurel kept a centrist political identity, while civil rights actions were non-existent in the rural areas. Murph’s moderately conciliatory method gave him the privilege of mixing with the white elite, yet it accomplished little in way of social progress. He saw nonviolent direct action as a way for activists to symbolically reach out to society’s conscience in building a united community but not by risking the younger generation. His endeavors were significant and monitored by the Sovereignty Commission. During a conversation with Virgil Downing, Senator E.K. Collins acknowledged Murph’s influence over African American voters in Jones County and his active role in regional politics. Despite potential manipulation, Collins did not perceive Murph as endangering the existing white dominance. Despite the possible railroading, Collins did not view Murph as threatening the white power structure. “So far, this Negro—Dr. B. E. Murph—has caused no trouble with the negro and white people of Jones County.” Murph’s

nonviolent philosophy towards resistance compelled some whites to think he was not “one of those agitators.” Mayor Gordon Berry even considered Murph, a friend.<sup>84</sup>

Despite persistent efforts, the advancement of the Laurel Nonviolent Movement was minimal, with only a handful of protests occurring. McKinnie, sensing potential defeat, attempted to spark broader engagement through a personal protest. In early May, McKinnie’s solo effort to integrate a bus terminal’s waiting room in Laurel led to his arrest by Police Chief Clyde Nix for disturbing the peace. Although sentenced to four months in jail and a fine of \$200, McKinnie was temporarily freed pending his lawyer’s appeal. The appeal was rejected on a technicality due to an error asserted by the Jones County Circuit Court. Subsequent efforts to appeal fell through because of procedural oversights. Despite being ordered to return to court later, McKinnie did not show up.<sup>85</sup>

McKinnie, having avoided his court date, pressed the Laurel Newsletter to make a drastic shift. “We must make the sacrifice for human dignity. We can no longer afford to sit idly by and be deprived of our rights as citizens.” The local bus station sit-in and merchant boycott were trivial when compared to neighboring efforts. On June 15, the Fifth Circuit Court in Forrest County ordered Circuit Clerk Theron Lynd to “provide blacks and whites the same sections of the Mississippi Constitution for interpretation, to permit federal agents to review his registration records and to present to the court a signed statement swearing that he would adhere to the court’s ruling. It also gave Lynd ten days to register forty-three blacks whose applications the court approved.” Despite Lynd’s noncompliance, this denotes a shift still pending in Laurel. McKinnie urged Laurel to “wake up and join the fight to persevere our American democracy.”<sup>86</sup>

Similarly, to Laurel, discord ensued amongst younger SNCC workers and the seasoned, traditional NAACP leaders in several towns across Mississippi. In nearby Hattiesburg, SNCC’s efforts to register voters hit a snag when NAACP leaders charged them with having Communist ties. In response, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO)—originally created to gain governmental support for the release of Freedom Riders—reformed in 1962. The new objective

was to reduce conflicts and overlap to align the efforts of key civil rights groups in Mississippi.<sup>87</sup>

Having spent close to three weeks in jail in Mississippi, James Forman welcomed fellow prisoner and local Jesse Harris to join the SNCC as a field secretary. Tasked by Forman, Harris was to lead voter registration efforts in Laurel alongside the Jones County Improvement Association and COFO as well as to facilitate a peaceful protest workshop at Roosevelt High School in Ellisville. Despite the low number of 24,000 African American voters in a state where 390,000 white voters were registered, Harris pressed on. He approached the Laurel county clerk with plans to boost voter registration, only to be limited to bringing two people at a time due to the clerk's other duties. With a hint of irony, Harris agreed, but the next day he showed up with nearly 50 people, overwhelming the clerk and causing voter registration to shut down for that day.<sup>88</sup>

Uncompromising calls for resistance came from surprising sources. Printed in the *Laurel Leader-Call* was an edgy proclamation passed by the Harmony Baptist Church congregation in Laurel. It claimed Jones County's serenity was under attack by external provocateurs suspected of communist sympathies. The announcement articulated a belief that the true aim of the civil rights organizations was not mere integration, but rather to overpower a liberated citizenry. The church solemnly committed to stand by their governor amid the crises, and to resist any overreaching authority or despotic regime at all costs, asking for divine support in their steadfastness.<sup>89</sup>

The chief spokesman for Laurel's separatist renegade, State Senator E. K. Collins, defended the institution's right with a metaphoric militia. "We must win this fight regardless of the cost in time, effort, money, and human lives," Collins tempestuously said, referring to the Ole Miss riots that spurred after James Meredith was accepted into the institution. An uncommon dissenting perspective was offered by J.W. West, the *Laurel Leader-Call* editor, who skeptically viewed Barnett's request for interposition. "Barnett is a lawyer by profession. He knew, or should have known, that the theory of interposition has been rejected by the court since 1792." West also contested Barnett's request to the college board to support his decision or resign. "According to Barnett,

the members of the state college board either go to jail for contempt of a federal court order or get off the board,” he noted. “Really, what skin is it off his neck if somebody else goes to jail?” He suggested that Barnett could have better served Mississippi’s educational system by leaving the matter to those who were responsible for it.

Over the course of two years, demonstrators succeeded in desegregating certain communal areas in some southern college towns. The Freedom Rides led to a nominal integration of bus terminals used for travel between states. Yet, in most of the South, public venues were still segregated under local laws. African Americans who defied these rules on buses were met with violence and unfounded arrests. The fight for integration in educational institutions often was undermined by police hostility and deliberate intimidation by groups like the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>90</sup>

On June 11, 1963, President Kennedy publicly denounced the white community’s resistance to African American civil rights, declaring it a significant moral obstacle, and committed to federal involvement in the fight for integration. That same evening, Medgar Evers was tragically shot and killed in front of his family after returning a NAACP meeting, advocating for the end of segregation with t-shirts saying, “Jim Crow Must Go.” Rewards from the governor and press for details on the shooter yielded little progress. However, the FBI investigation turned up Byron de la Beckwith, a fertilizer salesman and Klan member, as the prime suspect.<sup>91</sup>

## **Bowers and the Klan**

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) reemerged to prominence in Mississippi in the late 1940s. A power struggle ensued for control of the Mississippi KKK, climaxed by the election of Imperial Wizard Samuel Holloway Bowers Jr. Born on August 6, 1924, in New Orleans, Louisiana, Bowers came to Mississippi with his father, who became a salesman in Gulfport. Ten days after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Bowers, only 17 years old, left Fortier High School—with his father’s consent but not his mother’s—and joined the Navy. “He’s fanatically patriotic,” his mother recalled. “But he thought he was fighting for a pure de-



mocracy, not for this lousy government.” Bowers served in the Navy until December 7, 1945, and by the early 1950s, he moved to Laurel and set up the Sambo Amusement Company.<sup>92</sup>

During the Cold War, like many white southerners, he grew hostile towards the civil rights efforts, suspecting them of communist underpinnings. By the late 1950s, Bowers began sharing prejudiced political beliefs. He developed a conviction that the Soviet Union was a mask for Jewish leaders aiming to topple Western Christianity, that Cuba under Castro was training African Americans for an assault on the Gulf Coast, and that the U.S. government would turn this into an excuse to take control of the National Guard and forcefully remove whites from Mississippi.<sup>93</sup>

Functioning as a clandestine military-style entity under Sam Bowers, the White Knights of the KKK orchestrated a campaign of terror, marked by a sequence of bombings, beatings, and threats. As they came together, Klan affiliates were actively recruiting in regions straddling the border of Louisiana and Mississippi, with southeastern Mississippi being a hotspot for their operations. The White Citizens Council would often publicly reject any ties to Klan-instigated violence, attributing it to unsavory characters, yet the Klan was unabashed in its calls for violent actions against civil rights campaigns. Although the Council outwardly denounced violence, the Klan credited them with legally redirecting the widespread resistance against the acceptance of desegregation.<sup>94</sup>

With the rise of the White Knights, Laurel’s resistance to integration kept growing, making the unification effort seem unlikely. Simultaneously, initiatives for school equality jeopardized the existence of African American schools. On July 3, 1962, a six-member panel, speaking on behalf of 94 African Americans, contested the annexation of Nora Davis Elementary in a meeting with the Board of Trustees of the Laurel Municipal School District. They submitted a twelve-point proposal, one of which was a request for a plan for voluntary desegregation of all public schools by January 1964. One trustee quickly scanned the proposals. The board committed to reviewing them but provided no schedule for their response. Beatrice Collins, the president of the Nora Davis Parent Teacher Association (PTA), took this

as a small step forward. The PTA had been struggling since 1960 to have the Board of Education hear their grievances, but correspondence had been neglected until this meeting.<sup>95</sup>

In September 1962, Beatrice Collins' husband, Clinton Collins, declared his candidacy for the role of Justice of the Peace for Beat One in Jones County. A law school graduate from Lincoln University, former teacher and principal, Collins had his career in education halted due to being a registered voter. Clinton Collins' electoral pursuit was groundbreaking, marking him as the first black candidate for public office in Mississippi since the post-Civil War Reconstruction era. The SNCC-run newspaper, *The Student Voice*, backed Collins' initiative. "There is no reason why Negroes cannot run for office—and win—all over the state of Mississippi—that is if thousands more negroes registered to vote." Collins' aim was to inspire more Laurel residents to register to vote. For campaign support, he talked to Colia Liddell, a SNCC field secretary. Despite her initial apprehension to engage in politics, she committed to updating Bob Moses and his COFO colleagues about Collins' campaign, emphasizing the significance of his efforts.<sup>96</sup>

Collins's campaign, with its motto "Good Government to Succeed Demands Change," resonated with the black community's current struggle for justice. He understood that using a language shaped by resistance was essential to achieve reciprocity. "We of the Free State of Jones have a rich opportunity to remove much of the alleged inequity associated with our southern way of life. We have now the opportunity to express ourselves as free men and women in selecting a Justice of Peace based only on characteristics involving ability, training, energy, fairness, and social responsibility."<sup>97</sup>

Collins was the sole Black candidate in contention and faced tough competition, particularly from R.E. Parker, who was the existing Justice and sought his third term. Despite Collins winning a majority in two predominantly Black districts, Parker was also the Vice President of the Mississippi Justice Court Officers Association, giving him a significant edge. He spent three months campaigning throughout the city, only to find a burning cross on his lawn on May 10, a scare tactic against civil rights activists in the 1960s. It was reported that a

group of white women were actively involved in Clinton C. Collins's political campaign, a matter that deeply concerned the White Knights, and allegations surfaced about these women engaging with African American men at the Negro American Legion Hall, including sharing meals and intimate associations. As tensions were expected to rise in Laurel during the summer, a Klan informant revealed that Donald Henshaw shared news from Waynesboro, Mississippi. There, a man solicited signatures at a café for a committee focused on opposing African Americans, claiming he had already gathered over 300 supporters and that his initiative originated from Laurel.<sup>98</sup>

The much-awaited zenith of Collins' campaign efforts had finally dawned. On July 27, Leroy Johnson, a trailblazer as the first African American to win a Georgia Senate seat in the post-Reconstruction era, stepped into the Laurel Civic Center to speak to a throng of Collins' supporters. Collins, accompanied by B.E. Murph and Reverend R.I.T. Thomas of Jackson, warmly welcomed the Senator at the polished glass entryway. Inside, supporters buzzed with the sort of high spirit reserved for song and celebrations. Reverend J.E. Cameron of Hattiesburg took charge of the proceedings, presenting Collins to the eager attendees. His message underscored a heartfelt philosophy: "We, the Free State of Jones County, should place values in all people because every man is worth something to this community. Whatever happens in Jones, whether it be good or bad, reflects the entirety of the County."<sup>99</sup>

The cornerstone of Collins' political campaign was ushering in a reformation to boost the efficiency and functionality of the public sector. He held the belief that a government functions at its peak when every individual has a voice and a stake in it, and the wishes of the majority guide its actions. Speaking with clarity and conviction, Senator Johnson succeeded Collins at the mic, revealing the African American community's aspiration for equal rights rather than exceptional treatment, prompting southern whites to collaborate with them in future planning. Demonstrating his dedication to this cause, he pointed to the racial integration of the previously segregated cafeteria at the Georgia State Capitol. Conveying to those gathered that African Americans were no strangers to heroism and innovation, Johnson celebrated their

historical sacrifices and triumphs, highlighting luminaries such as Leontyne Price and Ralph Boston.<sup>100</sup>

At the end of his electoral bid, Collins garnered tallied a modest 518 votes. Nonetheless, local leaders voiced that Collins' race "has done more than anything to awaken Negroes to their civic responsibility." Before the governor's election in Mississippi in November 1963, the African American voter registration stood at just 12,000. The movement for equitable voting rights, championed by SNCC, persisted amidst the biased political scene of Mississippi. On the day of the election, November 5, a common belief among whites was that African Americans lacked the desire to vote, a misperception perpetuated by the government and the press. The fear that upheld racial voter suppression and preserved white supremacy went largely unnoticed.<sup>101</sup>

COFO launched the Freedom Vote to demonstrate to both the government and the nation that African Americans held a strong desire to vote without intimidation or prejudice. They worked to educate and motivate African Americans in Mississippi to participate in a mock election for governor. Aaron Henry, a pharmacist and the president of COFO from Clarksdale, was chosen as the nominal governor, with Tougaloo College Chaplain, Edwin King, as the lieutenant governor. Voting stations were set up in predominantly African American communities. At an October COFO conference, representatives drafted a proposal advocating for the voting rights of African Americans, the increase of the minimum wage, and a program to provide loans to farmers.<sup>102</sup>

In 1963, civil rights leaders in Mississippi were exploring fresh approaches to break through the persistent obstacles that hindered their progress. Past efforts in the 1950s and early 1960s to enlist African American voters, advocate for desegregation in schools, and fight against segregated public transit yielded limited success. The Voter Education Project (VEP) recognized that such deep-rooted discrimination required intervention from the federal level to substantially boost African American voter registration. Although President Kennedy had expressed support for the rights of African Americans to vote, activists believed more action was necessary. They proposed that the government could withdraw federal funds from Mississippi or dis-

patch federal marshals to voting locations to protect African American registrants. Meanwhile, Kennedy's administration preferred to pursue changes through court litigation until new laws could be established.<sup>103</sup>

On April 23, 1963, despite the insistence of U.S. Justice Department officials to inspect these records and poll books, they were not present to start their investigation. Leonard Caves declined to grant the U.S. Justice Department access to the county's voter registration records for photographic and other uses. Gerald M. Stern, an official for the Department of Justice in Washington, approached him to understand his unwillingness to share such records. Caves informed Stern that he believed the records were regular and without issue. He insisted that the local Democratic and Election Committees needed them upcoming voter activities. Stern expressed hope that Caves would reconsider his stance, mentioning his travel plans and availability for a response. However, Caves remained firm in his decision, foreseeing a federal court directive to share the records. The inquiry by the Justice Department generally followed a complaint lodged by an eligible voter, though Caves made no guesses on the complainant's identity. There was speculation among court officials.<sup>104</sup>

In Mississippi, African Americans who had been historically denied their rightful status as citizens took a standby engaging in the Freedom Vote. This approach utilized the act of voting as a symbol of their yearning to vote freely. Historians have noted that the Freedom Vote laid the groundwork for Freedom Summer, providing a strategic model, motivating African Americans, and cleverly involving white volunteers to attract press coverage to oppose the exclusionary Mississippi Democratic Party.<sup>105</sup>

While COFO worked on mock elections, the NAACP's Voter Education Project in Mississippi aimed to get more African Americans officially registered to vote. In Jones County, the efforts were encouraging. They contacted 15,332 potential voters by door-to-door canvassing, 1,654 by home, and 662 at clinics. In comparison to its southern counterparts, Mississippi was behind. For instance, in 1964, a mere 28,000 out of the possible 465,620 black voters in Mississippi had signed up to vote, the smallest amount among the 11 states examined. Though five states had a greater number of eligible black voters,

the tally in Mississippi was still dismal. To illustrate, Alabama was just ahead of Mississippi, with 111,000 of its 526,656 eligible black voters registered. Hence, the black electorate scarcely influenced the results of Mississippi's 1963 official elections.<sup>106</sup>

## 4

# HOTTER THAN THE DEVIL

Loose and easy language about equality, resonant resolutions about brotherhood fall pleasantly on the ear, but for the Negro there is a credibility gap he cannot overlook. He remembers that with each modest advance the white population promptly raises the argument that the Negro has come far enough. Each step forward accents an ever-present tendency to backlash.

– Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the summer of 1964, college volunteers converged in Mississippi, equipped with training from their sessions in Oxford, Ohio, all for the initiative known as the Freedom Summer Project. Their earlier training at Oberlin College had aimed to prepare them for the difficult tasks of educating and registering voters in the face of expected hostilities from the white power structure. The project kicked off on June 15. The operation in Laurel was headed by Lester McKinnie, with support from Gwendolyn Robinson of Memphis and Jimmy Garrett from the University of Southern California. The project gained momentum with the arrival of 175 new volunteers towards the end of June. Among them were Oberlin students David Owen, David Goodyear, and Linnell Barrett, who drove in together. Owen's experience on his first day, when he observed a man trying to read a pamphlet upside down, underscored the reality that without the ability to pass Mississippi's literacy tests, the Black community would remain under the thumb of white dominance.<sup>107</sup>

African American organizers were cautious of the influx of white

volunteers, feeling their privileged education could undermine local leadership. “Whites might start leading, with their better grasp of administrative work and long-distance communication,” a SNCC representative shared. Furthermore, the introduction of whites could herald a return to oppressive racial dynamics and elevate threats to the black community due to their high visibility as outsiders, drawing the hostile gaze of both Klansmen and law enforcement. Although there was opposition to involving affluent white college students in work in Mississippi, advocates such as SNCC organizer John Lewis and Bob Moses saw the benefit of an interracial campaign. They felt that a joint presence of white and black would draw the attention of news outlets to Mississippi’s situation. The strategy of recruiting Northern college volunteers aimed to raise awareness nationally about Mississippi’s persistent injustices. An interracial campaign was understood to enhance the group’s productivity by drawing on a mix of viewpoints and abilities, and by harnessing diversity’s capacity to inspire inventive strategies and measures, leading to change within society.<sup>108</sup>

Prior to the onset of Freedom Summer, grassroots organizations had little to no footprint in Laurel. Organizing efforts met resistance from some local African American leaders and a severe shortage of places for civil rights workers to stay. The bulk of the student activists assigned to Laurel made the daily journey from Hattiesburg for their organizing work. With a significant Klan presence, locals were too afraid to offer housing to the volunteers, creating a climate of dread as constant as the relentless summer heat. Volunteers held educational sessions for Freedom classes in available open areas and park facilities, while a handful of churches provided space for event planning. During the early stages, Pastor Marcus Cooley and his Morning Side Tabernacle congregation gave support to COFO and SNCC, soon facing terrorist acts like drive-by shootings and cross burnings. Without meeting them, a majority of white Laurel residents had already adopted a stance of opposition towards the incoming volunteers.<sup>109</sup>

Moreover, the Klan had intentions to inflict harm or even kill if they deemed it necessary. The night that three civil rights workers—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—began their first mission in Neshoba County, they suddenly went missing.



When they did not check in that night, seasoned SNCC members braced for grim news. Earlier that evening, the trio was detained for a traffic infraction in Philadelphia, only to be released hours later. The community grew anxious over the fate of the three activists and feared further violence, complicating the search for a safe planning space for their work. In a bid to solve their housing dilemma, Robinson, Garrett, and McKinnie were handed names of individuals from the NAACP to assist them. Clinton Collins turned to Eberta Spinks, a retired employee of Tant's Packing Company who moved to Laurel in mid-1941, to provide shelter for some participants. Spinks, despite being unwell, prayed for the strength to aid the cause at its critical moment. After discussing with her husband Ollie, who agreed to the idea, she cautioned him about the risks involved in taking in the students.<sup>110</sup>

"We might get our house burned," Spinks said.

Her husband replies, "Bert, whatever you want to do, you do it because I know it's going to be right. That's why we're paying insurance."<sup>111</sup>

With the onset of July, Robinson found herself at the front door of an unpretentious house, giving a soft knock. Inside, Spinks moved toward the sound, unaware of who awaited. Fumbling with her belongings, Robinson mustered her composure to greet her host. Identifying herself as an SNCC employee, she was met with Spinks' heartening words, "Girl," she told Robinson, "I've been waiting for you my entire life." Spinks recruited her neighbors, Carrie Clayton, and Bertie Mae Lindsey, to house Garret and McKinnie, and the duo set up operations in her Kingston home. Spinks, asserting her belief in self-defense, remained unshaken by threats, vigilantly maintaining security with her shotgun, encouraging her guests to sleep soundly. Her resolve mirrored the principles of historical figures like Ida B. Wells who once declared that she was "determined to sell my life as dearly as possible if attacked. I felt if I could take one lyncher with me, this would even up the score a little."<sup>112</sup>

With the Democratic Party being virtually all-powerful and exclusive, and the Republican Party too powerless to gain any foothold in the state, those championing voter rights were limited to a single course of action—forming a party anchored in the principle that voting



A portrait of Gwedolyn Robison (Courtesy of Dr. Gwedolyn Zoharah Simmons)

is an essential right. Thus, was born the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Across history, third parties have acted as important conduits for people to influence governance, a role the MFDP embraced. Its main mission was to welcome African Americans in Mississippi into the fold of national political discourse, a venue from which they had been previously barred. Recognizing a need to contest the entrenched election laws of the state, COFO established an initial executive body for the MFDP on April 26, 1964. This committee was

responsible for setting up the precinct and other state meetings.<sup>113</sup>

COFO workers joined after SNCC, with Marion Davidson—a Pasadena native and Smith College graduate, initiating a temporary site in Carrie Clayton’s backyard. They soon transferred operations to a newly acquired site with a trailer, serving as a makeshift community center. Mayor A.S. Scott ordered their removal for not having essential facilities like running water and toilets. Elsewhere, Marcia Moore, a COFO activist from Fort Dodge, Iowa, conducted freedom classes in a playground before being housed with Spinks. Her efforts expanded to New Bethel church, managed by Reverend Atkins, where she implemented a curriculum including Mathematics, English, African American History, and French. Alongside, a daycare facility for Freedom Schools was established, and locals received aid in navigating the biased voter registration process.<sup>114</sup>

The Freedom School was an alternative platform for learning. Mississippi’s educational system for black children historically suggested that being white was the standard, placing African American youths in a position where they were either neglected or degraded. This educational approach perpetuated exclusion. Educators, volunteers, and local residents collaborated in resistance to the authoritarian rule. When they filled churches with freedom songs, their collective strength shone brightest. Derived from gospel music integral to African American religious traditions, these songs carried messages that joined individuals of all races in the quest for the God-given freedom for all. Civil rights advocates recognized the pivotal role of the church in their mission. They made efforts to join worship services, knowing that befriending local clergy was a key first step. Securing access to churches meant more than just finding a place for meetings; it linked their earthly goals of politics and learning with the church’s influential moral authority. Stockley Carmichael told a group of new arrivals, “You’ve got to understand what religion means to people here. We are doing the Lord’s work.” They did not wish to exploit the church but rather to tap into the existing synergy between faith, civic life, and education with the belief that divine assistance accompanies self-help efforts.<sup>115</sup>

Black pastors mobilized their church members to facilitate voter

registration efforts, strategically partitioning the city to ensure widespread engagement in Laurel. Eberta Spinks, the county chairman of the MFDP, led teams to canvass rural areas within Jones County such as Ellisville, Moselle, Shady Grove, and Hoy. The energy of the movement was evident at nightly meetings. On July 2, during a live broadcast from the White House with lawmakers and civil rights leaders present, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted. While some African Americans celebrated, others, like Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton voiced skepticism about the true motivations of white politicians. They believed that the supposed allies of African Americans would abandon them when their interests clashed. Despite these concerns, the significance of the Act was rooted in the establishment of a federal standard that interrupted the legal acceptance of inequality.<sup>116</sup>

During the summer project, activists adopted strategies recognized by civil rights scholars emphasizing the exploitation of activists. This approach led to heightened public awareness and increased support when demonstrators suffered violence, fostering a more responsive attitude from the government towards the cause. The idea was that the public would rally behind the protesters as they witnessed their mistreatment. The broader community felt more compassion after seeing demonstrators hurt and facing police brutality. Volunteers monitored the life-saving Wide Area Telephone Service (WATS) line around the clock, recording incidents of violence and arrest, dispatching lawyers and doctors, notifying the press and Justice Department, and compiling the daily “WATS Report.”<sup>117</sup>

On the 4th of July, workers organized their initial protest to coincide with Independence Day. A group of seven young people visited a drive-in burger spot in Laurel named Burger Chef. Their aim was to check if the eatery adhered to Title II of the freshly passed Civil Rights Act, which banned racial and other forms of discrimination in public places like hotels and restaurants. As they arrived, a dozen locals obstructed their entrance and provocatively questioned if they were looking for a fight. Facing the expected hostility, the youths departed but came back half an hour later with thirteen additional demonstrators. The group endured a violent encounter where they were punched, kicked, and beaten with iron rods, with two demonstrators sustaining

lacerations to their face and chest from a razor. Observing officers did not act despite being in the area. McKinnie attempted to alert local law enforcement but was cut off when he chose not to reveal his identity. The next day, Jones County Chief of Police, Clyde Nix, recognized and apprehended McKinnie, confining him to Jones County Jail for not completing a prior four-month sentence stemming from an attempt to integrate a bus station in 1962.<sup>118</sup>

Gwendolyn Robinson repeatedly reached out to the county detention center to inquire about McKinnie's condition. At 8:25 p.m., she reached out to the city law enforcement, who assured her there were no indications Lester McKinnie faced any harm at the correctional farm. When Robinson sought the identity of the person she spoke to, he did not disclose it. Bill Light, a COFO official in Jackson, phoned again and conversed with the same officer, warning him about alarming reports that McKinnie was left isolated without other inmates or guards, raising concerns for his safety. The officer retorted sharply, insisting Light's source verify their information before making fabricated claims, and mentioned McKinnie received no extra security compared to other detainees. Marcia Moore visited the precinct and spoke to McKinnie through a window. He shared that he had been deprived of food for two days and was due for labor at the jail on Saturday. However, the judiciary brokered an arrangement for his release in exchange for his immediate departure from Jones County, to which he concurred, heading back to Nashville. Consequently, with McKinnie ousted from the county, leadership of the Freedom Summer Project in Laurel was transferred to Gwendolyn Robinson, with Jesse Harris as her co-leader, under James Forman's direction.<sup>119</sup>

A large number of arrests during Freedom Summer were tied to contrived traffic infractions. To preempt these issues, COFO personnel and volunteers meticulously followed traffic regulations, ensured their vehicles carried necessary documentation, and drove cautiously. SNCC Field Secretary Hollis Watkins highlighted that state officials tracked all COFO cars, often stopping them to impede their civil rights work, issuing tickets for minor violations. Trained to confront these detentions with nonviolent opposition, those arrested would not pay fines or bail, choosing rather to engage in civil disobedience, despite

consistent adherence to traffic laws and being wrongly accused of various roadway offenses.<sup>120</sup>

On June 5, as Robinson, Marcia Moore, Tom Watts, and Charles Spinks were exiting Pleasant Valley Baptist Church, Tom Watts realized that local police had been trailing them for several blocks. Their vehicle, which had two white and two black occupants, caught the police's attention. The police pulled them over, asked them to step out, and requested identification. Moore had left her ID at Carrie Clayton's house and withheld the fact that she resided with a black woman due to apprehension. The police directed Watts, Spinks, and Moore to get back into their car, leaving Robinson roadside, and escorted them to the station. Without money, ID, marital status, or a job, Moore was taken into custody and charged with vagrancy. Attorney Charles Pickering interrogated her about her role in civil rights organizing, and after several unproductive hours, he insisted that she should go back to Iowa and even attempted to call her father to make her leave. After being held for an hour, Moore contacted her father to report her vagrancy charge. She instructed him to notify the Jackson COFO office of her arrest. Upon speaking with Pickering, her father stated that since Marcia was a legal adult, she had the right to remain in Mississippi if she chose to.<sup>121</sup>

After spending a night behind bars, Moore was taken back to the police court on Monday morning to face her trial. Before the proceedings began, she was questioned in detail by journalists and also talked with an older gentleman, who was later identified as Mayor J.C. Holmes of Laurel. He inquired about her financial situation, and she mentioned receiving a \$150 weekly allowance from her parents. During the trial, led by City Attorney Raymond Schwartzfager Jr. and prompted by the Mayor's advice, Marcia entered a plea of not guilty. The only testimony against her came from the arresting officer. When the officer stepped down, the judge promptly asked if Moore wanted to speak on her own behalf, to which she suddenly asked for a lawyer. The judge pointed out that her request was made too late since the trial had already begun without her asking for legal representation initially, even though she had not been informed of her right to an attorney. She declined to testify, was convicted, and handed a 10-day suspended

sentence.<sup>122</sup>

While the prevailing sentiment among whites was against racial integration, the leadership of Laurel held onto the hope that racially exclusive facilities would be dissolved. Benjamin Murph, allied with the NAACP, initiated a proactive approach to mend relations among black citizens, white residents, and law enforcement, identifying the core problem as police apathy rather than outright aggression. On July 7, a mixed contingent with NAACP leadership and white allies embarked on a mission to inspect Mississippi's compliance with the civil rights legislation. The day started on a high note with an inclusive breakfast in Meridian. Following the meal, they visited Fannie Lee Chaney seeking to offer comfort as her son James Chaney, who was still missing. They returned to Laurel and discussed a recent integration attempt at the Burger Chef with the Laurel youth. Following the half hour meeting, they proceeded to the Holiday Inn for lunch. Declining the restaurant's separate banquet space, they divided into smaller groups among other guests, culminating in the city's first successful restaurant integration.<sup>123</sup>

Before the day ended, the group dispatched a telegram to Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, who was at the forefront of the Republican presidential race. The message conveyed that they were acting on behalf of Mississippi's black community to ensure safety for its civil rights leaders, amidst a prevailing sense of fear and intimidation. "Since it is your view that the basic human and civil rights of Negroes should be left to the states. We urge you to come to Mississippi on tour such as ours to talk with Negroes and whites so that you can determine for yourself whether state officials here are giving adequate protection to the constitutional rights of Negroes." Meanwhile, in stark contrast, Mississippi's white populace and the local press branded the summer movement as a renewed assault from the North, reminiscent of Civil War tensions. Amid this rhetoric about "...savage blacks and their Communist masters," and the absolute necessity of, "...the strict segregation of the races controlled by Christian Anglo-Saxon white men, the only race that can build and maintain just and stable government."<sup>124</sup>

In every part of Mississippi during the Freedom Summer, local

white residents clung to their own notion of loyalty to the country. When Anthony Lynn, a white volunteer from SNCC, was in the courtyard after helping a local African American with a voter registration literacy test, he was suddenly struck in the face. Stunned, Lynn called the authorities and identified the attacker who denied any wrongdoing. Both men submitted sworn statements. White residents called on President Lyndon Johnson to impose a six-month restriction on outsiders entering Mississippi to cause problems. Nonetheless, volunteers kept arriving. At the Jones County Courthouse, tactics to block African American voter registration emerged.<sup>125</sup>

Leonard Caves declined to handle large groups, while his secretary frequently excused the registrar's absence due to weddings, funerals, or hospital visits, instilling a pervasive fear of solo visits due to the threat of white intimidation. Caves set stringent requirements for voter registration. Applicants had to provide proof of property ownership, a birth certificate, and show they could read. They would then wait 30 days to see if they were registered. One woman, 65 years old, was turned away because she didn't have a deed. Despite bringing electric bills as proof the next day, her lack of a birth certificate led to another denial. Jones County received 67 formal complaints from the Department of Justice, leading to appeals for federal oversight.<sup>126</sup>

On July 11, Bertie Mae McGill took her son Larry McGill, aged 11, along with Jessie Harrington, Jerry Arrington, and their peers to SH Kress Store's lunch counter, now open to all. Anticipating service, their hope turned to horror as Jane Holifield aimed a gun at Larry, threatening to "blow out your guts." Their ordeal worsened when two Klansmen violently attacked Harrington, drawing blood. Arrington suffered a stab wound amid the mayhem, and Larry was subdued and thrown down after his brief attempt to escape. Although he tried running, more attackers hit him with a bat as he fled. They all survived the ordeal, bruised and bloodied. The actions at these sit-ins were significant; they marked a shift in Jones County's civil rights battle from focusing on voting rights to directly challenging racial segregation. The activists, undeterred by violence and systemic racism, continued to assert their presence in segregated spaces, reclaiming their dignity and resisting white supremacy.<sup>127</sup>



As evening fell, the town welcomed more volunteers. Marilyn Rapley, a student from Buffalo State College, found Laurel exactly as she envisioned it—a quintessential small town from 1964. “Laurel is definitely a small, very typical, 1964 rural community,” she observed, “with a large portion of the adult Negroes afraid to speak to us and a larger portion of Negro teenagers following us at our heels to lead them to uphold their rights under the new law.” Upon her arrival at the COFO headquarters, there was some confusion among the staff due to recent events. The departure of Lester McKinnie and an attack on some activists left the Laurel Freedom Project in a precarious position. To lighten the mood, COFO employees hosted a get-together at the house of Alvin and Maycie Gore while they were away.<sup>128</sup>

Gwendolyn Robinson only consented to the gathering if it remained alcohol-free. She remembered how previous functions ended with intoxicated attendees becoming noisy and scantily dressed on the lawn, enjoying themselves. Such events strained relationships with local leaders. Benjamin Murph sternly criticized the workers’ unpredictable behavior in a letter to Gloster Current, the NAACP’s chief assistant. He accused them of exploiting the trust of the community, engaging in improper conduct with provocative white girls and gambling men. They unauthorizedly painted the NAACP building, filled the library with low-quality books, and left a mess behind. “The story ... is the same all over the state. It is worse in some places. They have taken over the Civil Rights Program,” Murph concluded, dismayed. “COFO Must Go!”<sup>129</sup>

Murph was outraged about the current disarray within the Mississippi Freedom Movement. “In a place like this, we should be enjoying more unity than any place in the United States of America,” he exclaimed. “The eyes of the nation is upon us. We must somehow pick up the broken pieces and put them together. I am wondering how this can be done?” He debated stepping down as differences with COFO intensified. However, realizing the happiness it would bring to the Citizens Council and the White Knights, Murph decided against their wishes to leave. Despite his resolve, he doubted the future path of the movement. “It seems to me that our building is falling down like the London Bridge. I can only see one panacea for the plight that beset us:

A change in leadership. Just how this can be done, I will leave [that] up to [the] power structure of the National Office.”<sup>130</sup>

When Murph was absent, local youth swarmed his office post the horrific incident at Burger Chef. Though trust had eroded, they continued to view him as the frontline of their cause. Murph’s constantly busy office drew the eyes of the Klan, prompting them to scare him. Initially planning to incinerate his downtown workspace as Caldwell gleefully suggested due to the pine construction, they opted for a blatant caution. On July 18, Dr. Barnes, sharing the space with Murph, discovered a shattered window and a rock with a threatening message. “If you don’t want the same thing to happen to you that happen to the three civil rights workers in Neshoba County, then stop working with the NAACP. – KKK.” The intimidation was meant for Murph, yet it clearly communicated the threat to all.<sup>131</sup>

At the conclusion of the project, records showed a harrowing count that included six murders, 35 reported shootings, four in critical condition, upwards of 80 volunteers assaulted, and more than a thousand arrested. The decisive turning point came on the August 4, following a six week-long hunt. An insider, later exposed as Officer Maynard King of the Mississippi Highway Patrol, pointed investigators to a secluded dam on Old Jolly Farm outside Philadelphia. This was the grim site where Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman met their tragic end, their bodies found to have been brutally assaulted, burnt, and defaced. Speaking to reporters, Rita Schwerner, married to Michael Schwerner, boldly proclaimed that her husband’s sacrifice was not for nought. She articulated the grim acknowledgment that if Chaney and Goodman had been black, their deaths might have gone largely unnoticed, emphasizing that their race was a factor in the widespread concern and outcry. The experience cemented the resolve of many volunteers to pursue a future in social activism; indeed, more than 200 stayed in Mississippi once summer ended, abandoning their employment or educational paths. This cemented Mississippi’s role in the nation’s broader fight for justice.<sup>132</sup>

The MFDP delegates, on a tight budget, found themselves at the worn Gem hotel on August 21, packed into rooms with little cash but plenty of hope. Pleading their case to the Credentials Committee the

next day, they faced dwindling support due to interference from Johnson and Humphrey. Hopes dimmed to have the all-white Mississippi delegates replaced with the MFDP representatives. Nevertheless, a fraction of the Committee members endorsed the MFDP's position through a minority report. Senator J.C. Collins of Laurel argued for the white delegates, claiming unrestricted black participation in Mississippi's Democratic processes. The decision to discuss and vote on this report at the convention hinged on the support of eight state delegations. The possibility of an MFDP victory loomed, a pivotal moment hinged on amassing 11 votes for the minority report. Fannie Lou Hamer's moving testimony highlighted the dilemma: "If the Freedom party is not seated now, I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?"<sup>133</sup>

### **Crusade Against the Klan**

In the aftermath of the Summer Project, Brewell Currie, a native farmer, and his associates held a celebratory send-off picnic at his farm on the edge of Laurel, known as the Currie Settlement. The event took a violent turn when a group of white men interrupted, leading to the assault of volunteer David Gelfard after requesting the song "Dixie." What followed was an eruption of conflict as Klansmen emerged with chilling weaponry, causing the volunteers to rush to a nearby farmhouse. Amidst the flight, shots rang out, targeting those who dove into the pond. The farmhouse became a haven for the panicked group, though Gelfard was left behind, suffering attacks until an intervening gunshot by Currie's son forced their retreat.<sup>134</sup>

As 1964 drew to a close, governmental investigations into the White Knights picked up momentum. The HUAC subpoenaed for several Klansmen from Mississippi to testify, including individuals such as Sam Bowers and Deavours Nix. Concurrently, the FBI led a hidden operation to infiltrate the Klan, marshaling agents and tipsters within its ranks. Roy Moore, the head of FBI official in Mississippi, gauged that their efforts yielded an informant for every 100 Klan members engaged. Networks were also made within the upper echelons of Lau-

rel's community. Notably, Charles Pickering from Jones County, once a defender of segregation, began to see the damage inflicted by the Klan and became a critic of racial brutality. In early 1965, Pickering took a firm stand against the Klan. He made a public declaration decrying the Klan, inspired by a dossier of 130 Klan-related crimes given by Agent Lee. This manifesto received backing from influential locals, including the mayor and the district attorney.<sup>135</sup>

Bucklew found himself an unexpected and resistant fighter against the Klan. Caves noted that the Klan's endorsement had contributed to the election of Henry Bucklew for the incumbent mayor because his campaign rhetoric appealed to them. To win his next election, Caves too sought to assure the Klan's vote. His political background included organizing George Wallace's 1964 presidential campaign in three southern cities, speaking for the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, and pursuing the governorship with a pro-segregation platform. Nevertheless, the Klan's violent reputation was bad for local commerce, which mayors depended on for maintaining their influence. Klan aggression led to the withdrawal of three major companies from setting up in Jones County, and it also complicated the enforcement of law.<sup>136</sup>

The dread of the White Knights in Jones County was so great that individuals were hesitant to sit on juries judging Klan members, causing the mayor distress. He insisted, "I'm a segregationist, but I'm not a criminal." Bucklew came to see resistance to the national government as an unwinnable conflict and urged the public to accept what cannot be avoided. Adaptation is required, he argued, even if acceptance is not. Shifting from a centrist to an advocate for change, Pickering leveraged the moral urgency and financial crisis to urge Mayor Bucklew to take back control of their city. In October, the *Laurel Leader-Call* showcased a photo of Mayor Bucklew, law enforcement, and legal representatives signing a declaration condemning the White Knights and publicizing the harrowing details of Klan violence. The local newspaper and influential citizens commended Bucklew for his bold position.<sup>137</sup>

On September 2, top officials at the FBI introduced a secret program called COINTELPRO-WHITE HATE aimed at disbanding the

leaders and structures of the Klan. The FBI leadership believed that by dismantling the organization, they could lessen the likelihood of aggressive behavior within it. They theorized that if they could cut down on the number of Klan members, acts of violence would decrease, leading to a drop in new recruits joining the group. As detailed by William Keller, during the summer of 1964, the Johnson administration's liberals pressured the FBI to infiltrate Klan circles. Their goal was for the FBI to gather evidence of conspiracy to use in court against the Klan, thus quelling their acts of vigilantism and terror. Alongside this, the FBI crafted a clandestine plan to uncover, disrupt, and dismantle the Klan to achieve their objective.<sup>138</sup>

In the fall of 1964, the FBI conducted weekly interrogations of all White Knights members, insinuating they were betrayed by their own. Spy devices were placed in their meeting areas, while the press was alerted to expose arrests and highlight Klan leaders. The extra pressure from local police caused some members to quit. By late September, anxiety mounted for two individuals connected to the Neshoba investigation as they pondered over who might be the informers.<sup>139</sup>

Klan violence continued unabated in the face of local and federal opposition. FBI interference, a Klansman recalled, only motivated Sam Bowers to double down on his aggression. Bowers, feeling provoked by external influences he deemed communist, was determined to retaliate against both community leaders and those individuals who publicly opposed the Klan. Reprisals followed the publication of 500 names opposed to the Klan in the *Laurel Leader-Call*, with those individuals facing Klan intimidation. Instructions from Klan headquarters were to capture and beat Charles Pickering. Alerted to the danger by FBI Agent Robert Lee, Pickering enacted safety measures. Pickering benefited from the vigilance of an ally embedded within the Klan, who not only alerted him to looming threats but also safeguarded his home.<sup>140</sup>

The Ku Klux Klan felt unease as the FBI directed its efforts towards the White Knights after the Neshoba incident. On December 4, FBI operatives detained suspects while a Jackson federal grand jury issued 18 indictments. The initial charges did not implicate Bowers, but he was known to the FBI as the one who orchestrated the murder

of Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney. Bowers leveraged his influence in the White Knights for personal security. He gathered Klan donation pots from various businesses. Some Klan members became incensed, suspecting Bowers intended to use the proceeds for his legal defense. In 1964, HUAC disclosed that Klavern leader Mordaunt Hamilton threatened Bowers and Travis Ainsworth with a firearm, demanding the return of embezzled funds meant for Klan robes.<sup>141</sup>

Support for the FBI's crackdown on the Klan was common among state officials. Erle Johnston, public relations director for Sovereignty Commission, delivered a message to Mississippi sheriffs acknowledging the ongoing racial shifts and the necessity to adapt to some changes for a better future, leaving old attitudes behind. He highlighted the need to uphold public safety as evidence of Mississippi's ability to solve its criminal issues. The state's sheriffs on December 8, 1964, promised their backing to J. Edgar Hoover, asking citizens to support the peacekeepers. New regulations led to establishing a police training center and an increase in police forces and powers, especially for the Highway Patrol.<sup>142</sup>

The divide between young and old activists grew more pronounced, developing into a division between two conflicting beliefs. As time progressed, the community's receptiveness to these activists deteriorated. On a particularly quiet September 24, Gwendolyn Robinson, Linnell Barrett, and Marion Davidson revisited Laurel. There, they encountered Eberta Spinks, whose previous vigor for COFO had significantly waned. Later, at Thomas Pharmacy—known for their notary services during the summer months—they spoke with Dr. Thomas. He suggested COFO were afraid to organize in McComb, a place where their presence was essential. Robinson was taken aback, viewing Dr. Thomas as a solid supporter of COFO. This sentiment seemed to resonate across town, as even Mayor A.S. Scott broadcasted a week before on TV, insisting that "COFO is gone, and don't invite it back." Nevertheless, despite the overt lack of support, COFO persisted in participating in the movement.<sup>143</sup>

That night, ministers and layman from Laurel gathered to consider steps forward in the voter registration endeavor, with COFO caught

in a battle for prominence. Participants seemed to await recognition before acting. Robinson remarked on their hesitance to be connected with COFO. “They don’t want their names linked with COFO in any way,” said Robinson. “Dr. Murph was at the meeting in his usual role of Uncle Tom.” Murph encouraged religious leaders to plan the voter registration campaign independently of COFO to avoid confusion over leadership. At the meeting, there was contention over the description of the event, with Robinson and Murph disputing whether it was a political matter or strictly voter registration. Regardless of tension, Robinson united with Bob Stenson, Alvin Gore Sr., and Eberta Spinks to create a Freedom Democratic Organizing Committee (FDP). She declared the clergy’s resistance but foresaw their eventual involvement with the FDP. With the local reception growing colder, COFO needed a building by November to maintain their civil rights activities. They found a deal with Cleveland Golden, a well-off Black realtor, who would lease his vacant nightclub at a high rent, explaining that the financial risk justified the cost due to the threat of sabotage. “It’s just business. After all, I’m taking a real chance renting to you folks. Suppose crackers decide to burn the place down. I’ll lose everything.”<sup>144</sup>

As the new year commenced, the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC) initiated The Christmas Project, with plans for two separate four-day engagements over the holidays—from December 19 to 23 and from December 27 to January 1. On Christmas Day, a dozen students set out to perform Christmas carols and freedom songs for 20 detained workers. The sheriff, in a fury, came out and began forcefully pursuing them. During the confrontation, Moses Jackson was physically assaulted by the sheriff, and Lou House’s tape recorder was violently taken and thrown into the street. As some workers attempted to retrieve the recorder, a large truck barreled down the street towards the group, causing them to flee in fear. Amidst the chaos, Gwendolyn Robinson sought safety in their vehicle. The sheriff, filled with malice, threatened to unleash the Klan on the protestors and attempted to pull open the car door to reach Robinson, whose description of the sheriff was that of a marauding beast rather than a human. Having narrowly escaped harm, the students retreated to their base, where laughter helped them manage the tension of the ordeal.

Unshaken by the event, they started preparing for their next protest set for January 15.<sup>145</sup>

The Laurel-Jones NAACP chapter launched a robust voter drive, continuing the energy of the Summer Project. Amidst this effort, Susie Ruffin stood out as a commanding grassroots figure. Lawrence Guyot, director of MFDP, described her as a “semi-toothless woman” who “expressed her opinion everywhere, anytime, anywhere, to anyone.” Her southern drawl, floral dresses, and delicate hats gave her statewide allure. Her unceremonious radicalism in civil rights ventures in Laurel were vigorously highlighted in all the state’s black newspapers, championed by Susie Ruffin in her editorial capacity. She distributed the Jackson Advocate, reported local news in a minority weekly, and was the chief editor for the MFDP newsletter. In 1964, she began working with leaders like Fannie Lou Hamer and Unita Blackwell. Ruffin journeyed widely as a trio with Blackwell and Hamer. They attended the Community People’s Conference in Cleveland, Mississippi during the MFDP’s formative years. There, Ruffin addressed key issues like welfare, housing, and education, emphasizing that the conference was for community members from all backgrounds. Like her counterparts, she took those days as ones about economic justice for African Americans in Mississippi. She returned to Laurel to focus on voting rights and labor unionism through 1965.<sup>146</sup>



# 5

## A CONSTANT FIGHT FOR LIBERTY

The vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by human beings for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls which imprison people because they are different from others

- President Lyndon B. Johnson

African Americans, through peaceful protests and boycott strategies in the South, managed to dismantle blatant signs of racial inequality. The groundwork was laid for substantial changes with legislative actions, highlighted by the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. The American media, through generally unbiased coverage of racial issues, upheld its values of freedom and responsibility, while television broadcasts exposed the reality of deep-seated racial hostility to viewers across the nation. Historian Vincent Harding asks in his religiously rooted study of the black freedom struggle: “Who dares to dream without acting?” Or, as one of the activists in SNCC contended: “When we talk about growing up in a better world, a new world, we mean changing the world to a different place.”<sup>147</sup>

On January 14, 1965, Laurel marked its inaugural Freedom Day, where a collective of 17 individuals gathered at the COFO office for a brief session which offered voter registration forms and essential details. They organized to march at 10:30 am towards the County Courthouse. With books, a camera, and their lunches in hand, the group arrived at the courthouse. Leonard Caves, the sole authorized voter registrar in Jones County, arrived ten minutes following their

entrance to the waiting area. Caves called one individual aside to start the registration procedure. When the rest moved to register, they were abruptly stopped by the loud closing of the registrar's metal window shade. The group lined up patiently in the waiting area, only to learn later that Caves would not return that day due to a "funeral." Despite the group's peaceful demeanor, a cluster of white men gathered outside the courthouse, seemingly to keep watch.<sup>148</sup>

A woman who worked as a clerk at the Tax Receiver's office directed the group not to drink from the water fountain. Ignoring her, Susie Ruffin cautiously approached the fountain, took a sip, and others did the same without any direct interference. However, their mere presence seemed to provoke silent hostility from the white employees at the courthouse. Policeman Curtis Bradford and Deputy Sheriff R. W. McMinn routinely passed through the courthouse throughout the day. By the afternoon, workers started to remove benches from the lobby, forcing the group to stand. They mopped the floors and shut off the heating, resulting in a chilly breeze around the group's legs and feet. Ruffin spoke out against these actions, insisting they were deliberate attempts to make them too uncomfortable to stay.<sup>149</sup>

Sheriff McMinn hurried toward the noisy scene. Ruffin firmly stating that if former Sheriff Morgan Holifield were in charge, the situation would have unfolded differently. An exasperated McMinn countered, "When are you going to get it through your thick skull that Holifield ain't sheriff anymore?" As Ruffin attempted to respond, he sharply told her to "shut up" and warned her of arrest. Ruffin, unwavering, declared her indifference to jail. As she moved away, McMinn again reached for Ruffin while she cautioned him not to rip her coat. When he persisted, twisting her arms to arrest her for causing a disturbance, Ruffin struggled against him. McMinn then called for backup, and with the aid of two trustees, they forcefully carried Ruffin by her arms and legs to the county jail across the street.<sup>150</sup>

The SNCC worker stayed until 4:30 pm, but not one person managed to sign up to vote, so they eventually left. Approximately thirty African American had attempted to meet with the registrar, as one worker noted—four or five to check if they had passed last month's test, and the remainder to attempt the test. Later that day, when Judge

Bradford tried Ruffin who was denied legal representation, she faced charges leading to bail set at \$1,500—\$750 for creating a disturbance and another \$750 for resisting arrest. Bradford accepted a property bond, and two community members offered their home titles to avoid Ruffin's overnight jail stay. But Bradford deferred validating those deeds until the next day.<sup>151</sup>

Even with a claimed value of \$15,000, the properties did not meet Bradford's requirements, as he dismissed them as being worth that sum based on tax assessments since they lacked exemptions. The following day, Ruffin contacted the COFO office to share news of her release. Ruffin explained that B.E. Murph reached out to Howard Hudgies, whom many locals labeled an Uncle Tom, to see if he would aid in Ruffin's release. Hudgies agreed, and through some maneuvering, her bail was reduced to \$500.<sup>152</sup>

The next day, Eberta Spinks reached out to Leonard Caves to question his refusal to sign up voters on their Freedom Day. Caves argued that the crowd had caused major issues for the courthouse staff. Spinks pressed him on what trouble they caused and questioned how else they should present themselves. Caves replied saying that it was unlikely they would be allowed to register regardless of their approach. In spite of Caves's vow to obstruct African American voter registration, Gwendolyn Robinson, COFO activists Ben Hartfield and Peter Nemenyi, along with SNCC volunteer and Tulane University professor Ed Dubinsky, showed up with a party of 15 at the courthouse around 9 am. Nearly two hours later, Caves showed up, opened his office, and began to process the group one by one. He warned everyone that they had only half an hour to complete the literacy test. As the number of applicants reduced, Caves informed some they hadn't passed and told others to come back in a month for their results.<sup>153</sup>

As Dubinsky left his peers to head to his vehicle for the trip back to his home in New Orleans, he faced an aggressive encounter. Outside the courthouse, a white mob tackled him, kicking him while Sheriff Merle Pickering looked on with blatant delight. Despite not retaliating, both Dubinsky and his aggressors were apprehended for public brawling. At the police station, he learned that his attackers were booked on assault and disturbing the peace charges. Due to legal

complications, Dubinsky's attorney couldn't make his court date, and the matter was deferred to the next Friday. However, by Wednesday, Dubinsky was surprisingly convicted of the same offenses as the mob. He challenged the conviction and was ultimately set free.<sup>154</sup>

Freedom Day did not achieve its main goal of significantly boosting black voter registration, but it did succeed in making voting rights a major topic of community discussion. On February 20th, the U.S. Justice Department launched its 30th legal action focusing on voter registration, the 23rd specifically targeting discriminatory practices. The suit accused Leonard Caves' voter registration methods of being overly rigorous and ethically wrong. The legal filing highlighted that in Jones County, out of 7,927 African Americans of voting age, only 70 were registered to vote, in stark contrast to the 23,000-plus registered from the eligible white population of 25,943.<sup>155</sup>

### **The Right to Vote**

Meanwhile, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission looked into threats and harassment faced by African Americans in Mississippi. During hearings in Jackson, the Commission heard reports and testimony from 100 individuals, including residents of Jones and Forrest Counties. Witnesses stated that during the summer and fall of 1964, local people participating in peaceful sit-ins to test the Civil Rights Act of 1964 were victims of racial aggression and police inaction. Groups of whites often congregated outside locations of sit-ins to attack the demonstrators. The commission highlighted one of the worst cases, where Larry McGill and Jessie Harrington were beaten for trying to integrate a lunch counter at the S.H. Kress department store, which underscored the need to hold those attacking civil rights advocates responsible.<sup>156</sup>

Before taking the court proceedings, Civil Right Attorneys coached the activist before taking the stand. Larry McGill—the youngest of the sit-in students—granted the court its first testimony. McGill approached the witness stand, and Paul Swartzfager stepped to him and yelled, “What’s your name, boy?” A startled McGill shakenly gave his name. Swartzfager swiveled around and pointed, “Was this the woman who pointed a gun to your stomach?” Unsure whether he should answer yes or no, he quietly replied, “I think so.” He fell right into

Swartzfager's tactics of intimidation. "Case closed," he declared. After 2 minutes of questioning, the judge pounded his gavel and ordered McGill to leave the witness stand.<sup>157</sup>

Susie Ruffin, along with eight other community members, provided their testimonies at St. Paul Methodist Church. The defense lawyer questioned Ruffin on her past arrests, to which she chose not to respond. When inquired about any admissions to the State Mental Hospital, she firmly denied it. Ruffin then detailed her experiences of beatings and wrongful detentions by Jones County officers. Following her, Gwendolyn testified about the harsh realities of their "Freedom Day," where aggressive actions by officials and courthouse closure led to only one individual getting registered to vote. Gwendolyn highlighted the severe beating Ruffin endured and expressed, "This violent element in the law officers was in some kind of unholy alliance with the local racist. We were in real fear."<sup>158</sup>

As the Civil Rights Commission fought against racial segregation through legal means, activists persistently opposed racism in everyday settings. Paul Swartzfager, a lawyer who took legal action against Howard Wash and Willie McGee, also ran a coffee house in Laurel's downtown Pinehurst hotel. Eberta Spinks, along with other COFO members, entered the cafe and patiently waited for service. When Swartzfager noticed the black patrons, he insisted they leave, claiming they were not involved in business with African Americans. Spinks countered, suggesting that selling more would be profitable and serve the interest of any business owner, implying they should be welcomed. Her retort agitated Swartzfager who hurried to the police station to report the peaceful protest. He came back with police officers and arrest warrants, giving the activists a 15-minute notice to vacate. The demonstrators remained seated, prompting the police to immediately start handcuffing them and taking them to the station.<sup>159</sup>

Meanwhile, the Klan continued its sophisticated apparatus through newly found tactics. For instance, they would shoot their guns while a train passed to deafen the sound of gunfire. They also began using fires as a decoy. They knew drawing all the fire trucks in Laurel to opposing areas would make targeting the more significant spots easier, including the COFO headquarters on Churchton Street in Queensburg, the Lau-

rel Freedom School, and the MFDP office. On February 20, around 1 a.m., volunteer Pat McGauley discovered that the COFO building was burned to a crisp. He entered the blackened building seeing the mimeograph was smashed beyond what the fire could have done, the typewriters were missing, and the library was destroyed.<sup>160</sup>

This was a part of the Klan intimidation towards Cleveland Golden, who had been renting to the workers since November 1964. A month before the COFO burning, the Klan set a hotel that Golden owned on fire while he was still present, forcing him to exit through a window and, as a result, breaking his leg. Gwendolyn Robinson commented on the situation: "He was the only person in town who would rent to us. After this fire, I don't know where we'll go." Subsequently, an ad hoc committee was formed by a group of donors across Mississippi, raising 1,500 dollars and donating 2,000 books and nursery equipment for the daycare.<sup>161</sup>

Persistent in their fight for equality, civil rights workers did not let down their guard and continued to hold sit-ins in the spring of 1965. They saw some wins, yet the path to real change was still tough. In March, a handful of brave activists managed to desegregate a bowling alley and some eateries in Laurel. However, the U.S. government was hesitant to fully back their efforts. Even with new laws against racial discrimination and the FBI looking into acts of Klan violence, government action at all levels tended to give in to white supremacist pressures, often ignoring the very laws put in place. The government supported voting rights for African Americans, but it also made sure whites maintain power in the state. This happened when the U.S. Congress turned down the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's bid. This half-hearted approach from the government sent a signal that it was not entirely behind the civil rights movement, which gave whites who opposed change more reason to keep resisting. Many white supremacists determined that their war of attrition would work as it had during Reconstruction. They believed resistance would produce stagnation and regression, and ultimately, the federal government would abandon the black South again.<sup>162</sup>

On April 7, Benjamin Murph traveled to Bangor, Maine, to speak to the Bangor Area Branch of the NAACP at the Bangor Theological

Seminary and at the University of Maine under the leadership of Gerald Talbot, the founding president of the Portland NAACP about his state's current political climate. "The laws of Mississippi are liquid when applied to white people; when applied to Negroes, they are frozen like ice," said Murph. He described to his audience the conditions of segregation prevalent in Mississippi, calling special attention to the literacy test. According to Murph, the FBI has found strong evidence that the requirements to which African Americans are subjected are much more stringent than those applied to whites. Although there are approximately 5,000 Negroes of voting age in Laurel, only 600 have successfully registered.<sup>163</sup>

White authority in Jones County continued its pattern of aggression against key figures in the Civil Rights Movement. The Ku Klux Klan orchestrated a drive-by shooting at Murph's residence. On the night of June 17, at 1 AM, Murph's home was jarred by the sound of five gunshots, which he later likened to the noise of an atomic explosion. Falling to the ground for safety, Murph quickly notified the police and his insurance provider. Despite escaping harm, the aftermath saw Murph's insurance policy being revoked, and he faced rejection by other insurers.<sup>164</sup>

The case attracted the attention of officials, resulting in Prosecutor William O. Dillard accusing Pete Martin of illegal vigilante activity, labeled 'white capping.' In a heated courtroom session, Judge Casey fiercely denounced the Klan's brutal tactics. "Make no mistake, they may shoot in your windows or attempt to burn your home if you indict them," Casey warned. "But unless you have the guts to put a stop to such criminal activities, [they] will take over our country, and fear will be in every heart. Strike now, before it is too late." However, a Klan informant revealed to Dillard that Leonard Caves, the local Circuit Clerk and the one responsible for forming the grand jury, had ties to the Klan. This practically ensured that Martin would face no formal charges. Later, Murph discovered that the grand jury had unanimously voted against indicting Martin. Relaying this to Gloster Current, an NAACP official, Murph expressed his lack of surprise, noting that Martin even got his bond money returned, indicating that justice had not been served in the violent attack against him.<sup>165</sup>

Due to widespread violence and acts of terrorism, Laurel had become an off-limits area. However, Gerald Talbot courageously immersed himself in these hostile environments. Talbot had formed a strong bond with Murph and was eventually given the chance to see Laurel for himself. Despite being cautioned by Bangor's clergy and residents, who spoke of ongoing killings, Talbot, along with two fellow activists, resolved to visit. They reached Laurel in the early morning of June 28. As Murph led them through the community, Talbot observed a clear segregation between the neighborhoods. He examined the white area boasted typical urban amenities—lit streets, paved roads, lush lawns, and standard houses. By contrast, he described the black community as having dirt paths, no streetlights or sidewalks, and mostly rundown shacks.<sup>166</sup>

Spending a week in Laurel to help with voter sign-ups, Talbot had a tense encounter with Leonard Caves, who aggressively warned him to stay away from his property. Moreover, Talbot got a candid glimpse of the local tension when their driver, a woman, kept a “mile-long handgun” under her car seat for protection as she shuttled them to Queensburg. When visiting Murph's home on multiple occasions, Talbot took note of a conspicuously large window in the living room. Finally, he asked, “What is this?” Murph replied, “About every Saturday night, [Klansmen] come here and shoot out the front, the big plate window. Those are bullet marks.” The bullet marks were stark symbols of the persistent racial violence that African Americans faced across the nation.<sup>167</sup>

### **Freedom Democrats**

In July 1965, State President of Mississippi's AFL-CIO Claude Ramsey invited more than 100 moderate Whites and Black conservatives, including editor of the Delta Democrat Times Hodding Carter III and the NAACP's Aaron Henry and Charles Evers, to form a group known as the Loyalist Mississippi Democrats. Working-class individuals were not invited to join, including sharecroppers, domestic servants, and day laborers. With strong backing by the NAACP and African American businessmen, the Loyalist Democrats, officially known as the Mississippi Democratic Conference (MDC), lobbied President



Johnson for recognition as a legitimate political body, but to placate Mississippi congressmen and to retain his southern base of political support, Johnson refused.<sup>168</sup>

Even though the MFDP remained committed to the Democratic Party, President Johnson, when he took office, started directing poverty relief funds to the state via groups that were linked to the national Democratic Party. This move ignored the MFDP. With the rise of voter safety after the 1965 Voting Rights Act, efforts to find an alternative to the MFDP increased, especially with the establishment of the MDC. Activists like Susie Ruffin believed in forming racial alliances and criticized black professionals who joined the MDC. Ruffin admitted that the MFDP had not succeeded in building an effective state-level organization. The MFDP's Jackson office was often chaotic, leading some middle-class professionals to see the MFDP as unorganized. Yet, for Ruffin, the importance of the MFDP was more about its symbolic impact than about running smoothly as a political party. She felt that the MFDP had challenged the Democratic Party's core, paving the way for black political participation.<sup>169</sup>

Ruffin wished that black professionals would reinforce the MFDP, boosting its image as a legitimate political entity. Despite its challenges in maintaining itself as a formal organization across the state, Ruffin valued the MFDP's historical significance in Mississippi. She believed that the involvement of black professionals could help elevate the MFDP to a respected position as a political choice. Just like during the Reconstruction era, when black voters wielded exceptional political clout, Ruffin viewed the MFDP as a fresh opportunity for African Americans to shape politics. She argued that white political figures in Mississippi worried about being abandoned if they stuck with the MDP, as it seemed to be losing its political relevance. The MFDP stood as the unopposed voice for black citizens in Mississippi and their political choices. Ruffin believed that the white centrist faction within the MDC was manipulating black professionals to safeguard their own positions. She suggested that these African Americans were being used like chess pieces, set up to cushion the fall of the white political leaders. Ruffin feared that this would leave African Americans suppressed for centuries to come. She noted that the more accept-

MDC aimed to prevent the success of both the MDP and the MFDP.<sup>170</sup>

On August 6, President Lyndon Johnson enacted the Voting Rights Act of 1965, describing the occasion as a monumental win for liberty equal to any success on a battlefield. The law eliminated literacy exams and poll taxes, which had been used to prevent African Americans from voting. It also granted the federal government power to oversee voter registration in areas notorious for ongoing bias. “This law covers many pages,” Johnson said before signing the bill, “but the heart of the act is plain. Wherever, by clear and objective standards, States and counties are using regulations, or laws, or tests to deny the right to vote, then they will be struck down.”<sup>171</sup>

On that day, President Johnson declared that Nicholas Katzenbach, the Attorney General, would start legal actions against four states that still imposed a poll tax for voter registration. After the Act’s adoption, a report showed that 99.9% of white citizens in Jones County were registered to vote, compared to just 8.8% of African Americans. By August 20, the Department of Justice had set up a registration office in the Laurel Post Office. Within just ten days, over a thousand black voters were added to the registration rolls by a small group of voting officials.<sup>172</sup>

## **Losing Systematic Support**

America’s attitude toward progress broadened while the Klan’s influence waned. FBI agent Robert Lee teamed up with local prosecutor Charles Pickering of Jones County. Even though Pickering had helped the Regular Democrats against the MFDP, he despised racial violence and started to doubt the segregation laws. In late 1965, Pickering bravely opposed the Klan. He did this after Agent Lee gave him evidence of 130 acts of violence by the Klan’s White Knights. Pickering wrote a public denouncement of the Klan’s savagery, and with the help of D.A. Chet Dillard, took it to May- or Henry Bucklew, who unexpectedly joined the fight against the Klan.<sup>173</sup>

The widely recognized beliefs in white supremacy that characterized his past were no secret among political insiders. He led the campaign for George Wallace’s 1964 bid for the presidency, belonged to

the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, and used overt racist language when he campaigned for governor. However, dealing with the Ku Klux Klan became an issue for business and was a key part of his responsibilities as mayor to keep their influence in check. On October 18, Bucklew took a public stand against the White Knights during a broadcast on WDAM-TV. He criticized them for their extreme views, even though they often invoked God's name. In his televised address, he revealed photos of burned houses, cars riddled with bullets, and bombed facilities. He also announced a \$1,000 reward for tips leading to the arrest and conviction of those responsible for these violent acts.<sup>174</sup>

Directly after his address, a wave of local support surged, with a thousand residents from Jones County—including clergy, business leaders, and employees from the Masonite Corporation—signing petitions to back his actions against the Klan. Additionally, 46 Baptist churches from the Jones County Baptist Association and the Laurel Kiwanis Club passed resolutions to endorse the mayor's campaign. His office was flooded with letters and telegrams with a 15 to 1 ratio in favor of his stance against the Klan.<sup>175</sup>

As 1965 ended, the NAACP and Civil Rights Commission recognized that the most pressing issue in Mississippi was racial violence and inequality. On January 9, 1966, Vernon Dahmer, a civil rights leader and president of the Hattiesburg NAACP, announced on the radio that his store in Kelly Settlement was accepting poll tax payments and promised to cover the cost for those who couldn't afford it. In the early hours of January 10, eight members of the White Knights drove to Dahmer's property and launched an attack. They shot out the windows of his home and store and then threw in firebombs made from gasoline-filled plastic jugs.<sup>176</sup>

Amazingly, the initial gunshots did not wake Dahmer, but the fire did. He quickly took up his shotgun and shot at the attackers, allowing his wife, children, and aunt to get away, with just one child getting hurt. Outdoors, the attackers at the shop mistakenly fired on their own when they turned on the car lights, resulting in one of their cars getting a flat tire. In the chaos, attacker Billy Roy Pitts lost his gun, and another driver left his car behind after only making it three miles, later

falsely claiming it was stolen. Despite being severely harmed by the fire, Dahmer managed to make it to a hospital. However, he passed away at 3:45 am due to the severe damage the smoke and heat had done to his lungs.<sup>177</sup>

FBI agents quickly linked the deserted car to its owner, Howard Giles, an experienced car thief working at Laurel's Masonite plant. Giles, also known as a leader in the White Knight Klan chapter in Jones County, reported his car stolen after eating at the Chow House, a restaurant favored by Klan members and owned by Henry De Boxtel. On January 11, an informant told the FBI that Sam Bowers praised the Laurel Klansmen for their work, suggesting they were more effective than another group in Mississippi. Bowers expressed his wish for the Klan to cause distractions whenever they faced scrutiny elsewhere, keeping FBI agents occupied. The following day, another source confirmed the White Knight's involvement in Dahmer's killing, pointing to Lawrence Byrd, a prominent oil businessman and Klan member, as a suspect. Byrd admitted his role to the authorities on March 2, and also convinced another Klan leader, Cecil Sessum, to confess.<sup>178</sup>

Following the tragic killing of Vernon Dahmer by the Ku Klux Klan, the Bogalusa Deacons in Louisiana established a subsidiary division called the police unit in Hattiesburg, during 1966. They collaborated with locals to set up an additional branch in Laurel, which broadened their engagement to the labor sphere. In Laurel, the Deacons endorsed voter registration drives and laid the groundwork for the basis of the paramilitary organization of a labor movement. They were receptive to a harder line in fighting racial injustices. In the midst of the March Against Fear, initiated by James Meredith, organizations SNCC and COFO openly adopted the 'Black Power' mantra, indicating a shift towards assertiveness and self-dependence.<sup>179</sup>

The Deacons, recognized for supporting nonviolent CORE demonstrators in Mississippi, did not partake in protest marching themselves. However, they were prepared to defend peaceful activists and African American neighborhoods from Klan aggression, using firearms if needed. On the second day of Meredith's march, he was wounded by a shooter. Promptly, leading civil rights groups SNCC, CORE, and SCLC pledged to persevere with the march. Earnest "Chilly Willy"

Thomas, head of the Deacons for Defense & Justice, insisted on an aggressive stance to secure the march, stating his commitment to protect the community without directly participating in the march, ensuring anyone harmed would not suffer without a response.<sup>180</sup>

The FBI deployed a large team of agents to Forrest County to initiate DABURN (Dahmer burning) investigation. Subsequently, in his State of the Union speech, President Johnson urged Congress to enhance federal court powers to prosecute those who kill or threaten civil rights activists or any individuals asserting their legal rights, and to toughen the penalties for these crimes. Within two months after the crime, the FBI detained thirteen people linked to the murder, most of them members of the White Knights. Sam Bowers was pinned as the 14th person involved and the brains behind the operation. He handed himself over a few days afterward. Charges against the other thirteen involved breaking two laws: the Reconstruction Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, for infringing on Dahmer's civil rights.<sup>181</sup>

A jury made up of twelve individuals—five men and seven women, all white—was chosen for the trial. Despite the presence of several African Americans among the over 200 potential jurors and the inclusion of at least 17 on the panel, none were picked for the jury due to the defense lawyers' objections. The defense probed each African American about links to the NAACP, and despite an attempt to dismiss one member, the judge declined the motion. All potential jurors were asked about involvement in civil rights actions, which led to a black woman being dismissed after she acknowledged participation in a civil rights march and membership in the NAACP. A white man, when questioned, admitted former ties to the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan but insisted it would not affect his judgment. Although his membership to the group did not result in his removal, he did not end up on the jury.<sup>182</sup>

Despite a mistrial, the White Knights experienced internal strife and violent conflicts. During this time, Bowers, their leader, made a controversial statement at a public event in support of James Eastland. He claimed the Republican Party was under Jewish control, causing upset among Republican-supporting attendees. This prompted them to aggressively demand Bowers retract his statement, even threaten-

ing him with guns. One member went as far as to threaten Bowers' life if he ever came back to their community, putting his leadership in doubt.<sup>183</sup>

The reputation of the White Knights took a major hit due to the scandal involving Dahmer. The combined efforts of the FBI and the Mississippi Highway Patrol to undermine the group, along with local Mississippians speaking out against the Klan, hastened their decline. In early 1966, the White Knights' numbers plummeted from around 6,000 members to only 1,500 a year later. By early 1967, membership had fallen further to just 400. These disruptions showed that Mississippi was starting to be a community that respected the law more. It marked a period when law enforcement, including the sheriffs' department, began to improve. The staff became more competent and received better training, showcasing Mississippi's progress towards a more law-abiding state.<sup>184</sup>

## **Black Power and Resistance**

On June 16, while speaking in Greenwood, Mississippi, during the March Against Fear, Stokely Carmichael, the fresh leader of SNCC, looked out over a crowd in one of his beloved Delta cities. Over time, he grew fond of Greenwood. He declared to his audience, "We want Black Power," and they echoed the sentiment, shouting "Black Power" in return. Carmichael urged for burning Mississippi courthouses the next day to cleanse them of corruption, signaling a call to arms for future generations of African Americans and other oppressed individuals throughout the nation. Following the march, tension arose between the established nonviolent approach of the movement and the new, forceful Black Power stance. In Laurel, the young and old were divided. While the older generation continued to embrace peaceful protests, the younger ones saw themselves as revolutionaries.<sup>185</sup>

Black Power transformed into active resistance in Laurel, where the Burger Chef on Cook Avenue stood in the heart of KC Bottom, Laurel's poorest African American area. This restaurant served Black customers through a back window but refused them seating inside. This discriminatory practice angered one predominantly white community but was especially pronounced in their district. When Black

demonstrators walked into the Burger Chef, the white crowd quickly threatened violence. A group of twenty stood ready to retaliate with bottle-throwing if African Americans were barred entry. The white crowd yelled, "Go home Yankees!" During the turmoil, white aggressors, armed with knives, slashed a young Black man, Terry Gillum, across his face and cut his brother Willie Roy on the chest. Police overlooked calls for help from African Americans, who, fearful, did not leave their names. Some white customers looked on, confused. A white youth, Frank McKenzie, was shocked to see several white adults beating a Black teenager with a lead-filled hose as he tried to flee.<sup>186</sup>

The day after the initial conflict at Burger Chef, the teens returned, and their arrival was met with intense anger. The police were there to intervene, telling them to leave immediately. Jerome Wyatt, one of the teenagers, calmly warned a white customer to follow the police's directive. However, other Black onlookers were incensed. Charles Coleman, aged 30, charged at Harrell Stringer, an enraged white man who was threatening him, and stabbed him. Charles Jordan was also there, brandishing his shotgun, ready to confront anyone challenging him. Both Coleman and Jordan were swiftly taken into custody by the police.<sup>187</sup>

However, whites who had attacked the Black teenagers were not detained, and the local newspaper, *Laurel Leader-Call*, didn't even report on the incident or what led up to the Black community's outrage. Enraged by the unequal treatment and bias, some Black community members fought back by throwing stones at white people's cars passing through the KC Bottom. When James Lee Buckley, a 20-year-old Black man, threw rocks and bottles at cars with white occupants, injuring a woman and her child, he was charged with assault with intent to seriously harm. Even though Klan power shifted and affected Laurel's community, the local Civil Rights Movement experienced ups and downs. By 1966, the movement's reaction was mixed, showing as much stability as change. Immediate efforts to overhaul the unfair societal structure in Jones County or the broader state were not observed. Yet, the significant positive changes began to emerge following the Klan-related violence, eventually leading to a fairer Laurel for all residents.<sup>188</sup>





## 6

# ONE WHO SHEDS BLOOD

Masonite is the beginning of a pattern. This local has a way been radical and a thorn in the company's side. They've had some bad strikes down there. If they destroy this local, unionism in Mississippi will be set back decades. Masonite laid a trap for them, and they walked right into it.

— Claude Ramsey, President of the AFL-CIO, 1967

Following the Mississippi killings, FBI agents not only cracked cases of Klan-related bombings and murders but also learned to prevent such violence by employing informants, keeping watch, and other tactical methods. In places where influential figures chose to curb Klan brutality, the FBI provided local police with crucial information. They collected evidence of small-scale legal breaches and handed it to local law enforcers, who then strategically targeted Klan members. These members faced arrests and charges for trivial matters, leading to wasted time, drained resources, and hindered Klan activities. Still, the Klan's anti-unionism continued to be an issue to exploit.<sup>189</sup>

From 1946 to 1967, the union at Laurel's Masonite facility walked out on strike seven times, leading to a total income loss of over one million dollars. The strikes of 1946 and 1949 lasted between one and a half to five months, while in 1951 and 1958, there were briefer walk-outs lasting from a few days to three months. In the 1960s, the worker disputes at Laurel were reflective of the broader national climate of strife and upheaval. Before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 came into effect, black employees at the Masonite plant in Laurel formed their



Masonite in the 1960s (Courtesy of the Lauren Rogers Museum)

own all-black sub-local. Despite Laurel having a population of 25,000, with 37% being black, due to the majority-white workforce and racial segregation in the paper sector, the black subgroup had less influence in union matters. For example, pay increases in three departments were distributed by a system that kept black employees in lower-paid roles. Out of six departments that ranked by seniority—Shipping, Warehouse, Sample rooms, Locker room, Engine switching, and maintenance—only Shipping and Warehouse provided African Americans with roles above janitorial work.<sup>190</sup>

Additionally, the International Workers Association (IWA) exerted pressure on the union to amalgamate. This resulted in a merged union composition of 75% white and 25% black members. In the initial elections after amalgamation, black nominees vying for leadership roles in Local 5443 failed to win, as voting divided along racial lines. The white president of the Local, J.D. Jolly, observed that black members grew distant from the union activities and refrained from running for positions thereafter. Jolly suggested that the lack of collaboration between white and black members in selecting leaders was undermin-

ing the union's strength against the company. He expressed concern that without a unified front the divide would persist.<sup>191</sup>

Admitting that just a handful were associated with the Klan, Jolly acknowledged the group's significant influence in Laurel. The White Knights ruthlessly targeted civil rights workers in Jones County and throughout Mississippi to stifle the push for civil rights, particularly efforts to ensure the Civil Rights Act was followed. Otis Matthews, financial secretary of Local 5443, was relentless in his efforts to desegregate the Klan-dominated Masonite plant. Along with J.D. Jolly and other union officers, Matthews held meetings with Masonite employees from every shift, reporting that over 90% supported the union's dedication to the principle of law and order.<sup>192</sup>

The planned merger of races at the workplace was met with strong opposition from white members and non-members alike. On the evening of November 18, a band of Ku Klux Klan members tailed Otis Matthews after he left the union building. When he was on a bridge, another vehicle flashed its lights to signal Matthews' location. A Klansman got out of his car, lifted his hood, and pretended to fix his engine. As Matthews neared, another car rushed behind, trapping him. The Klan members quickly approached Matthews, threatened him with a gun, and dragged him out of his car. They took him to an isolated spot, forced him to lie face down, and threatened his life if he did not stop attempting to integrate the union. Matthews begged for his life as they struck him fifteen times with a thick strap and poured a burning liquid on his wounds. They let him go, warning they would kill him if he spoke of the attack. Matthews defied their warning and reported the incident the next day.<sup>193</sup>

In a public statement placed in the *Laurel Leader-Call*, sixteen union leaders made a strong stand against their assailants. They firmly announced that they will no longer tolerate any form of abuse, either verbal or physical, against any union member or officer. "We declare that this is the last indignity that is going to happen to an official or an employee of this union, whether it be verbal or physical." The officials were resolute in their stance, indicating they would fight back, even to the point of lethal confrontation, if necessary, to protect their progress and rights, especially in public areas. They stated they are ready to

defend themselves, having been advised to take up arms. This straightforward warning was effective—there were no further skirmishes.<sup>194</sup>

Despite being a supporter of racial segregation, newspaper editor J.W. West took a stand against violence. By publishing a union advertisement, the local newspaper risked backlash. Not long before the assault on Matthews, an explosion had damaged the *Laurel Leader-Call's* pressroom, shattering its windows and walls. West recalled a recent incident where the Ku Klux Klan set ablaze a cross outside their building. He was cautious to avoid divisive opinions in the paper's editorials, particularly on race matters. Nonetheless, their reporting on the Masonite corporation's activities drew the ire of the Klan's public faction.<sup>195</sup>

On March 3, 1967, the union Local 5443 of the IWA partnered with Masonite and the larger union group AFL-CIO to create a deal that helps solve worker complaints in five steps. If these steps don't work, arbitration is used as the last resort. The deal has a part, Article 23, that says workers cannot strike, and Article 26 explains how to fix issues and use arbitration. With this deal in place, the union and its members could not start strikes or stop work until the contract ends. Traditionally, labor unions did not consistently dedicate effort or resources to rally workers in the South. This lack of action had given conservative forces greater confidence to intensify their unfair treatment of employees. While the South had seen significant economic expansion, outpacing other regions for many years, this surge was largely due to regressive and overt business-centric policies that involved lower taxes, lax regulations, minimal wages, and strict laws that restrict union power.<sup>196</sup>

On April 21, employees at Masonite staged a walkout after management fired an employee for his support of a worker who had refused to move an employee's lunch table, which had been obtained by going to the third step of the grievance procedure. The walkout violated the no-strike agreement between the International Woodworkers of America and the plant, but the strikers revolted anyway. For years, workers had suffered under management that told them to complete tasks outside their job descriptions, and union members were singled out and endured criticism from ubiquitous Masonite agents who shadowed them, scrutinized their work and actions, and threatened to fire

them. On the night of the strike, Andrew Goettman, the maintenance and engineering manager, tried to leave the plant but was viciously attacked by strikers who gave him a black eye. For the next four days, R.E. Paul, the general manager of Masonite's Mississippi operations and manager of plant training, had been attempting to enter the plant for four days, but he was barred by strikers each time.<sup>197</sup>

Amid disorder, Judge Shannon Clark instructed striking workers to resume their duties. Nonetheless, 2,000 of them, including many Klansmen employed at the facility, defied the order. However, that evening Judge Clark, swayed by the union's plea, allowed the strikes to proceed, provided they remained nonviolent. The next morning, R.E. Paul and Lewis Carter, while driving to the plant, were confronted by a swarm of cars and protesters blocking the entrance. The crowd attacked Paul's vehicle, breaking the rear window, attempting to smash the side windows, and stomping the windshield, without breaking it. Paul could not enter the plant, leading Masonite to take legal action against IWA, AFL-CIO, and Local 5433. In early May, the Mississippi Supreme Court intervened, directing the union members back to work. Despite this, the strike carried on, and Masonite pressed contempt charges against 82 union officials. Further legal battles caused division in Laurel, as black employees started returning to their jobs, while most white strikers remained. Masonite compensated for productivity losses by hiring unemployed college students of all races. Strikers showed bitterness towards these newcomers, but the African American workforce saw a silver lining. In the words of long-time Masonite employee Sam Simmons, the strike opened doors to job opportunities previously out of reach for them.<sup>198</sup>

At their most charitable, white workers tended to dismiss black strikebreakers as misguided, ill-informed pawns of capital. Had they inquired further into their opponents' motives, many of their fears would have undoubtedly been confirmed. Certainly, some black strikebreakers were recruited under false pretenses or were honestly unaware that they were being used as weapons against white labor, as whites occasionally claimed. Certain black employees were clearly aware of their actions; they eagerly sought chances to work as strikebreakers in opposition to white workers, a white union publication declared. African

American workers often faced discriminatory union practices and job segregation, making their strikebreaking roles a genuine concern for white union members. Black strikebreaking was essentially a strategic movement by working-class African Americans aiming to promote the welfare of their own workers and households—a concept that many white workers and black leaders found difficult to grasp.<sup>199</sup>

As Masonite leaders and union representatives were embroiled in a legal dispute over the strike, members of the White Knights sought to throw Masonite's operations into chaos. Over the subsequent week, Klan members aimed to hinder the functioning of the plant by setting off explosives at Masonite sites, causing disruptions to transport, and targeting both managers and workers. On July 17, they detonated between 12 to 15 sticks of dynamite at a well situated a half mile from the facility. The blast showered the area with debris, narrowly missing employees on their lunch break and damaging a pickup truck parked a quarter of a mile away. Despite the explosion, the plant's activities continued unabated. Klan members also attempted to sabotage the United Gas Company pipeline, but this too had only a brief impact and did not significantly disrupt Masonite operations.<sup>200</sup>

Undiscouraged, the following day, Klan assailants shot a ball bearing through the car window of Andrew Goettman, a maintenance and engineering manager, using slingshots. The projectile shattered the glass but did not harm Goettman. Alongside this, strikers pelted workers with eggs and stones during shift transitions, and nightriders attacked the plant with cherry bombs and gunshots aimed at Masonite's primary power unit. Ultimately, Masonite officials were compelled to employ security personnel to safeguard the facility and its employees. Regardless of circumstances, Klansmen attacked them, even in broad daylight.<sup>201</sup>

The next day, the situation at Masonite escalated into virtual war-zone. Wackenhut security set up defensive positions across the site, with guards armed with shotguns fortified in sandbagged shelters. The facility resembled a military stronghold more than a manufacturing site. Masonite even purchased a nearby gas station where employees gathered, instructing them to vacate the premises. Bowers exploited the situation and the resentment felt by white workers as they saw

their jobs being filled by African Americans, and he used this to recruit them for the White Knights.<sup>202</sup>

Bower's use of racial division in the workplace was a counter to the black scab's quest for economic power. Strikebreakers' plan to continue work was risky and had its downsides. This strategy was always a gamble. Black workers were valued by white employers because they could limit the influence of white workers. However, they were still at risk in the job market and often faced worse or equally bad working conditions that had led white workers to strike. Additionally, black workers who took the jobs of strikers risked being targeted with violence by the strikers and their allies, who saw them as unwelcome outsiders in labor disputes. Many white workers dismissed black workers' complaints about being left out of unions and jobs. Instead of understanding, they blamed black workers for the issues and were unwilling to acknowledge that black workers efforts to break strikes or even their participation in more common forms of labor activism were legitimate ways to fight for their rights.<sup>203</sup>

Hence, Bowers joined forces with Klan members Deavours Nix, V.L. Lee, and Norman Lee to intensify their campaign against the African American strikebreaker. He turned the White Knights into one of the most active hubs of terror activity that summer. Large groups formed picket lines, while smaller teams watched the plant and noted who crossed the picket line. Masonite issued 700 letters demanding workers return to work or forfeit their employment rights with the company. R.E. Paul got numerous calls from employees who did not strike about menacing calls they received from Klan members, threatening them with violence if they went back to work as the company letters asked. On the morning of May 22, a crowd of 350 white strikers taunted 60 African Americans who decided to work despite the strike.<sup>204</sup>

The judicial system aimed to control the unrest by imposing limits on the strike. On June 22, Chancellor Shannon Clark lifted the strike's temporary ban but also prohibited the strikers from picketing or disrupting the work at the plant. Masonite objected to this decision. The Mississippi Supreme Court stepped in on July 10, reinstating the ban on the Masonite strikers, preventing them from picketing as long as



the legal case was ongoing. Authorities anticipated possible violence and kept a close watch on the strike organizers. When a large group from Jones County, including several Klan members, attended these hearings, state police officers encircled the courthouse and recorded the Klan members present. Additionally, the state police boosted their patrols around the factory.<sup>205</sup>

The local police's presence did not stop the ongoing violence. In fact, the White Knights escalated their attacks. From June 29 to July 15, they targeted and shot at the homes of multiple workers who did not support the strike. On the night of July 12, LV Reed, a senior Masonite employee who returned to work a week earlier, experienced a shooting at his home. While his family was asleep, his house was hit by five bullets, breaking a large window and damaging his vehicle's rear and side windows. Judge Casey was openly critical about the night riders' blatant disregard for the law. He urged all local law enforcement, including the sheriff's office, city police, and deputies, to put in a full effort to find the people who shot at the Reed residence. In the subsequent week, an attack unfolded at the home of another Masonite worker, Gordon Flemming. His home was hit 41 times by gunfire, injuring his wife in the process. The police believed the intent of these attacks was to kill those inside, rather than merely frighten them.<sup>206</sup>

The shooting incident involving Mrs. Flemming prompted immediate concern among other workers' wives. On July 7, a group of Masonite union workers' wives marched to Laurel City Hall, led by Edna Earl Lewis as their representative, to ask Mayor Fern Bucklew for help in resolving the ongoing 76-day strike at the Masonite factory. Around 90 women took part in the march, and while Lewis and a few others met with the mayor, District Attorney W.O. Chet Dillard, Police Chief Clyde Nix, and Detective Captain Thomas Segrest inside, the rest of the women waited in the courtroom.<sup>207</sup>

They found Mayor Bucklew willing to listen and address their concerns. Although the meeting was successful, the women felt compelled to take their cause up with Governor Paul Johnson for further action. After leaving the City Hall, the women approached local businesses to express their discontent. Any store that did not support the



union was boycotted, prompting the group to go to Meridian instead of shopping in Laurel. They spent the day there and planned to continue doing so in the future. During this time, prominent civil rights figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and Huey Newton highlighted the importance of mobilizing workers at the community level as a means to promote both racial equality and economic fairness.<sup>208</sup>

Robert “Bob” Zellner, who hailed from Alabama and was the son of a one-time Ku Klux Klan member, was moved by his Methodist values to participate in the civil rights movement. He became the first white person to serve as a field secretary for the SNCC. Together with his wife Dottie, also a SNCC activist, Bob Zellner put forward an idea to rally working-class white Southerners to the civil rights cause by focusing on their shared experiences of labor exploitation. Although SNCC’s leadership decided against this strategy, preferring an all-black staff, the Zellner’s teamed up with Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF) affiliates to establish the Grass Roots Organizing Work (GROW).<sup>209</sup>

In 1967, GROW’s interracial team, including Zellner and New Republic of Africa’s Walter Collins along with others, ventured into Klan-dominated Laurel, to rally white employees for black liberation amid the Masonite strike. Jack Minnis, the Research Director for GROW, was skilled at pinpointing weaknesses within the system. He collected all the available data on the strike, realizing that the international union had breached its own rules by establishing the trusteeship and agreeing to the contract with Masonite. Jack Peebles, an attorney and SCEF’s Vice President, advocated for the local Laurel residents in court. The legal battle with the International Woodworkers of America was becoming more intense. Adding to the controversy, Hulse Hayes, associated with the firm that crafted the 1946 Taft-Hartley Act, led a team of five lawyers on behalf of Masonite. Meanwhile, the International hired a prominent Little Rock firm that boasted an ex-Governor and a former Commissioner of the Arkansas Public Service Commission.<sup>210</sup>

Minnis held meetings to inform workers about their legal challenges and educate them on both state and federal judicial systems, highlighting Senator James Eastland’s influence on the appointment of

federal judges. Zeller stood firm in his belief that the African American union members were being deceived. His goal was to raise community awareness, improve research methods, and ensure that knowledge was open for everyone to access. During a session with Laurel unionists, Bob conveyed his vision:

We are trying to carry on the work of organizing grassroots in the South, like in Laurel, Mississippi. If we had the kind of organization we hope to have in a year or so, the fight would involve many people across the South and not just be between labor and management in one town. Have we started some- thing that will get the working people of the South together, politically and economically? I believe that we have.<sup>21</sup>

GROW had multiple meetings with the strikers during the period of the labor dispute. The pressing need at the time was to persuade African American workers to leave the plant and rejoin the strike line. However, these workers felt marginalized by the local union, despite enjoying higher pay compared to other African American workers in Mississippi because of the union's strength. Workers such as David Seals, a trucker for Masonite, did not feel compelled to take sides, opting to stay away from the strike to provide for his family. As their only vehicle was required by his wife Cora, a teacher, for her commute, she had no choice but to drive him to work, braving offensive shouts and threats along the way. They attempted to disregard the hostility and not dwell on the potential for violence that loomed.<sup>212</sup>

Others, like Alvin Gore Sr., initially joined the picketers but stepped back when the strike faced intimidation from the Klan. With his wife Maycie actively participating in civil rights efforts, Gore felt extremely vulnerable. When Masonite warned that they would fire any worker who kept striking, Gore, along with many others, returned to work. Gore and other African American employees used carpooling, often in packed pickup trucks with armed riders, as a safety measure. When confronted or followed by hostile white groups, these armed

workers would not hesitate to defend themselves.<sup>213</sup>

When the Ku Klux Klan started attacking non-union workers and college students, the aggression sparked opposition from influential local conglomerates toward Bowers and his followers. This surge of violence prompted city, state, and national officials to step in with comprehensive investigations. Mayor Fern Bucklew, city leaders, and members of the Laurel community jointly denounced the violent acts. At the community's plea, state troopers poured into Laurel while Sheriff Merrill Pickering began an inquiry and amped up neighborhood patrols to bring an end to the nighttime terror. The FBI teamed up with local law enforcement to zoom in on the Klansmen intimidating workers at the Masonite Plant.<sup>214</sup>

Jones County's District Attorney Dillard, along with Sheriff Pickering, called on locals for assistance in identifying the night riders. Dillard described the plant as a battleground. Sheriff Pickering reminded residents of their right to protect their homes and united them, along with people from nearby areas, to form a Committee of Concern. This committee passed a resolution to denounce the strike-related violence. Judge Lunsford Casey urged the grand jury to delve into the nighttime terror and pledged to prosecute those responsible. Questioning how long innocent people must endure, he likened the criminal actions to a snake that moves under the cover of darkness, injecting its poison into the unsuspecting lives of its targets.<sup>215</sup>

Despite the situation, the local authorities and Masonite appeared more focused on defending white employees over their black counterparts. Consequently, the sheriff instructed the black laborers to defend themselves, which led to their arrest after they acted. During a clash, striking worker Deavours Valentine threw a bottle at Otis Milsaps, who was black; when Milsaps threw it back, the police intervened and detained him. Any improvements that seemed to benefit African Americans were viewed with suspicion. Masonite's move to recruit black workers as strikebreakers for jobs typically held by whites provided new openings for them, but it also escalated racial discord. This tactic also caused a rift among workers, while civil rights advocates contended that Masonite and the union was exploiting Klan activities as a strategy to undermine African American efforts.<sup>216</sup>

The dueling visions of the law—majoritarian, anti-statist industrial pluralism versus state-assisted redress of individual claims of racial discrimination—generated a lot of conflict between unions and civil rights activists. A suspicious Susie Ruffin expressed disapproval of the local union, pointing out that the union leaders in Laurel had used racially divisive tactics in their campaigns instead of uniting all workers around common financial complaints. The union backed a strike led by white workers who were against promoting African Americans. Another critic from the Freedom Democrats slammed the Mississippi AFL-CIO, noting it mainly consisted of craft unions that were “whiter than lilies after the rain,” highlighting that it hadn’t organized the state’s African American cotton pickers, who were paid only three dollars a day. However, some African American members of the union did not have complaints; one worker stated the necessity of being in a union for protection, crediting the union with ensuring good pay and job stability.<sup>217</sup>

Meanwhile, a collection of African Americans known as the Negro Citizens of Jones County wrote a letter to Mayor Fern Bucklew. They urged him to look into the police’s role, questioning “why you don’t make these people go home. If you really and truly want to keep Laurel ‘The city Beautiful’ instead of letting it become ‘The City Bloody,’ we are humbly asking you to make the people stay away from the Masonite plant threatening the poor working men.” In response, Mayor Bucklew reprimanded the group, stating that he does not respond to anonymous messages, reminding them that he is always available to discuss any issues face-to-face. He noted their views did not reflect the majority of the town and expressed his willingness to accept advice to resolve the tension surrounding Masonite.<sup>218</sup>

Three days later, on the early morning of August 14, gunfire erupted around the Masonite factory, with bullets bouncing off the machinery and striking a security vehicle’s windows, wounding the passenger, Sergeant DeFazio, while Robert B. Sparkman was driving. Meanwhile, Sparkman spotted a man running towards the Union Hall, prompting them to seek shelter. Masonite’s guards, Julian Carr and Robert Anthony Billiot, a Vietnam veteran with the prestigious Green Berets, left their stations to pursue the source of the gunshots. Shortly

after, Billiot quickly armed himself with a knife and gun for defense, and Carr heard more shots fired. Suddenly, the area went completely dark as Klansmen shot out the factory lighting. Carr dropped to the ground until the shooting stopped. When he got up, he looked for Billiot and found him on his back with blood streaming from his head due to multiple shots in the face. Billiot was killed at age 23. Sergeant DeFazio alerted his team, stating that Billiot's "brains [was] all over the place," insisting his guards not to engage, determined to avoid any more deaths under his watch.<sup>219</sup>

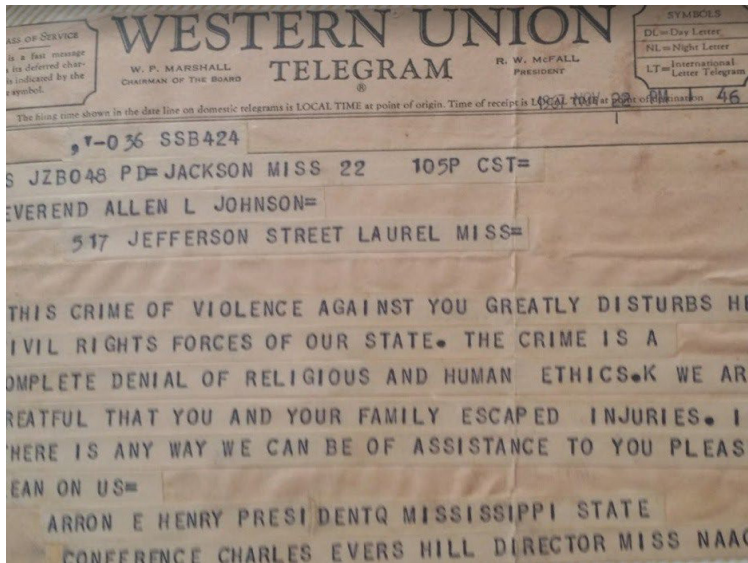
In Laurel, the Klan's already minimal backing vanished entirely following Billiot's killing. Masonite offered a \$10,000 reward for tips leading to an arrest, and an anonymous local group added \$15,000. District Attorney Dillard labeled the crime as a blatant act of murder. Mayor Bucklew vowed that the killer would be pursued by the police and praised the people of Laurel for keeping their composure during the crisis. The slaying of the security guard hired by Masonite did not calm the ongoing strike. In August, the grand jury convened, with Judge Casey urging them to formally accuse those responsible. The Klan's rise to power, through instilling widespread fear, was likened to the tactics used by dictators like Hitler and Stalin. This trend was also noted in Jones County. Prosecutors showed that the assailants were involved in various violent acts, shootings at 16 houses, and bombings. During a visit to the Masonite Plant and the Union Hall, the jury found signs of 81 bullets. They stated that there was an emergency situation and blamed the police for neglecting their duties on the night of Billiot's death. Subsequent grand juries began to issue indictments in relation to the Masonite incidents, and while the aggression at Masonite diminished, the strike persisted.<sup>220</sup>

### **Hoping for a Better Place**

Reverend Allen Johnson, hailing from Jackson, Mississippi, became an ardent supporter of the labor cause after being moved by the plight of workers following the tragic death of Medgar Evers. His involvement was spurred on by witnessing a large march of 5,000 individuals paying tribute to Evers. Johnson stood out for his resilience in face

of challenging circumstances. During a demonstration on July 5 in Jackson, he received a minor injury to his jaw but brushed off the incident with laughter and encouraged fellow demonstrators to press on. In 1966, Johnson joined the March Against Fear, standing by notable figures like Martin Luther King Jr. during the final gathering near Mississippi's State Capitol. King talked about his aspiration to address poverty in Mississippi and reignite its dormant industries. Johnson then took the stage, invoking the thirteenth chapter of Hebrews, urging the crowd to welcome strangers and show empathy toward those in hardship, as if sharing their struggles. By June 1967, after dedicating years to promote voting rights for African Americans and sharing his sermons in Jackson, Johnson moved to Laurel, assuming the role of pastor at St. Paul Methodist Church.<sup>221</sup>

On November 10, 1967, law enforcement from Jackson County visited neighboring Jones County to detain Sam Bowers, Cecil Victor Sessums, and Deavours Nix. Their arrest followed state charges from Pascagoula, which came just four hours after Klansman Billy Roy Pitts, Bowers' bodyguard turned FBI informant, confessed to abducting Jack Watkins earlier that year in March. Pitts admitted that he, Attorney Travis Buckley, and three others abducted Watkins to coerce a confession for the Dahmer slaying but to no avail. Still, Pitts pleaded guilty to the kidnapping and received Pitts received a five-year sentence. Reverend Johnson spoke out, expressing relief that at last, the local people could sleep without fear with the White Knights now imprisoned. To Bowers, however, Johnson's statements were antagonizing, and soon after, Johnson became the target for the Klan's next hit. Within five days, the White Knights placed a bomb under the carport of the brick, ranch-style parsonage where Johnson and his family slept. The blast destroyed Johnson's new car, warped the carport's roof, and shattered areas within the house. The family piano was even hurled into Johnson's bedroom wall. Miraculously, Johnson, his spouse, their four children, and their church were all safe. Johnson attributes their survival to divine protection. The explosion was just one incident in a series of violent acts orchestrated by the Klan. The day after the attack, in a stance against fear, Johnson's wife sent their children to school, signaling to the townspeople that the Johnson family was undeterred



A message from Aaron Henry to Allen Johnson (Courtesy of Glenda Johnson)

by the bombing.<sup>222</sup>

Following the attack on Johnson's residence, the white community started to join forces with African Americans. The Committee of Concern in Laurel openly condemned the attack, stating their support for the authorities' commitment to bringing the perpetrators to justice. They believed that most residents would not stand for such violence. They collaborated with African Americans in Laurel to create a biracial committee aiming to curb violence, foster communication, and plan for upcoming peaceful protests. Reverend Robert Marsh was one of the signers of the alliance, typifying the traditionally moderate white pastors in the South. He rejected the violence perpetrated by the Klan and upheld the belief that all people are spiritually equal before God. African Americans across the Pine Belt region expressed their anger through large demonstrations. Notable figures like Reverend Milton Barnes and Reverend J.C. Killingsworth of Hattiesburg, as well as numerous black pastors from Laurel, led 100 students from Oak Park High School in a march from Johnson's charred home to the city hall. They refused to make more compromises. The people of Laurel did not wish to experience a race riot like Detroit, but they were



approaching the limits of their tolerance.<sup>223</sup>

The Jones County Ministerial Association, led by Wallace Mangum and composed solely of white leaders, strongly denounced the attack on Reverend Allen Johnson's home. They urged the local black and white communities to show mutual respect and work together to improve racial relations. The group recognized that the bombing reflected deeper issues of animosity, hatred, and prejudice in the community. They emphasized that Christian love should guide everyone towards peaceful coexistence and respect for every person's worth. The ministers called for the community to stay calm and help the authorities find those behind the attack. To support the cause, they gathered \$600 the following week to repair Johnson's home.<sup>224</sup>

The reaction of the Klan to opposition was expected, stemming from deep-seated and enduring rifts. Masonite took advantage of these bitter divides within the union, manipulating members as if in a strategic game. According to Claude Ramsey, black workers felt a profound sense of grievance across the nation, and white workers often avoided or outright rejected dealing with the issue. Ramsey warned that unless changes were made, the devastating events of Laurel could happen again. African Americans, often feeling let down by their white counterparts, were hesitant to start making amends, indicating that white individuals needed to step up first. Unionists believed solidarity was their shield. Following a new deal with Masonite, the company gained the upper hand to set work conditions and pay, leaving workers vulnerable should they confront Masonite in the future.<sup>225</sup>

Many of the original employees of Masonite had to find new employment, often traveling to different counties or states to do so. The large gatherings that used to have up to 600 attendees in a rural field across the county border had dwindled to just 40 to 50 individuals. Nevertheless, those who stayed were determined to keep up their fight. However, the nature of their battle had changed; it was no longer about the strike. The union was not the same—it was being managed by trustees. The workers understood that even if they were successful in their legal action against the company and the national union, the resolution might take so long that the trusteeship would have ended naturally. A few union members were brought back to work at the



plant, but not to resume their former roles. Instead, they were added to a general workforce, required to perform any given job at the set wage for the day. Additionally, there were still some former union members, specifically black men and women, who had not supported the strike from the start and continued to work at the plant.<sup>226</sup>

When the strike concluded, many of the former Masonite employees were forced to seek employment elsewhere, with some even relocating to different counties or states. Meetings that once numbered in the hundreds had dwindled to mere dozens, but this small group remained determined to continue their advocacy for union representation. Although the nature of their endeavor had altered post-strike, they were aware that any victory in their legal case against Masonite and the international body could be so protracted that the issue may resolve itself when the trusteeship concluded. At Masonite, some unionists returned to the factory, not to resume their old roles but to join a variable workforce where they were assigned any available job at the prevailing wage for that day. Meanwhile, there were still African American men and women from the original union who had never supported the strike and continued to work at the plant. In spite of these challenges, Bob Zellner and his colleagues remained dedicated to the Local's cause against Masonite. They were also focused on persuading white workers that their own interests were undermined by discriminatory practices against African Americans.<sup>227</sup>

Civil rights leaders consistently highlighted the link between economic injustices and America's racial disparities, advocating for progressive labor unions. They often compared the jobless, poor whites to the maltreated black laborer, aiming to rally the impoverished towards collective liberation from the start. In November 1967, Martin Luther King revealed his plan for the Poor People's Campaign at a Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) staff retreat. Aiming for a method that avoided both violent protests and weak appeals for justice, King intended to lead 2,000 impoverished individuals to Washington, DC, and cities across the North and South. Their objective was to demand jobs, unemployment insurance, a fair minimum wage, and education for poor adults and children designed to improve their self-image and self-esteem. King continuously rallied through towns

like Greenwood, Clarksdale, and Grenada in Mississippi, always focused on the link between racial injustice and poverty while recruiting for the campaign.<sup>228</sup>

Martin Luther King Jr. arrived in Laurel on March 18, 1968. That evening, he was warmly welcomed by Reverend Allen Johnson who hosted King and his close colleagues, Ralph Abernathy, Hosea Williams, Dorothy Cotton, and Leon Hall, for dinner at his newly finished parsonage. The following night, an eager audience waited at St. Paul Methodist Church in Laurel as King was set to speak in support of the upcoming Poor People's March in Washington. King arrived at the church around 10 pm, delayed and having taken a safer route due to the threat posed by the local presence of the Ku Klux Klan. Despite the delay, King entered the church confidently and captivated the congregation with his powerful call to action, declaring their march on Washington was not about begging but insisting on immediate changes to better the lives of the poor. He pinpointed racism as America's core problem, and with the audience's overwhelming support, he emphasized the dire need for fair-paying jobs.<sup>229</sup>

King's campaign led to the creation of a temporary settlement of 3,000 people in Washington, and the movement captured the nation's attention—even as the FBI actively targeted African American organizations through COINTELPRO. Tensions were high, featuring prominently in events like the Orangeburg Massacre, the Democratic National Convention, and the trial of the Chicago Seven. Tragically, less than a month after his Laurel visit, King was assassinated, sparking waves of riots and unrest in over one hundred cities. The social fabric was tired of the ongoing turmoil, and there was a shifting sentiment among many Americans for more order and peace, which paved the way for new narratives in politics.<sup>230</sup>

## **Trial and Destruction**

On January 21, 1969, Sam Bowers stood trial, charged with murder and arson, after a month and three days since his indictment. A group of 100 specially selected individuals was called to the Circuit Court as Bowers faced judgment. The appalling deeds linked to Bowers' Klan

in both the DABURN and MIBURN cases sparked outrage across the nation, leading to public statements from the White House and the attorney general's mandate for extensive FBI inquiries. Billy Roy Pitts served as the prosecution's key witness during the trial. Bowers, showing no emotion, heard Pitts describe how the plot to kill Vernon Dahmer began during a meeting where Bowers pounded his fist on a table, demanding action against Dahmer. Pitts remembered Bowers calling for a "Project Three," to burn Dahmer's house, and even a "Project Four," which meant Dahmer's killing.<sup>231</sup>

During the Bowers case on January 25, at 4:15 a.m., a train going north with 26 cars full of oil had a wheel break. This caused the train to come off the tracks and led to a massive explosion known as BLEVE. This blast tore through the air, aiming to break apart everything. It wiped out 46 buildings directly in the middle of Laurel's downtown. The power of the blast broke windows far and wide and sent fireballs shooting into the dark morning sky. Around ten blocks away, the blast brought down another 85 buildings. Businesses like Wansley Machine and Welding Supply, Harper Transfer and Storage, Woodall Industries, and S and V Wholesale were ruined completely. The leaders of the city in Laurel reached out to Mississippi's representatives in Congress to help get President Richard Nixon to proclaim that Laurel was a disaster area. Just two hours after the explosion first hit, Sheriff Jerry Landrum and Mayor Bucklew called on Governor John Bell Williams to bring in the local National Guard and Civil Defense. They were to help out the more than 70 highway patrol officers already on the scene.<sup>232</sup>

Residents in the area feared the worst. "I thought the whole world was on fire," said one resident. "I was lying there waiting to get up when the room lit up. Then I heard the first explosion." A nearby resident was asleep when her home was severed by the rupturing tank; miraculously, she was unharmed but hospitalized due to the shock. Throngs of people, eager to escape town for the day, queued at a gas station, vehicles packed with anxious families. The incident displaced 711 individuals from their residences. "It was an unbelievable sight," said Chuck Edwards, a National Guardsman. Five hours later, at 9:10 a.m., a racially diverse jury reported to Judge Stanton Hall they could not agree on a verdict, stuck at a 10-2 split. "If we stayed here six



A family walking around a destroyed black neighborhood (Courtesy of The Laurel Leader-Call)



Overhead shot of the train explosion (Courtesy of The Laurel Leader-Call).

months, it would still be 10 to 2,” noted the jury’s leader, Robert Spiers. This prompted Judge Hall to announce a mistrial. Following this, Lawrence Arrington, the defense attorney, sought bail for his client, Bowers. The town of Laurel was rocked by two calamitous events in quick succession, causing a blur in perceptions—the line between forward movement and the persistent shadow of Klan-related dread seemed to vanish momentarily.<sup>233</sup>

Many African Americans and some whites saw the accident as the work of the Ku Klux Klan, as the violence did not seem beyond what the Klan might do. Reverend Robert Marsh, a supporter of equality and justice who previously did not advocate racial integration, had his worldview rocked by a shocking incident. The day after Marsh honored a local businessman with a Jaycee Man of the Year award, the recipient was arrested along with 10 Klan members for the murder of Vernon Dahmer. Feeling disgraced, Marsh decided to leave Laurel and perhaps work at a seminary. Feeling liberated by the prospect of leaving, he shared his plans with Reverend Marcus Cooley saying he was “free at last” and ready to do the right thing since he had nothing more to lose.<sup>234</sup>

Reverend Cooley countered, insisting that true freedom isn't about having nothing to lose. “Surely you understand that until you are willing to lose everything, you will never know what it means to be free,” he argued, adding that Dahmer was a friend who left a wife and eight children; their lives forever changed. Cooley challenged Marsh's sincerity about caring for justice, given that he had just awarded a killer. Unaware of Cooley's connection to Dahmer, Marsh expressed his regret. Cooley then questioned Marsh on his actions with the guilt he felt, asking if he had used his position to speak against racism and for equal rights for African Americans. Cooley spurned white liberals morally, feeling they did not truly understand the importance of race and power in shaping society. He saw them as pretending to be progressive but linked them to the oppressive legacy of white supremacy. During the freedom fights, they faced criticism often. The late 1960s were a turning point for racial matters in the U.S., with African Americans increasingly adopting black nationalism. This new ideology became more influential than integration in the quest for black liberation.<sup>235</sup>

At the dawn of the 1960s, the Klan cases began to wind down. In the mid-June 1969, District Attorney Harold Odom and Jones County Attorney Robert Sullivan took Andre Hendry to court over the killing of Robert Anthony Billiot. They brought in 34 people to testify and showed plenty of proof, including a tape where it sounded like Hendry confessed to the crime. White said he sold this tape to Masonite for

more than \$20,000. They played the tape two times, but it was hard to hear what was being said. To fix this, they made the sound louder and put the tape player near the jury, which helped make the words clearer. It seemed Hendry told White on the tape that he shot the guard with a shotgun and spoke about it in a merciless way. When White asked if he felt any guilt, Hendry said it didn't affect him at all. After the crime, he said he removed the shells, gave them to Dubie, left, and then calmly went to have coffee. Pickering and Dillard were hoping that their work in this case and others involving Masonite would put a stop to the Klan's control in Laurel. Yet, Judge Lunsford Casey and the jury did not want to hold anyone accountable. The prosecutors, maybe because they were discouraged or they knew the local courts wouldn't convict Klan members, did not facilitate more cases linked to the Masonite Klan. The trial went on for six days, and in the end, the jury let Hendry go free from all charges.<sup>236</sup>

However, in November 24, 1969, a jury split 10-2 in favor of the conviction of Sam Bowers for arson in the Dahmer murder. Bowers would serve time behind bars for his part in the turmoil of those years. Still, he was never convicted for murder, which had a hung jury. He resided modestly on Laurel's Southside, an area populated mostly by African Americans. Many neighbors seemed unaware of Bowers' Klan connections. The White Knights fell off the grid in Laurel after a decade of terror and criminal trials. If the promise of the 1960s faltered in 1968—a year marred by assassinations, the Tet Offensive, and the waning of the new left—it also saw the decline of the postwar Ku Klux Klan. After the King riots diminished and school integration became more accepted or avoided in the South, the Klan was deprived of issues to exploit. This, combined with efficient FBI and police crack-downs on violence and local courts charging them, spelled the end for the Klan's activities.

# 7

## GOING BACK TO THE COUNTY

The current language of educational reform emphasizes racial ‘achievement gaps’ and ‘underperforming schools’ but also tends to approach education as if history had never happened. Integration was a flawed strategy, but it recognized the ties between racial history and educational outcomes.

– “Class Notes,” *The New Yorker*

Black power is organizing the rage of Black people and putting new hard questions and demands to white America.

- Charles Hamilton Houston

Eleven years after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown II* for school racial integration with “all deliberate speed,” many school districts in Mississippi with school segregation gave their students the right to choose between white and black schools, independently of their race. About a dozen black students, whose parents’ jobs were not at stake, opted for “freedom of choice” at the risk of alienation from Laurel’s black community. In particular, the Holmes family, who moved to Laurel in mid-1964, were among the first black families to successfully integrate Laurel public schools. In the summer of 1966, they attended a seven-week-long Summer Enrichment Program in Edwards, Mississippi, and Mary Holmes Junior College to “bring [black] children, whose parents had ‘chosen’ for them to attend all-White schools, up to speed before started.” Between these vigorous



sessions, they were taught horseback riding, how to swim, and how to “behave” when being followed in department stores. Ann Holmes, the youngest of the Holmes, recalled arriving at R. H. Watkins, seeing policemen standing carelessly with their arms folded and walking through a gauntlet of angry whites as they screamed racial attacks at her. Despite the constant abuse from teachers and students alike, Holmes graduated in May 1968. This efficacious moment made way for a new era of integration.<sup>237</sup>

A year and a half after October 29, 1969, the Supreme Court decided in the case of *Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education* that the era of ‘all deliberate speed’ for school desegregation was over. Because of this, African American students at Oak Park High were given a choice by Watkins: attend that school or stay at their current one. The Fifth Circuit then replaced Chief Judge Brown with Judge Griffin B. Bell, who along with the panel, ordered on November 7 that Judge Dan M. Russell from the Southern District would act as a special advisor. His job was to look over proposed changes and hold meetings about the plans for desegregation. Judge Russell was to report his findings and advice to the Appeals Court. No new plan could go ahead without the Fifth Circuit’s okay. By November 25, the Legal Defense Fund was brought in as a friend of the court in the cases filed by the US Department of Justice. As a result, the workload for the Mississippi office dealing with school desegregation grew fourfold. Even though the Legal Defense Fund later wanted to be more involved in some cases of the Justice Department, they still had the chance to take part in Judge Russell’s meetings and share their opinions on the plans with the Fifth Circuit, whether or not they were fully part of the case.<sup>238</sup>

At the start of the 1970s, seven states—Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Mississippi—still enforced segregated schools, against what the Brown ruling, which had deemed such systems illegal, had established. On March 24, 1970, President Richard Nixon made a detailed public announcement about his administration’s approach to ending school segregation. He suggested a two- year initiative, costing \$1.5 billion, to help school districts overcome the specific challenges they faced during deseg-



regation. Moreover, Nixon put in place a strategy to fulfill the legal requirements of desegregation. He assigned Vice President Spiro T. Agnew and Labor Secretary George Shultz to a cabinet committee responsible for overseeing the move to integrated schools.<sup>239</sup>

Discontent was felt by both segregationist whites and black civil rights leaders. African Americans criticized his overlooking of freedom of choice initiatives. Senator James Eastland echoed the feelings of many Southern whites, criticizing the President for endorsing separate but equal schools in the North, yet confirming the government's intent to integrate schools in the South. Nixon's stance was a departure from his usual policy and didn't align with Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) Department guidelines. Their initial desegregation rules for the 1965-1966 school term barely required schools to do anything to maintain federal funding. These rules were broad and un-specific, with no clear integration quotas for students and suggestions like joint staff meetings as an initial step towards integration; merely a genuine effort to start desegregation was needed. To comply, districts could adopt a freedom-of-choice plan affecting only a few grades. The shift was gradual, often involving only a small number of black students at a time. In Jones County School District, only a few decided to switch to predominantly white high schools.<sup>240</sup>

After a prolonged period of uncertainty spanning three years, the District Court finally revised the HEW's proposal, compelling the school district to promptly unify into one high school and one junior high school while dismantling racial segregation within the educational system. This directive was met with dissatisfaction by many parents of both black and white students in Laurel, who expressed concern about their children's safety. They worried about the inevitable interactions with trains in Laurel, a community characterized by its railway industry, as the HEW's strategy planned to integrate six of the local elementary schools. This would necessitate children encountering multiple treacherous rail crossings during their daily commutes, irrespective of the weather. A troubled parent stressed the potential hazards in a letter to the editor of the *Laurel-Leader*, cautioning that the likelihood of train-related accidents was high and questioning the potential loss of young lives should the HEW's approach be pursued.

In response to the uproar, the Laurel School District Superintendent, J.M. Caughman, aligned himself with the concerned parents. On August 7, the newly formed Committee of Concerned Parents, led by veteran educator and seamstress Ruth Reid, submitted a petition with 3,822 signatures to Caughman. The petition represented a stance in favor of the city's own desegregation plan and voiced opposition to the HEW's integration scheme due to the associated risks to students. It was presented to U.S. District Judge Walter N. Nixon.<sup>241</sup>

The Laurel School District, which managed racially separate schools, including R H Watkins High for whites and Oak Park High for African Americans, presented annual plans from 1965 to 1967 outlining a step-by-step process to integrate each school. The district officials hoped to avoid attracting attention from the US Justice Department with these plans. Nevertheless, on April 17, the Justice Department informed Mississippi education authorities of its plans to sue should the schools not be fully integrated by the fall of 1970. Following this notification, school districts hastily began to devise full desegregation strategies. While these efforts stopped overt segregation, they inadvertently stirred a significant increase in internal divisions.<sup>242</sup>

Oak Park High School had long been a hub of pride and achievement for the African American community, dating back to the 1920s. It was here that young black students felt at home, with faculty members often seen as an extension of their own families. The school's legacy includes alumni like Leontyne Price, who became the first African American to be a leading performer at the Metropolitan Opera, and Ralph Boston, who was a record-setting long jumper in the Olympics. The school held a special place in the hearts of its African American students and alumni, an affection not mirrored by the white authorities of the time. In 1970, as the high school was transitioned into an elementary school, workers cleared the premises of its historic emblems, including photographs and trophies, which were thrown away, and the treasured football gear was cast aside to be incinerated. This act was a clear indication that the imposed integration measures were far from an actual representation of equality.<sup>243</sup>

Mayor Bill Patrick, alongside the school board and local figures, arranged a meeting of about a hundred parents at Watkins High to mit-

igate the concerns of white families due to unplanned integration. The event aimed to showcase a constructive perspective and build a base of support-ive white residents. While the general sentiment about racial matters was passive, the past inequality suffered by African Americans instilled apprehension in white parents about potential retaliation. Conversely, black students were pleased with their schools, with many believing integration unnecessary. They were now tasked with mingling with the very group that had historically been their oppressors. Those against integration expressed deep resentment toward the widespread change and the federal government's tampering with the traditions of the South, directing significant disapproval at President Richard Nixon. Former Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett, on September 8, prophesied that Nixon's presidency would not extend beyond one term due to his support of integrating schools. Speaking to the Citizen Council of America at their yearly sum- mit, Barnett implied that mandatory integration hinted at a new period of imposing widespread changes in the South. He reminded the audience of Nixon's pledge to Southern constituents to treat their interests fairly. Now, nearly two years post-election, Barnett branded that commitment as a farce.<sup>244</sup>

A mere six days after a new semester commenced at R. H. Watkins High School, the autumn of 1970 marked the end of segregation across all school districts. This was a marked contrast to just three years prior, in 1967, when a third of Mississippi's school districts remained segregated and less than three percent of black students shared classrooms with their white peers. Despite the legal changes, the effects of segregation were still felt, with many black students preferring the safety of their former segregated schools. White district leaders often doubted the capabilities of black educators in leadership positions. Although the schools were no longer segregated by law, the discontent among the white population was noticeable. White officials continued to suppress African American educators by assigning them to inferior positions to maintain control in the education system. As a result, these once-respected black teachers and principals, key figures in their communities and mentors for the youth, found themselves marginalized. Black educators, previously with strong job security, particularly in districts where they were numerous, often found themselves unjustly

unemployed. Despite their dedication, this relegation marked a significant setback in their status, with bias coming from superiors and colleagues.<sup>245</sup>

Alex Warren, formerly the principal of Oak Park, was demoted to an aide at Watkins High due to a district reshuffle. Irving Morrell, a decorated coach, similarly found himself reassigned to a middle school. This trend saw white officials relinquishing junior roles, diminishing the impact of black educators. Guidelines emerged that barred black teachers from disciplining white students, establishing a racially based hierarchy that undermined African Americans' authority, including over students of their own race. Through various measures, white school authorities-main- tained control over the unified educational facilities.<sup>246</sup>

The moment the African American students entered through the main doors, they faced immediate ridicule from those against them. The school's teachers deliberately arranged classroom seating by race; with black students often relegated to the back or one side of the room, while white students occupied the front or the opposite side. Tensions were palpable in the shared hallways among students and teachers of both races, with some believing it was necessary to mark their territory. During a dispute about school rules, principal Allan McClure expelled Richard Porter, a black student moving into his junior year. The altercation quickly escalated into shouting, drawing attention from nearby classes as students observed the clash. Porter's frustration turned to desperate pleading for the principal to consider his side of the story. However, McClure was adamant and demanded Porter leave immediately. History teacher Larry Coleman stepped in, easing Porter away from the scene just as the situation intensified with the abrupt arrival of police cars and officers aiming guns at the two. Despite Coleman's appeals to let Porter walk home, one officer forcefully separated them and detained Porter. Coleman, facing the threat of arrest himself, reluctantly returned to the school as Porter was taken from the property.<sup>247</sup>

### **The Walk-Out**

Bearing an invitation, on January 18, 1972, the integrated R. H. Watkins marching band was set to perform at the inaugural parade for

the newly appointed Governor Bill Waller at the Capitol in Jackson, Mississippi. Excitement brewed amongst the rejoicing high schoolers. The celebration raised the ambient soul of the band to a broad, shared smile. However, black students did not view the moment as a commemorative occasion. Governors of the past have fought a lethargic battle against black enfranchisement, leaving African Americans indifferent about participating in any white-led event. As the default leader of this cause, Faye Musgrove earnestly decided not to march with the band. She lacked the desire to celebrate a self-proclaimed “redneck” and even turned in her band suit. A descendant of Newton Knight—a white Mississippi farmer who led armed opposition to the Confederacy during the U.S. Civil War and married one of his grandfather’s former slaves—Musgrove was born into a family where members were beholden to choose a side: black or white. As a commitment to African customs, she chose black. Only a sophomore, Musgrove was an insurgent personality and an uncompromising reformer. She wore a towering afro—mirroring the aesthetics of Angela Davis—with a dashiki as her garment of choice to divulge a sartorial sign of racial pride.<sup>248</sup>

By February, Laurel faced a pressing issue. KC Bottom students had to travel a great distance to reach the high school, which was situated in a predominantly white neighborhood. The journey was a great strain, as black students often faced hostile actions from local white residents, such as being chased by purposely unleashed dogs or sprayed with water hoses as they walked on the sidewalks. Tardiness to school resulted in harsh disciplinary measures by the attendance officer, a treatment not equally applied to white students. Johnny Magee, a former Youth Council member, remembered that sometimes they skipped school if they were already late. The students confronted black assistant principal Alex Warren regarding the unfair treatment, but despite his prior reputation, he did not step in to help. The students sarcastically called him a janitor since his role seemed limited to cleaning the hallways. Warren’s standing with the black students diminished. As a result, the students realized they needed to address the situation themselves, as they could not rely on support from black school staff.<sup>249</sup>

Musgrove and Bobby Washington had been in talks about a potential walkout to protest against the school's biased practices. The idea seemed powerful yet unforeseen. On February 18, in her English class, Musgrove spotted a book titled "How to Teach a Negro" on the teacher's desk. She was both shocked and confused. A heated exchange followed with the flustered teacher, who exclaimed, "Y'all are coming here and disrupting our way of life!" In a burst of anger, Musgrove marched down the halls, rallying black students to leave their classes for an impromptu demonstration. Around 200 students joined, and as they approached the school's entrance, they were met by armed police officers and reporters ready to capture the event.<sup>250</sup>

As the police tried to block the students' protest march, one officer pushed his gun against Musgrove's midsection, threatening to shoot and hitting her with a club. Unfazed, Musgrove shouted back, "Do what you have to do, because we're marching no matter what!" While news reporters clung close and scuffles broke out around them, Musgrove led the demonstrators from R.H. Watkins to Saint Paul Methodist Church. Chanting for liberty, Musgrove raised her fist with vigor, shouting "Black Power." At the church, the young protesters discussed their next moves to shake up the usual way of things. One outspoken participant declared, "If we're going to pray, let's pray. If we're going to fight, let's fight." Word spread that amid the chaos, Wyatt had hit Officer Jim McDonald, breaking his glasses and injuring his eye. Now, two people were under suspicion: Wyatt as the attacker, and Musgrove as the instigator.<sup>251</sup>

On a subsequent evening, Mayor Bill Patrick spoke with WDAM about the recent upheaval. He underscored the city's obligation to maintain peace and order, especially in schools. Despite the pressure, Patrick maintained that municipal involvement in school matters should be minimal since schools are managed by a legally established board. Nevertheless, he criticized the students for resorting to violence. Patrick expressed that grievances regarding equal educational opportunities should be resolved without resorting to riots. He warned that if the unrest persisted, the city would take all necessary measures to restore order. In response to the escalating crisis, community meetings were organized in African American neighborhoods to seek a peaceful

solution with the school board and ease racial tensions. However, the black students would not attend Watkins High School under current conditions. Eventually, their ongoing absence led to a police presence at the school, with officers prepared for possible conflict.<sup>252</sup>

Ministers and church members accepted the task of connecting disillusioned African American students with impartial school leaders. Churchgoers spoke out against the visible presence of firearms on campus. When African American students established a committee to address their concerns, Reverend Allen Johnson documented their issues, though he was not familiar with all the committee members. However, he recognized their academic excellence and potential for leadership. At the same time, Benjamin Murph, head of the Bi-Racial Committee, engaged in talks with Superintendent Caughman and school attorney William Deavours regarding the protest's broader implications. They intended to review the students' concerns with local clergy associations and communicate them to their congregations, hoping to reach all students.<sup>253</sup>

Since its powerful inception, 'Black Power'—a term introduced by Willie Ricks, a Black Nationalist, and co-founder of the All-African Peoples Revolutionary Party—had become a key symbol of a significant shift in the way African Americans fought against oppression. Moreover, Angela Davis's trial, which started in March for alleged murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy linked to Judge Harold Haley's deadly shooting, drew global notice and caused many to wrongly associate black activism with acts of terror in America. During this time, Musgrove became notorious as media coverage during the Davis proceeding led to her being expelled. The Laurel School Board ousted her and another eleven pupils, accusing them of biased and racially driven misconduct. Musgrove alone faced charges of inciting a riot for raising her fist and shouting 'Black Power,' making her an object of fear during unstable political times. Her alignment with the Black Panther Party highlighted her and her family as surveillance targets. The FBI's Racial Matters Program kept a close watch on her, monitoring protests, racial unrest, and riots. Even her father, Reverend Hollis Musgrove, was not spared; police tailed him, and the family's phone conversations were tapped.<sup>254</sup>

On March 23, Musgrove and the eleven other students who were previously expelled went to Meridian for a hearing to discuss their possible return to school. They approached the municipal building's grand steps and entered the chilly, formal setting of the federal courtroom. Their lawyer, Thomas C. Hogan, questioned the reliability and legal standing of the suspensions, labeling them overly harsh and inappropriate. Following Hogan's initial remarks, the court screened a video of the protest, with the intensity drawing silence from the observers. Student testimonies followed, with the seniors particularly feeling the weight of the situation as their graduation loomed. Under lawyer's probing, students reluctantly named Faye Musgrove as involved in instigating the protest. She faced her interrogation last, and when the prior evidence presented against her was mentioned, she admitted her involvement by defiantly raising her fist, affirming, "Yes, I did do it."<sup>255</sup>

Judge Russell was stunned to see the students show no guilt. Principal Allan McClure's words in court made matters worse. He strongly felt that readmitting these students would undermine discipline, hurt the morale of the school community, and heighten everyone's anxiety, potentially harming the education system. He also worried about losing students to private schools. During the hearing, a consensus emerged that courts should not serve as venues for resolving school issues, particularly when a school is fully integrated. The expectation was that school administrators would manage such problems. The judge criticized those assuming they could rely on judicial support to act indiscriminately. Judge Russell concurred with the court's dominant view, noting that reinstating the twelve students would not serve the interests of the entire student body or the school system. He concluded by reminding them that they should have considered the impact of their actions and the rights of others before participating in the "disturbances at the high school."<sup>256</sup>

The news of rebellion caused distress among white families, yet they ultimately, albeit unwillingly and with delay, accepted the end of legally enforced racial separation. Despite not being able to alter federal rules, they chose how to respond; prioritizing location over educational quality, many shifted to the county. The rural areas around Jones



County became their refuge, a clearer choice for avoiding integration. Some went so far as to give guardianship to relatives who lived in the county. This migration gave African American students a chance to excel in sports. Whites in the booster clubs expected the coach, George Blair, to keep white athletes in prime positions, neglecting the more skilled black players due to societal pressures. Larry McGill saw Blair as a mentor with good intentions, yet the coach, swayed by racial biases, sidelined black talent. Tensions escalated to physical altercations, with one white coach assaulting McGill, leading to his and other players' temporary departure from the team. Only after persuasion did McGill return, driven by his aspirations and unperturbed by prejudice. As the year progressed, the players united, and their collective effort led to a winning record to end the season. Coach Blair's inclusion of black players and the secret willingness of white players to cooperate transformed the team. McGill graduated that same year and enrolled at the historically black Mississippi Valley State University.<sup>257</sup>

### **Death by Integration**

In the early 1970s, Laurel saw widespread integration, often sitting together in public, albeit sometimes uneasily, without trouble. B.E. Murph passed away in September 1972 due to a heart attack. He witnessed the unity he fought for over two and a half decades before his death. The city, once under Klan influence, appeared calm, even as White Knights members faced legal action for Vernon Dahmer's murder and related crimes. Nevertheless, in April 1973, Assistant Attorney General Bob Murphey chose to drop the federal charges in the Dahmer case, thinking another federal trial was pointless because previous trials with the same witnesses had not resulted in any convictions. Judge Harold Cox agreed and dismissed the charges. The FBI wrapped up the DABURN case on August 19, giving back all the evidence and closing the matter. Many Klaverns shifted to devout Protestant or Christian Identity beliefs, or a mix of both. For example, Maurice Flowers, an original White Knights member, took up a role in the Jones County Baptist Association as a mission's director. He also set up a hangout in Laurel's Eastside, the Jones County Curb Store and

Amusement Center, which drew in many young people with its combination of music, games, and especially the pool hall.<sup>258</sup>

On the summer evening of June 4, 1974, two African American Army Reserves, David Windham and Carl Richardson, entered Flowers's arcade to play billiards. While organizing the game, their friendly rivalry was evident in their loud jests, with each claiming he was the better player. An hour of enthusiastic cheers and laughter irritated Flowers who then told them to leave. When Windham resisted, their argument intensified and spilled into Flowers' adjacent grocery store, where they continued to sling insults. The altercation concluded violently on the street when Flowers pulled out a firearm from his pocket and shot Windham in the chest twice, prompting Richardson to run away as the shots disrupted the bustling crossroads.<sup>259</sup>

Following the shooting, African American onlookers rapidly disseminated the news within their community. A multitude of residents swiftly convened at the Cross and Chantilly Street junction where the tragedy took place prior to the police's arrival. Enraged, the crowd erupted into a riot, hurling stones at Flowers's shopfront, forcing entry, and igniting his vehicle. The chaos extended, impacting nearby businesses; Grecos Food Store suffered a firebombing, and shotgun blasts damaged Mitchells Seafood café. As law enforcement appeared, the turmoil escalated with exchanges of gunfire leading to injuries of James Jenkins and Luther Boykin. The two-hour bedlam ended with sixteen arrests, including youths, four injuries, Flowers facing murder charges, and the tragic loss of David Windham. Yet, unrest persisted for two more days. Gunfire targeted vehicles, the Brown Street Curb Store suffered three fire attacks, and a bottle shattered a car window at Howard Industries. Leaders sought peace; I.L. Thomas and Rev. Allen Johnson linked the upheaval to youth anger over Windham's killing. Johnson also expressed concern about possible reprisals against the black community.<sup>260</sup>

Following Windham's funeral on June 11, NAACP's James Dace Jr., Vodie Reed, and Susie Ruffin headed a march of sixty-five from Brown Funeral Home to Sandy Gavin Elementary, with local police ensuring a safe passage as they transported Windham's casket, his mother Christine Smith followed closely behind. Following a six-day

incarceration in Jones County jail and being denied bail at his initial hearing, Judge Alpheus McRae granted Flowers a \$100,000 bail, leading to his release on the same day. Flowers benefitted from a specific ruling; the Supreme Court's decision in *Ex Parte Charles Jay Willette* mandated bond privileges for detainees with severe health issues, and Flowers was suffering from advanced-stage cancer, explained McRae. The judge also noted the ability to set bail rests with the committing magistrate and is guided by Supreme Court laws.<sup>261</sup>

The trial of Flowers kicked off on November 20, involving a jury composed entirely of white individuals—eight women and four men. Acting as his own defense, Flowers recounted how he tried to disengage from an altercation with Windham by entering his grocery store, only for Windham to come in after him. Claiming to have feared for his life, Flowers explained that he fired his gun without aiming. Throughout his statement, he maintained that he acted in self-defense. However, witnesses such as Richardson, Douglas R. Buxton, and Mary Louise Simmons disputed this, testifying that they did not see Windham pursue or threaten Flowers. After intense jury deliberations failed to reach a verdict, resulting in a deadlock, the judge declared a mistrial. In a subsequent trial on May 22, 1975, Flowers was acquitted by a Jones County Circuit Court jury in the murder case of David Windham.<sup>262</sup>

### **Elementary Schools**

After the Windham riots, the tension and division grew stronger, especially when parents faced off over the persistent division in educational institutions. In the summer of 1975, the R.H. Watkins High School Golden Girls drill team was getting ready for the new football season, embracing a Bicentennial theme for their first game vs. Pascagoula. As they arranged themselves for a team photo, Faye Jones, a black junior, stood out as the only black member on the team. Previous black members had joined but never completed a season due to various challenges. But Jones would break new ground by participating the whole season. Jones experienced the scorn of white parents who were upset their daughters did not make the team, as she occupied a spot. One parent rudely confronted her, bantering racial slur, insisting

she had no right to participate alongside their children. Throughout the season, her car was vandalized with scratched insults, her locker was broken into, and slurs were hurled at her while she wore the team uniform. Nevertheless, two supportive white coaches helped make her time on the Golden Girl squad more tolerable, despite the prejudice she faced.<sup>263</sup>

Despite small victories in desegregating the school system, true integration had yet to be fully embraced, as progress seemed to halt. In the early 1970s, the Black community took the district to court again, and by 1975, Judge Dan Russell informed the Laurel district that combining the city's elementary schools was likely necessary. The U.S. Attorneys revealed to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals data showing Laurel remained as divided as ever since the 1970 compulsory integration. White students were absent in predominately Black schools, while Black students only made up fifteen percent of the racially mixed white schools. The Fifth Circuit supported Judge Russell's observation and mandated that Laurel's elementary schools must integrate by the autumn of 1978.<sup>264</sup>

When the news broke, the white residents of Laurel left the city's school district in greater numbers, galvanized by Judge Russell's caution of the looming need to pair elementary schools. Obligated by Russell, Judge Walter Nix demanded that the Laurel School District adopt a strategy to form a single, inclusive system for middle and high schools. The mandate highlighted the end of racial division in education. The court implored the community to embrace this goal and back the district's mission to provide equal education to all students. Furthermore, Nix made it clear that the elementary schools would not be merged. Instead, students could transfer based on racial majority-minority ratios. Per the plan, Oak Park High School would shut down, compelling 10th to 12th graders to join R.H. Watkins High, expecting a mix of 745 white and 534 African American students. To integrate secondary schools, Idella Washington Middle School would close, merging students into Maddox and Jones Junior Highs. Nix confirmed that any schools closed must remain out of private educational use.<sup>265</sup>

Between 1976 and 1978, Laurel schools saw a decline of over 800 students, largely white. As white families moved away boldly, many

Black county families left for the city. To challenge political and educational setbacks, prominent figures were needed. This is where Arwilla Huff Davison stepped in. A dedicated Democrat from her youth, Davison showed a keen business sense. Starting humbly at 39, she cared for housebound seniors in the simple home left by her parents. She drove for Sargent Shriver's anti-poverty campaign, earning just 25 cents an hour. Davison secured a \$50,000 grant for building a sanitarium and founded the Davison Nursing Home in Kingston. Her political journey led her to the Mississippi Democratic Executive Committee and onto a national political path. In 1972, she was the first black delegate at the National Democratic Convention in Miami, and later the Kansas City mini-convention. Her independent political spirit was recognized when President Jimmy Carter chose her as one of Mississippi's seven presidential electors in 1976. Davison often said her civic commitment came from her father, who was active locally, while she aimed to go further.<sup>266</sup>

Davison's clear passion for diverse political matters endeared her to both African American and white communities. With her unifying thinking and business acumen, she exemplified outstanding leadership that resonated with the public. Another African American school, Sandy Gavin Elementary, was shuttered due to new integration laws. The African American neighborhood had to craft a formal complaint to voice their disapproval of Russell's integration strategy. On March 7, 1978, a crowd of 375 African Americans united in protest against the new integration plan, a sense of solidarity palpable in the air. Within the chatter-filled auditorium of Sandy Gavin, Arwilla Davison stepped up to the microphone with a prepared list of objections against the new policy. She began to read the list to an attentive audience, receiving approving nods and supportive outcries. Applause erupted upon her finishing, but it was a bold, unplanned speech that capped off the evening. She declared that until fair representation from the Justice Department, the U.S. Health, Education, and Welfare Department, and Judge Dan Russell is secured, they wouldn't send their children to any public school in America. Her declaration took the crowd by surprise and was met with a powerful show of support from the African American parents.<sup>267</sup>



Arwillla Davis shaking hands with President Jimmy Carter and Thurgood Marshall (Courtesy of Dr. Deborrah Hyde)

Community members organized protests and gatherings to prevent the shutdown of a local school. PTA representative Flora Brooks from Nora Davis campaigned from house to house, gathering community views on the potential closing of Sandy Gavin School. She put together a persuasive argument and emphatically stated that the NAACP planned to bypass the local officials and direct their appeal to Judge Russell. William Deavours addressed the intense discussions about the closure being based on racial issues. He explained that the school was

no longer modern, and its location did not align with the required district boundaries for equitable student distribution. He believed that keeping the school open would incentivize African American families to stay nearby to prevent their children from having to transfer to predominantly white schools.<sup>268</sup>

Burtis Dougherty, a lawyer for the US Department of Justice, offered a new plan on April 8 to reorganize the local schools. The strategy involved swapping students between four schools, grouping three others, and redrawing the district boundaries. Debate escalated over Sandy Gavin school when Dougherty introduced a report from a month ago, disputing its poor condition and affirming its structural integrity. However, William Deavours rejected the plan, accusing it of distortion and petty objections. The issue at Sandy Gavin widened the rift among parents, school officials, and the community across racial lines. Despite Deavours' efforts toward equality, the reality persisted that Laurel maintained two segregated white schools, partly funded by black residents' taxes.<sup>269</sup>

By mid-May, the doors to Sandy Gavin Elementary were locked for good. There was a pressing issue at hand as previous errors came to light. When it came to merging students from different backgrounds, the initial steps were a struggle, especially for African American administrators. The group designed to bridge the gap between local citizens and the educational institutes, known as the Desegregation Steering Committee, challenged Deputy School Head David Sheppard on the defined responsibilities for Oak Park and Nora Davis, the black schools. Sheppard put forward the idea of jointly assigning a black and a white principal, thus removing any hierarchy in the role. Yet, with a significant tenure, Lamar Elementary School's Principal, Bobby Stevens, labeled the strategy as nonsense and detrimental to education. He couldn't see the reasoning in possibly moving an esteemed principal to a setting they are unacquainted with.

Additionally, the topic of 60 teachers not having their contracts renewed was on the table. This time, race impacted the situation differently; black teachers were more experienced and were seen as more reliable, making younger white educators less favorable. Sheppard confessed that length of service was the deciding factor in keeping



staff, although he also mentioned that a resolution about their job security is expected soon. In the end, despite a night of intense discussion, all parties left feeling hopeful, echoing the sentiment that it heralds a new era.<sup>270</sup>

The Laurel School District resolved the contentious issue of shared principalship and likely job losses by hiring a single principal and two additional staff members for administrative roles at Stone Deavours School. Eugene Owens, former principal of Sandy Gavin School Elementary with a background in elementary music instruction, took the position of Director of Transportation for the district in the new academic year. A native of the Salem Community near Forest, Mississippi, Owens earned his Music Education degree from Jackson College in 1964. After avoiding the Vietnam War, Owens chose to contribute to his nation by fostering the intellectual growth of young people. In 1967, following a brief period teaching in Holmes County and facing his mother's illness, Owens accepted the role of choral director in Laurel School District to stay geographically close to his family.<sup>271</sup>

Despite being hired under urgent circumstances, Owens's experience in managing music programs across six primary schools made him a strong contender for an administrative role. With recent qualifications including a Master's in Elementary Education and a School Principal Certificate, Owens had reservations about the new job. However, after discussing it with his loved ones on June 10, he chose to take on the challenge. His duties involved overseeing bus route creation, training of drivers, and management of bus facilities. Shortly after, on June 12, 1978, the Justice Department formed a trio, including Owens, Arwillia Davison, and Police Chief Dan Walters, to observe the busing operations in Prince George, Maryland. They departed Meridian around 3:25 pm, reaching Washington, D.C., by 7:30 pm. The following day, they engaged with James Gholson, the Prince George's school busing supervisor, at a bank in Baltimore. The meeting was kept open-ended to encourage a free exchange of ideas. They explored topics like scheduling buses, driver training, and recruitment. Davison committed to preventing disturbances like those in Boston, ensuring community harmony. On Owens's team, Davison's role was being



the “peacemakers,” to cultivate trust and manage conflicts related to school transport.<sup>272</sup>

As the heat of summer intensified and the reality of integrated elementary schools took hold, nine individuals who previously served on the Desegregation Steering Committee came together to establish the Education First Committee (EFC). This diverse group aimed to tackle the challenges of integrating public schools. Quickly after their meeting began, they crafted a mission statement to define their role: The EFC was a nonpartisan group dedicated to supporting the school district in bringing the community together for a seamless and effortless consolidation of the elementary schools. This effort ensured that the children’s education continued without disruption or decline in quality. The primary focus rested on the education, safety, and well-being of every child. Following their inaugural meeting, the committee chose its leaders: Ginny Traylor, a local real estate agent and PTA president, and Arwilla Davis, by agreeing to a co-chair arrangement.<sup>273</sup>

On August 22, the EFC held a two-hour open house at all five local primary schools, providing a relaxed setting for eager parents to meet the equally apprehensive teachers. Principal Douglass Peppers of Nora Davis welcomed each child with warmth, regardless of race. The youthful attendees played carefree while education officials, teachers, and parents filled the auditorium, unexpectedly hopeful about the upcoming school year. The EFC’s earnest endeavor was significant, with its effectiveness depending on the satisfaction of the 833 parents.<sup>274</sup>

The academic year progressed smoothly, and by the end of the 1978- 1979 term, the Parent-Teacher Association, under Ginny Traylor, organized meetings every other week to define school goals and success markers. The school leaders considered the first fully integrated year in the local elementary schools a triumph, while parents had varying opinions. In July, a meeting took place where Traylor complimented the Jones County leaders for their steadfast dedication, leaving many parents content with the year’s results. They were surprisingly pleased and felt the year ended well. However, Susie Ruffin disagreed, stating that African American parents did not share this positive view, feeling overlooked as usual. A particular concern was the high number of black students being expelled. Ruffin argued that parents should be made aware of handbook rules before they are applied, noting that this

could be harming the kids' morale. From another angle, some white parents argued that the presence of African American students had caused academic and disciplinary standards to drop, prompting plans to create a new private high school.<sup>275</sup>

# 8

## BREAD WITH BUTTER

For the many black residents, the isolation of their community and the occasional blocking off by trains are more than inconvenient. The train line has come to symbolize a segregated past and a perceived neglect of present needs.

- Laurel & Laurel: A City Divided

The Jackson Advocate featured a story and photo covering the induction of Fred L Banks Jr., the latest African American county judge, who was sworn in by Justice Reuben Anderson, the first African American on Mississippi's highest court. Beside this was a report titled "Cross Burned—Youth Abducted and Beaten in Strife-Torn Durant," reflecting the contrasting racial climate in Mississippi during the 1980s. Statewide interviews showed evolving attitudes juxtaposed with echoes of past prejudices. Political progress was made, it is said, but racial integration on a personal level remains insufficient. The "Residential Segregation by Race in Mississippi, 1980" study indicated significant separation among races, especially in the Delta and Piney Woods regions and slightly less along the Gulf Coast. The report also highlights that segregation intensifies with a larger economic disparity between Black and white residents.<sup>276</sup>

Residents of Laurel have expressed concerns that the separation with- in their city deeply hinders the advances of black residents, from educa- tion to employment. The racial divide, though no longer legally

enforced, became apparent through a documentary by Miriam Grayboff, a US Civil Rights Commission field worker. Titled “Laurel & Laurel: A City Divided,” the film uses the town’s railroad track, which physically splits Laurel between white and black neighborhoods, as a metaphor for the deeper social and political rift between the races. It features footage showcasing neglected homes and streets in disrepair in Laurel’s black neighborhoods. The city was selected by the Civil Rights Commission as a representative example of a typical town in Mississippi. The long-standing issue of police neglect described by Benjamin Murph continued to negatively impact the black community.<sup>277</sup>

Since a black officer joined LPD in 1963, over the next seventeen years, their ranks swelled by fifty-seven. This increase in diversity was seen by some as a positive step, but opinions were divided. Susie Ruffin called African Americans on the Laurel police force “nothing but patrollers,”—a term that black slaves used for the “patrollers” once hired by plantation owners to keep the slaves systemized. “I’ll tell them I wouldn’t have their jobs,” Ruffin said. Her critique was that African Americans in the system acted as placeholders, following a routine life, attending church, yet lacking autonomy, and too intimidated to think for themselves.<sup>278</sup>

In the film, the existence of racial segregation was presented as an undeniable truth, not simply an opinion. Local authorities strengthened this divide, comparable to apartheid, between Black and white populations through their augmented clout. Both a sizable Black-only public housing development and numerous White-only apartment buildings received federal funds to house those with low incomes. Freddie R. Beech, the head of the local housing authority, frankly, admitted the racial homogeneity of the public housing units, saying with no hint of emotion that Whites simply wouldn’t consider moving in. Conversely, the supervisor of a White-only apartment complex gave a vaguer reason, suggesting Black applicants often found alternative housing after their paperwork was processed.<sup>279</sup>

African Americans in Laurel faced a significant hurdle due to their exclusion from political clout. Whites exclusively controlled Laurel’s city governance because the electoral system selected city council

members on a citywide basis. This method effectively prevented African Americans, who made up a substantial portion of the population, from being elected. The U.S. Civil Rights Commission's Mississippi Advisory Committee urged Congress to eliminate the citywide electoral system in favor of district elections in places with significant minority populations. Mayor Bill Patrick argued against this change, suggesting that electing representatives from individual districts might not serve the city's overall interests. Patrick professed ignorance of any complaints regarding the status quo. This political disenfranchisement led many African Americans to question the value of their vote, resulting in apathy. The lack of political representation also cast doubt on the prospect of economic advancement for the community.<sup>280</sup>

Attempts to gain political power for African Americans began with pushing to broaden the reach of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Arwillia Davison vividly described being forcefully removed for seeking to vote. As a lead figure in the Jones County Democrats, Davison stressed the need for the Voting Rights Act's preservation to validate the struggles and losses of many. In Mississippi, where blacks constituted over a third of the population, they were noticeably absent from any state-level elected positions, and several majority-black counties had exclusively white leadership boards.<sup>281</sup>

Throughout the '70s and '80s, the NAACP encountered various difficulties while adapting to changes. Roy Wilkins concluded his extensive leadership period with the organization from 1931 to 1977, and Margaret Bush Wilson took on the historic role as the first black woman to lead the NAACP Board of Directors. Continuing the fight against racial injustice, the NAACP advocated for measures like busing to mix schools racially and affirmative action to remedy past discrimination. However, legal challenges and a dip in relevance, criticized by the Black Power Movement, nearly drove the NAACP to bankruptcy by the mid-1970s. In the 1980s, the Reagan administration's slashes to civil rights resources and opposition to affirmative action intensified the NAACP's struggles. These issues pushed the organization to redefine how it would serve African Americans in a changing society.<sup>282</sup>

In Jones County, the NAACP found itself embroiled in division,

mirroring the broader divides in city politics and the national NAACP. At a state NAACP meeting held in Laurel, a clear disagreement was present between Susie Ruffin and the county's NAACP president, Manuel Jones. Their intention was to discuss charges of racial bias in the city's schools but ended up focusing largely on debates regarding the NAACP's strategies for demonstrations and advocacy. Ruffin mentioned that internal conflict stemmed from misconceptions about the NAACP's workings, leading to the breakdown of the educational committee she oversees. Additionally, she reported feeling ostracized by the youths due to the NAACP's stance. The NAACP had earlier issued 31 requests to the Laurel School Board, advocating for the hiring of additional African American teachers. Olivia Jones attributed the ongoing issues within the NAACP to a personal rift between Ruffin and Manuel Jones. Although she had great respect for Ruffin, she urged the need to support the incoming administration for the betterment of the community.<sup>283</sup>

Whispers of internal conflicts among African Americans over the protests targeting select Laurel establishments were present, but these disputes only came into the open during a Sunday board meeting. In this meeting, Ruffin confronted Jones for privately organizing media engagements without notifying her. In a defense against the criticism of her actions, she suggested her critics wanted her to disengage from the issue. Aaron Henry, the state president of the NAACP, was present and reported that per the national legal team, there was no legal justification to boycott the school-related matter. Previously, the NAACP had presented clear demands to the Laurel school board, which included stopping the division of black students into different academic categories such as special education, the appointment of a black assistant superintendent, and the balanced allocation of accolades to black and white students. The school board, however, did not act on these issues because they were entangled in a lawsuit accusing the local schools of not respecting civil rights regulations.<sup>284</sup>

In an extended period of activism, the NAACP also highlighted discriminating practices at the Laurel Ramada Inn against black housekeepers, such as making them use separate entrances and forbidding them from eating in certain areas. Despite his best efforts, Jones was

not successful in persuading Oak Park High School and Alcorn University alumni groups to avoid the hotel for their meetings. Regional NAACP director Earl Shinhoster reiterated to the Laurel community that without local African American support, the changes aimed for by the national body would not be achievable. "If you can't influence in your town a group of black folks who want to have a meeting there, can't nobody in Washington, Baltimore or anywhere else influence them."<sup>285</sup>

On December 20, 1982, the Mississippi legislature concluded a two-week extraordinary session by passing the Education Reform Act, a project led by Governor William Winter. This Act introduced kindergarten into the public education system, required children to attend school, and insisted on higher standards for teacher certification. Additionally, it outlined a method for assessing the performance of local schools and arranged for classroom assistants in grades one through three. There was debate over whether to merge smaller school districts to improve education quality and save money, but despite concerns about the potential impact on rural schools, compromises led to a plan. This plan required school districts to comply with a consolidation strategy by 1986 or risk losing their accreditation and state funding.<sup>286</sup>

The Education Committee set aside legislation, introduced by Mize lawmaker Senator Billy Thames on February 2, 1983, aimed at reversing a school unification initiative. Some opponents called for a pause, suggesting legislative action should follow the study examining the merger's impact. Senator Thames stood against the consolidation, highlighting that neither larger schools inherently lead to quality education nor to cost savings. Taking a nuanced approach, House Speaker C.B. Newman mentioned, especially during an earlier press conference, that while not a proponent of obligatory consolidation, the decision should be left to locals in areas where there is support for a unified system. Newman asserted that the concept of consolidation had been a recurring topic over years and stressed that merging should be voluntary, not imposed.<sup>287</sup>

Local families in Jones County became aware that state budget troubles could heavily impact the future makeup of their community

schools. Details of the failed bill, including timelines and processes for merging school districts, were clearly outlined. Yet, signs pointed to a future reconsideration. School leaders voiced that consolidating administrative offices would not achieve the anticipated cost savings, suggesting the push for consolidation was financially, not educationally, driven. In addition, the 1981 Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (ECIA), introduced during Ronald Reagan's presidency, led to major educational reforms. This act eliminated terms and support that had previously allowed schools in underprivileged, bilingual, and segregated areas to receive federal assistance for over 15 years. John Ashbrook, the creator, aimed for the ECIA to transfer more educational control to states and localities, a key conservative objective. Nonetheless, the act also ceased programs that promoted integration and ensured that schools with the greatest needs received funds.<sup>288</sup>

Despite energetic moves toward school desegregation, the outcomes were not completely effective. In the 1980s, despite legal orders, a significant portion of black students in the South still attended predominantly black institutions, with a renewed push toward segregation occurring. This echoed what was unfolding in the north. The actions of white families, particularly those with economic means, played a large part in resegregation. Those moving to less diverse areas or enrolling their offspring in private institutions caused a significant change in the demographic make-up of public schools, leading to a rise in the number of schools with mostly black and lower-income children. Policies aimed at balancing student placement could not keep up with the swift shifts in the makeup of local populations. The fight for integrated schools was complicated by individual choices, including those shaped by discriminatory attitudes, reinforcing the stubbornness of segregation.<sup>289</sup>

President Ronald Reagan exploited the rising anxiety of white voters concerning the influence of Black political leaders. Voting rights expert Jesse Rhodes notes that the Reagan team reshaped the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division and influenced the Supreme Court using their governmental powers. They intended to discreetly reduce the power of the Voting Rights Act by painting minority voting pro-



tections as if they harmed white voters, branding them as a form of “reverse discrimination.” In spite of the Reagan administration’s efforts to reduce the involvement of the Legal Enforcement Assistance Administration in executing civil rights legislation, African American political endeavors rose sharply in the 1980s. This rise is represented by the growing count of African American politicians, which jumped from 4,912 in 1980 to 6,056 by 1985.<sup>290</sup>

In early January 1985, the plan to switch Laurel’s municipal system to one led by a mayor and seven district-based council members received ap-proval from U.S. Magistrate John Roper. This approved structure, which boasted three majority-black districts, yet only two where the majority of residents of voting age were black according to the 1960 census, was publicly recognized by city leaders in Laurel. By the following day, this proposal had been submitted to the U.S. Department of Justice, awaiting their sanction. The 1965 Voting Rights Act sets a 60-day deadline for the Department’s decision, but the expectation was to proceed quickly since the Department had already submitted a participation request for the case.<sup>291</sup>

In 1912, the city of Laurel implemented a commission-based government system that employed at-large voting. Despite a significant black population constituting 37% of the community, to date, no African American has served on the city council. African American nominees, Republican Pearl N. Blalock and Democrat Viola Malone, were set to contend in Ward 7. Meanwhile, George Gaddy and Lula Cooley, black candidates in Wards 5 and 6 respectively, ran unopposed. By June 5, Malone won the race with a vote of 65%. Under the newly elected mayor, Sam Lindsey III, Laurel’s City Council saw its first three African American members esteemed for their excellence: Lula Cooley, George Gaddy, and Viola Malone. According to the *Laurel Leader-Call*, they were chosen for their capacity to champion the interests of the African American community at City Hall, ensuring all citizens were considered equitably and with fairness. Moreover, Jerome Wyatt was elected as Laurel’s first African American County Supervisor. Even though the African American community made impressive political gains in the 1980s, it seemed to many that those gains were not translated into decisive economic power to significantly re



John Drennon, Lula Cooley, and George Gaddy (Courtesy of Lula Cooley)

verse the continuous decline in the living conditions of the majority of African Americans.<sup>292</sup>

The majority of residents believed that local votes are the best way to address issues in Jones County, not mandates from the government. Jones County Superintendent Carey Clay stood firm against merging schools. “I’ve been opposed to this since before the Education Reform Act was passed,” he stated plainly. “I think if the Legislature sits by and lets this go through, they’re making a mistake.” Clay and the Jones County education rejected any action that would reduce their governance over schools. They feared that without the ability to enhance their curriculum to reach newly set standards, smaller schools would be ousted. Clay argued that the community should decide on their school system and the number of schools, not the state government.<sup>293</sup>

Concerned parents with children in county schools urged Senator Smith to overturn the recently enacted Education Reform Act. Smith advised the worried parents that two legislative proposals are on the table: one seeking to abolish the merging of schools and another proposing a three-year postponement consolidation. “We’ve got two shots

at changing the plan. Quite frankly, the bottom line is Frank Lovell,” Smith stated, referencing the Education Finance Commission’s chairperson. He expressed his unwillingness to stand by as Frank Lovell wields the ultimate authority to determine the fate of the school system.<sup>294</sup>

Despite clear opposition, the Education Finance Commission (EFC) decreed that the Laurel Separate School District would merge on July 1, 1986. David Sheppard, who was visibly upset, called the move a preliminary attempt at reorganizing school districts. He shared his uncertainty regarding the merger’s impact on Jones County with the *Laurel Leader-Call* but declined to comment further. The next day, Jones County lawmakers united to oppose consolidation. Senator Ronnie Shows, a Democrat from Moselle, took the matter personally, citing his experiences at larger schools lacking close-knit interactions. Senator P. A. Townsend criticized the EFC for not listening to the public as elected officials did. Representative D. R. Anderson reported an influx of calls all against consolidation. There was debate about student numbers, the execution process, financial estimates, and the motives for such a policy. Fears arose over the loss of local control and the potential dominance of one district by another larger or more influential one. Some educators worried that quick decisions by politicians ignored the long-term consequences of such actions.<sup>295</sup>

In mid-1985, the movement towards school consolidation lost momentum among legislators due to significant public disapproval. The strong opposition was fueled by worries over job security for school administrators, who stood to lose the most, though the debate rarely touched on how consolidation would advance education. Notably, those who stayed quiet on the consolidation issue would suffer the most. The Mississippi House and Senate, meeting in Jackson, then chose to scrap the consolidation component of the law. Senate Education Committee head Jack Gordon sought a three-year moratorium on consolidations, thinking this would allow other urgent issues, like boosting teacher wages and examining tax hikes, to take precedence without the additional pressure of consolidation deadlines. In wanting to delay the process, Gordon and his fellow legislative leaders were cautious not to further undermine the Education Reform Act, leading

to the implementation of only two of its initiatives: placing assistant teachers in early primary classes and enforcing school attendance laws.<sup>296</sup>

When the Laurel School District was ordered to desegregate in 1970, it had 6,073 students; 2,833 (around 46%) were black, and 3,270 (about 54%) were white. At the same time, the Jones County School District agreed to a desegregation plan with 8,279 students, 79% of whom were white and 21% black. Over time, the student count and racial mix in Jones County remained somewhat the same, showing 8,478 students (81% white and 19% black) by the 1988-89 academic year. However, Laurel's enrollment dropped sharply to 3,215, and racial proportions shifted significantly, with 75% of the students being black and 25% white in the 1988-89 school year. This change signifies that while Jones County School District has consistently been recognized as predominantly white since 1970, it has gradually started to be seen as a majority-black district.<sup>297</sup>

On December 17, 1987, Mayor Sam Lindsey unveiled an annexation lawsuit against the Laurel and Jones County school boards in the Jones County Chancery Court. City leaders were anxious about the potential changes to schools if the area north of Laurel, measuring 413 square miles, were to become a part of the city. Both school districts were criticized for breaching civil rights laws by allowing children in the city of Laurel to attend county schools. The racial mix in both urban and county schools was uniform, with a balance of 70 percent of both black and white students. City Council had previously dismissed the idea that schools would be a problem during the 1986 annexation discussions, up until new regulations came into effect later that year, as Mayor Lindsey emphasized. The lawsuit also broached the hot button issue of school consolidation. As stated in the claim, the Mississippi school statute had been implemented with a racially biased agenda, contradicting federal and civil rights voting laws in America. This policy endorsed annexation but let children within this new city area continue their education in county schools, took away the parents' vote on the governance of city schools, planned to allocate city school taxes to county school districts within the annexed area, and outlawed merging school districts without the agreement of all parties involved. This was

seen as a strategy to allow school districts with a predominantly white student body to evade consolidating with predominantly black school districts.<sup>298</sup>

Lindsey thought seriously about merging schools when considering the annexation. He proposed a central high school that could serve over 2,000 students, possibly the best in the state. Yet, he acknowledged the strong opposition to merging school districts and the requirement for building permits. Many residents moved outside Laurel to escape the city schools and to maintain their current unrestricted land use without the hassle of permits. In US District Court, city attorney Harold Melvin and county attorney Terry Caves sparred over whether Laurel's annexation case should be locally or federally tried. Melvin challenged the state's school law as "patently racial" and pushed for federal courts to assess its constitutionality. Caves maintained that the constitutional query could be settled by a county judge. Magistrate Britt Singletary heard the arguments and was evaluating the next steps, with the expectation that a federal decision would be quicker than one in Chancery Court.<sup>299</sup>

On August 25, 1988, a pivotal meeting took place in the courthouse auditorium regarding the fate of the city's school board. Lawyer Richard Yoder shared that a directive had come from Judge Singletary at 5:30 in the evening, mandating the disbandment of the board. Sharp divisions marked the panel, evident in the voting outcome of 3 to 2—three white members voted in favor of merging schools, and two black members opposed. Amidst the proceedings, Rev. Johnny Anderson, Laurel school board member and vice president of the Laurel-Jones NAACP, voiced his strong objections to how the merger process was unfolding, earning support from the present crowd. Barbara Brumfield-Pruitt, the board's president, shared Anderson's sentiment, yet the agenda for the night was followed. During a subsequent closed meeting, an in-camera session sparked resistance from NAACP President Manuel Jones and parent Janice Hollingsworth, who remained seated in protest. Confrontation escalated, prompting the intervention of police, although Jones and Hollingsworth left of their own accord before any arrests. Afterwards, Yoder communicated to the now intrigued and upset audience that the board decided against fighting the

order and would proceed to formally consent to the disbanding.<sup>300</sup>

Following the directive's issuance, the Laurel-Jones County branch of the NAACP, alongside four students, filed a request for court intervention in the lawsuit. A community forum was orchestrated by Jones at the St. Elmo Baptist Church to deliberate on the school district consolidation. The venue was filled to capacity, with several African American local councilors, county officials, and former members of the Laurel School Board in attendance. Despite their presence, the sentiment among attendees was one of betrayal by most incumbents, criticizing their role in the dissolution of African American schools. Arwilla Davison, a longstanding participant in pivotal decisions for African Americans post-school integration, addressed the crowd. "All these people you marked your 'X' for [flushed] you down the drain," she said. "The Laurel City Hall, they knew about this."<sup>301</sup>

Davison reflected the sentiments shared by others at the meeting, asserting that the district's closure was timed with the rise of African Americans in leadership roles, suggesting the system was changing to suit certain interests. She criticized the silence of black officials until now, questioning why discussions were only starting when similar, white-led conversations began in November. She called for action rather than mere talk and encouraged proposals from the audience. Dr. Morris Kinsey from the state NAACP identified the district's actions as rooted in racial avoidance, as white families moved away or opted for private schooling to prevent their children from attending schools in primarily black areas, despite African Americans experiencing busing since the start of integration. "The bottom line is that the move by the school board is due to white flight and racism. Whites don't want their students bused to black neighborhoods. African Americans have been bused ever since there has been integration."<sup>302</sup>

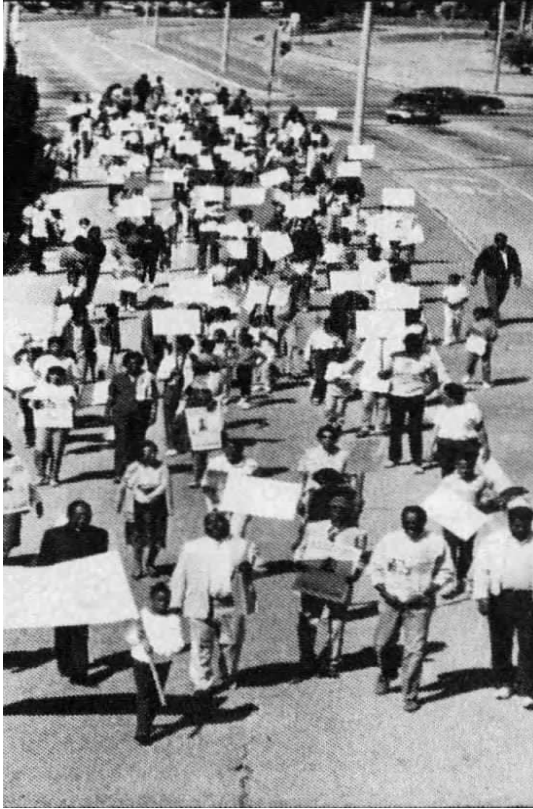
Manuel Jones promptly employed Michael Alderman, an attorney with roots in Michigan now practicing in Hattiesburg, to take on a case aimed at halting the consolidation of two school districts on September 1. Jones and Morris Kinsey stirred up the community with a march against the district merger. Kinsey declared, "While the lawyer is doing his job, we must get out there and do ours." A voter's event was planned as part of the march, and Jones arranged a meeting with

Circuit Judge Roy Hunt Boutwell to facilitate voter registration at the courthouse. Before the march, Alderman briefed a large audience, urging parents and students to engage in the case. The gathering highlighted Susie Ruffin's influential spiritual presence, with her strong vision leading the way. The support of the black community was largely secured by Ruffin, Kinsey, Jones, and Rev. Anderson, though one NAACP member voiced opposition to the group's stance against the merger, arguing it was a favorable development for Laurel and that the NAACP was entirely wrong in its opposition.<sup>303</sup>

Two weeks of planning led up to the day when protesters, bearing banners with messages like "Remember Oak Park School" and "How Far Will Your Child Be Bused," gathered 500 strong at Oak Park. They marched to the Jones County Courthouse. Despite the drizzling rain, they lifted their voices in protest songs while walking through downtown Laurel. The majority of the participants were young people. Although content with the turnout, particularly the presence of youths, Jones voiced his disappointment at the low representation of black elected officials. Laurel City Council's George Gaddy was the only one who stood out that day. "We will retaliate at the ballot box," Jones declared. During the march, young people made their opinions clear to the press, with 9th grader Stephanie McCormick from Watkins School predicting increased fights if schools were merged. Others told the Laurel Leader-Call they'd refuse to attend school elsewhere if closures happened. They aimed to make a strong statement at the courthouse against school consolidation.<sup>304</sup>

Following a protest, Mac Holladay, Mississippi's appointed chief of the Economic Development Department, swiftly addressed the trustees of the Economic Development Authority (EDA) in Jones County, touching on recent occurrences in Laurel. He opened the discussion stressing the importance of uniting regional assets and organizations. Holladay expressed his desire for a seamless merger of the state's Research and Development Center, anticipating it would meet the positive expectations set by the 1988 Legislature. He acknowledged not all would favor the consolidation, stating, "Consolidation won't make everybody happy, but that's not my job. I want to put together the very best team to give Mississippi the best opportunity for growth





The March Against School Consolidation (Courtesy of the Hattiesburg American)

and economic development.” They projected merging the two areas could save city and county dwellers between \$500,000 and \$1 million annually in taxes. Mayor Lindsey supported this, noting the economic necessity of the move. Meanwhile, the NAACP grew suspicious, interpreting the merge as favoring those in power rather than committing to meaningful education improvements.<sup>305</sup>

The NAACP has scheduled a boycott targeting the commercialized policies of Laurel School District to coincide with the Christmas shopping period. In a meeting at St. Elmo Baptist Church on October 13, Reverend John Anderson explained to a crowd of 150 people how



a boycott can impact tax revenue by avoiding purchases. NAACP's Earl Shinhoster, who attended the rally, concurred with Anderson and pointed out the problem of insufficient African American input in educational decision-making. He emphasized the critical importance of education and the demand for representation in decisions about merging schools.<sup>306</sup>

At St Elmo Baptist Church, the local NAACP chapter commenced preparations for a renewed protest, taking cues from their previous march in September. This occasion, however, was to coincide with an NAACP national radio event aimed at attracting new members and rallying support from community businesses. Jones declared on October 13 that their demonstration would challenge the unjust nature of the town's unification process, asserting it an opportunity to clarify the community's inclusivity of African Americans in its governance. He maintained that the merger was tainted by racial bias, noting that despite being the majority in Laurel, African Americans lacked governmental representation. To broaden the Laurel Branch's outreach, a three-hour live segment on WQIS was scheduled at Ruth's Place downtown. The planned protest was to start near Sandy Gavin School. During an animated meeting, Rev. Johnny Anderson urged the congregation to stand firm in their demand for justice, making it clear that the time for passive strategy had passed. "It is not a time for diplomacy. It is a time to fight for your rights," he said. "On Saturday, we will be heard!"<sup>307</sup>

After two days, 200 demonstrators came together at Sandy Gavin around 10:30 am. Jones anticipated 1,000 participants but remained optimistic through his faith, recalling a biblical message about the power of small groups. The protesters made their way through downtown Laurel, chanting the iconic anthem "We Shall Overcome." Children waved signs that read "No Consolidation" and "Let Freedom Live On." When they reached the courthouse, Manuel Jones stepped up to address the crowd. He criticized the merger proponents for bypassing the local NAACP and insisted they would eventually have to negotiate with those who challenged the consolidation legally. Jones revealed the Jones County EDA's attempt to bypass the local chapter by involving the NAACP offices in Atlanta and Jackson and disregard-

ed EDA claims as untrue. As their court date loomed, Jones was adamant that their voices would be heard. “We not going to hush up.”<sup>308</sup>

# 9

## SAVING A STAPLE, RIDDING A PROBLEM

Poor people know they have to accept [what] they cannot change.  
Now we are waiting on all the things that were promised.  
- Omeria Scott, 1989

I won't give up. I'm as determined as sugar is sweet.  
- Marzelle Clayton, 1989

In early December 1988, the pushback against Governor Mabus's plan to shut down the state's charity hospitals was a common sentiment among state lawmakers and local government representatives who addressed a gathering on the South Mississippi State Hospital's front lawn. The rally attendees, approximately 500 strong, braved the cold winds, many holding signs to signal to Mabus and the legislature that "while poor, we vote." As they listened to the speakers' earnest requests to prevent the hospital's closure, Rep. Gary Staples of Laurel, received loud cheers for his emphatic challenge to the governor. "Governor, read my lips—you're wrong, wrong, wrong." Other politicians, such as Rep. Vincent Scoper of Laurel, Rep. P.A. Townsend of Laurel, and Dr. James Anderson, founder of the Medical Committee for Human Rights, attended the rally to advocate for the state's hospital system, along with county officials from the area. Rep. Johnny Stringer of Jasper County pointed out that most people he represented depended on South Mississippi State Hospital and overwhelmingly support its continued operation.<sup>309</sup>



The South Mississippi Charity Hospital (Courtesy of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History)

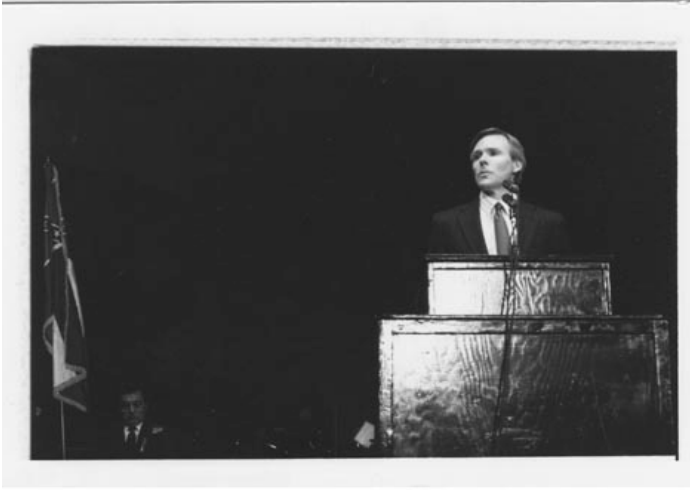
The primary issue for speakers and supporters was keeping medical services available for the state's low-income workers. Additionally, Jo Moody, a nurse at the facility, voiced worry over the staff's job security in light of these developments. Carolyn Boutwell, administrator of South Mississippi State Hospital, noted that uncertainty is a recurring problem every year when it's time to allocate funds for charity hospitals. Nonetheless, she argued that it was unfair to the employees, advocating for a lasting solution to the funding controversy. The charity, despite its longstanding rigorousness to maintain support, was a staple for poor Mississippians.<sup>310</sup>

Until the end of the 19th century, with minimal government help, people in Mississippi mostly depended on nearby medical professionals for health care. In severe situations, the poor turned to the limited charity hospitals in major cities such as Natchez, Vicksburg, Jackson, and Meridian. In 1916, Senator Theodore Bilbo established the South Mississippi Charity Hospital in Laurel and recommended to put more in other sections of the state. Subsequently, the three main charity hospitals in the state were located in Laurel, Vicksburg, and Meridian. Still, as healthcare was still a resource prioritized for whites, at the hospitals, African Americans and whites had separate wards, separate entrances, and separate nurses. For example, at Laurel Gen-

eral Hospital in Laurel, only two rooms with four beds were allocated for African American patients, and there was not a dedicated nursery for their newborns, unlike ones available for white babies. African Americans in Jones County not only lacked access to necessary care for infants, such as monitoring or incubation, due to the absence of appropriate facilities, they suffered from segregated, substandard hospital conditions and access to doctors. Historian Thomas Ward notes in *Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South* that Mississippi had the lowest number of African American doctors for its black population, exceeding a million; with just one for every 18,527 people from 1932 to 1942, the state only had fifty-eight African American doctors, sometimes even fewer.<sup>311</sup>

As the struggle for adequate healthcare became more defined, Mayor George Flagg of Vicksburg referred to it as “the third Civil Rights Movement.” After 1975 there was a decline in political and economic support for African American health, leading to poorer health outcomes compared to whites after 1980, and the mid-1980s marked the first decrease in life expectancy for African Americans in the 20th century. African American life expectancy for African Americans declined from 69.7 in 1984 to 68.4 years old in 1989 while whites were living until 75. Throughout the 1980s many hospitals relocated from heavily African American communities to predominantly white suburban communities. Mabus’s announcement of getting out of the charity hospital business ignited a new fight for healthcare.<sup>312</sup>

In January 1989, Governor Ray Mabus, a Harvard Law School Graduate and the former state auditor, proposed a total reorganization of Mississippi’s government. Two years prior, Mabus managed to secure legislative backing for various restructuring plans proposed by the Reorganization Study Commission; this included establishing the Department of Finance and Administration (DFA) and abolishing the local charity hospitals and the Eleemosynary Board. Mabus proposed that the state legislators consider eliminating the \$103,000 funding for the Eleemosynary Board that oversaw the charity hospital. He suggested transferring the hospital’s management to the State Board of Health. He argued that since Medicaid largely took over providing medical care for the poor, the state’s use for the charity hospital



Ray Mabus standing at a podium (Courtesy of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History)

was obsolete. He recommended shutting down the charity hospitals, believing they hardly served anyone. He also advised reallocating the \$68 million they receive from Medicaid each year towards new economic ventures. Mabus's decision was heavily influenced by Dr. Clinton Smith, former Laurel pediatrician turned Mississippi's Director of Medicaid. Smith was convinced that a more robust Medicaid system would benefit the state's working poor who lacked insurance. He planned to broaden Medicaid's reach to include a larger number of citizens. Smith predicted that, over the next few years, around 32,000 additional people would receive Medicaid coverage.<sup>313</sup>

At the Mississippi State of the State Address on January 3, 1989, Mabus gave his remarks about the state's economic situation in front of a panel of legislators. Consistent with his entire political career, Mabus talked about progressivism in Mississippi. He devoted roughly one-third of his lengthy 42-minute address on the legislative session's opening day to building a case for an intensive overhaul of state government. The proposal would pull roughly 135 state agencies and departments under the yolk of a dozen major governmental divisions, reduce the executive chain of command, and allow the Governor more

authority to hire and fire top administrators in state government. The tepid reception to Mabus's 42-minute speech was punctuated with a few boos when the Governor spoke about the closure of charity hospitals. With his relatively bland, technocratic language, restrained demeanor, and jet-speed pace, he set out to show the public that Mississippi could be a player in the wealthy, quickly homogenizing world of 1980s medical care.<sup>314</sup>

The idea was to eliminate state support for charity hospitals, but whether these hospitals could remain open would hinge on local fundraising efforts or if a private enterprise would step into the void. The expansion of Medicaid was seen as a victory by progressive politicians and child welfare advocates, with some anti-abortion activists also supporting better healthcare for mothers and babies. Traditionally, Medicaid for these groups was linked to being part of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, but states had the option to offer Medicaid to pregnant women not in AFDC, leading to some shifts in AFDC and Medicaid qualifications. The 1988 Census revealed that less than half of America's 32 million poor benefitted from Medicaid, as states had a lot of say over who was eligible, especially children and families, resulting in many not being covered due to low state income thresholds for AFDC and Medicaid. Vincent Scoper, a former election official turned senator, challenged the idea that expanding Medicaid would support those relying on charity hospitals. He noted that over time, changes to Medicaid and AFDC had led to certain groups qualifying for Medicaid based solely on income and assets. He expressed concern that altering the eligibility requirements could lead to an overwhelming increase in enrollees.<sup>315</sup>

Mabus started approaching the hospital funding conflict from a fresh perspective. Seven years prior, during the previous major dispute regarding the financing of the three charity hospitals, representatives from northern Mississippi and the Gulf Coast failed to eliminate the charity hospitals. Yet, they managed to secure higher payments for local hospitals to treat patients unable to pay. In 1982, Governor William Winter acknowledged that the system for providing health care to the needy was unjust. He emphasized that the solution was not to stop funding existing charity hospitals but to distribute funds for the

needy's health care more fairly. Winter conceded that legislators fighting to phase out the charity hospitals are "beginning to recognize there is a marked disparity in the distribution of indigent care money."<sup>316</sup>

For Mabus, the dilemma was straightforward: determining the best way to offer health care to Mississippi's low-income residents. He agreed that charity hospitals did provide help. Nonetheless, the state was unable to support health care at charity hospitals to the same extent as at Delta Medical Center in Greenville, St. Dominic Hospital, Baptist Medical Center in Jackson, and other private facilities. As a result, impoverished Mississippians were getting less health care than they should, due to a two-tiered medical system that disadvantages those who are poor or live in certain areas.<sup>317</sup>

The response to the speech was not internally supported. Even with Mabus's vows, those in favor of the hospitals felt it would leave many without Medicaid uninsured. Supporters of the Charity hospital accused Mabus of using the matter for political gain. They saw clear political motives from the other side as well. In particular, regional lawmakers with voters linked to the hospitals suggested Mabus was ignoring the needs of the poor. Some believed that keeping things as they would harm more low-income individuals than the hospital's aid. They argued that closing the Charity hospitals could end unequal healthcare in those regions—a subpar level for the poor and a superior one for others. Concerns were raised for patients too rich for Medicaid but too poor for private health insurance. Mabus had committed to attracting more doctors for the poor via the National Health Service, making sure all hospitals give emergency care to the poor, and creating a hotline to help impoverished people find medical help.<sup>318</sup>

Despite opposition, he garnered backing from legislators in the Gulf Coast and northern Mississippi to consider closing hospital doors since those regions did not have one. During the initial construction of hospitals in Mississippi, legislators faced resistance from plantation owners, who feared widespread diseases like smallpox or tuberculosis. Carolyn Boutwell believed the solution would be to establish charity hospitals in areas that did not have them. She proposed to transform the University Medical Centers into such facilities. Alternatively, Mabus suggested creating federally qualified health centers and starting a





Marzelle Clayton in his front yard (Courtesy of the Laurel-Jones Black History Museum and Arts)

hotline to guide those in poverty to medical support.<sup>319</sup>

On the following day, Marzell Clayton, who established the organization People Helping People in Laurel and served as its treasurer and secretary, hand-delivered letters to Eric Clark, the Head of the House Rules Committee, and Tim Ford, the Speaker of the House. The letters requested the lawmakers to postpone decisions on Mabus's proposal until a January 26 meeting of the Eleemosynary Board, which had decided to listen to arguments to keep the hospitals operational. Ford mentioned he had not received the letters and did not commit to adhering to Clayton's plea. Standing noticeably taller than others at over six feet, Clayton's distinct feature was his greying Jheri curl at his hairline. Despite his modest means, as he referred to himself as part of the "po folk," he proudly wore his signature blue jeans everywhere—whether attending legislative sessions or discussing issues with government officials like the Governor, congressmen, and local leaders. Clayton's focus was to gather funds to convert a closed charity hospital into a clinic. His approach to fundraising was straightforward, appealing for just one dollar from every person's paycheck in the state. "We're asking for a dollar from everyone in the state from each paycheck," he stated. "We are going to have to fight. We must fight."<sup>320</sup>

Omeria Scott, born in Laurel and forging a career as a Nursing Home Administrator at the Meadow manor Intermediate Care Facility, became president of the Committee for the Continued Funding Operation and Ex- pansion of the Charity Hospitals (CFO), a group dedicated to safeguarding the continued financial support and growth of the Charity Hospitals. This passion for healthcare advocacy was not from personal hospital experience but was kindled when her aunt, Arwillia Davison, who served on the Eleemosynary Board, faced the challenges when the Natchez Charity Hospital funding was cut in May 1987, as Mississippi redirected its financial resources amidst the facility's decline. Davison recognized the grave consequences of shutting down the hospital, alerting Scott with a serious warning that echoed the peril of a domino effect across other hospitals. This was particularly alarming for pastors in Jasper County who joined the fight for funding.<sup>321</sup>

The CFO outlined plans for a rally on January 18 at the State Capitol in Jackson. Clergy not only voiced their support but also worked to transport backers of the cause. Meanwhile, Scott, with fellow activists and committee members, mobilized a petition to confront Governor Mabus with public sentiment. They tirelessly spread the petition for signatures, from hospital desks to church doors, and from neighbor to neighbor, gathering an impressive tally of over 20,000 signatures backing their stance. Rooted in her faith and keen on justice for the underprivileged, Scott maintained that true Christian values included compassion for the poor. This belief propelled her into the Charity Hospital Movement, driven by the conviction that the fight transcended race—it was a matter of moral and Christian principles.<sup>322</sup>

Omeria Scott, alongside her spouse and fellow CFO colleagues, made the trip to Jackson three times a week. Their mission was to convince state senators to support the hospital petition. Dorothy Rustin, affectionately known as Dot by those close to her, had been a passionate advocate for the hospital since the late '50s. However, due to health issues related to high blood pressure, her doctor advised against travel. "The doctor said the stress makes my blood pressure too high for traveling," Rustin shared. "Still, I've done my part by speaking out, signing petitions, and even driving ill folks to the state hospital, the only place they can afford. We desperately need more hospitals. If

the Governor spent just one day in my life, he'd understand." Rustin ran Dots Cash and Carry, a local store in the Rustin Community, some 13 miles from Laurel. For years, she was the one who'd give people rides to the South Mississippi State Hospital if they lacked transportation or the funds for a doctor's visit.<sup>323</sup>

On the way to the rally, Mayor Bucklew was at the forefront of the convoy filled with advocates as they departed the city. The highway patrol was on hand in each city they passed, ensuring they navigated through traffic smoothly. When they arrived in Jackson, around 300 supporters from Laurel, donned in yellow ribbons and heavily wrapped in coats, joined the protest. The corridors of the state Capitol buzzed with activity as the demonstrators, armed with signs, filled the Senate galleries to brimming. The signs they carried bore messages about the concerns of Mississippi's poor. As the demonstrators fully occupied the building, Capitol officials, acknowledging their protest rights and the consideration due to older participants, set out chairs for them to sit and rest. At 12:01 pm, the group gathered on the Capitol steps. Scott ascended the steps and shared a unifying statement, noting the diverse representation of people united by a singular goal: to preserve and hopefully extend the charity hospital network in the region, including North Mississippi and the Gulf Coast.<sup>324</sup>

Barbara Jones, secretary of the CFO, observed significant support from the House of Representatives members for the state hospital system. "We're not backing down and we're going to ramp up our efforts," she declared. Jones showed concern that Governor Mabus's focus on expanding Medicaid coverage to an additional 32,000 individuals overshadowed the needs of the uninsured. Following a nearly 45-minute demonstration, some protesters, including Dot Rustin, secured a meeting with Governor Mabus. Rustin vowed they would not quit, as many lives hung in the balance. She shared the challenges faced by Jones County with the Governor, but he responded confidently that his plan would succeed, noting that it would extend Medicaid to families earning less than \$22,500 per year. He also mentioned a poll suggesting his growing popularity. Despite this, Rustin challenged the relevance of the poll, arguing that it did not capture the true sentiments of Jones County residents towards the governor. She left the meeting

uncertain about the future of healthcare.<sup>325</sup>

After putting in months of hard work to rally support for the charity hospital network, Omeria Scott and Barbara Jones returned to Laurel with disappointing news. The outcome of the House vote did not align with their hopes. She expressed concern over the lack of a backup plan for individuals who don't meet Medicaid's criteria. According to Jones, the notion that welfare is the best economic strategy for assistance is a dismal perspective. She emphasized that a similar level of investment in economic development, as seen in the efforts to dismantle state hospitals, could have led to a more favorable situation. That evening, the South Mississippi State Hospital in Laurel saw the CFO gather for a candlelight vigil and prayer service on the front lawn. Eberta Spinks guided participants in singing hymns as they held candles, standing against the Governor's suggested changes. They unfurled a set of petitions bordered with red, with the theme "Mississippi Speaks." These petitions, filled with heartfelt pleas, were displayed prominently to express impetus and goodwill for the perceived obsolete hospital.<sup>326</sup>

Despite the demonstration not changing Mabus's stance, it did succeed in one aspect—it garnered more support from legislators for the charity hospitals. Several state representatives had indicated that there is sufficient backing in both the House and the Senate to ensure the continued funding and operation of the hospitals. The following week witnessed a second vote by ten Senate Executive Reorganization Committee members regarding the hospital's fate. On January 23, Senator Cy Rosenblatt, serving as the vice chair of the Public Health and Welfare Committee, insisted on yet another vote after verifying at least ten times that he had the necessary support for the motion's success. Rosenblatt believed the hospital's supporters were in the minority within the Senate, but it appeared that he was mistaken. He described the situation as "getting caught with your pants down."<sup>327</sup>

Even though they secured a victory, the conflict was far from over. The House was still embroiled in disputes regarding the issue. The CFO felt deceived upon learning about the subsequent vote. Barbara Jones warned that continuous re-voting on the future of the hospitals might lead to voter exhaustion. On February 8, around 75 hospital \



The candlelight visual in front of the South Mississippi Hospital (Courtesy of Rachel Summers)

advocates from Laurel made their way to Jackson to witness the debate and voting process in the House. Among them were Omeria Scott and Barbara Jones, who carried a collection of petitions signed by 200,000 people. Despite the House passing the initial vote narrowly, the Senate's proposed legislation was left to unaddressed.<sup>328</sup>

A crucial decision was made after Representative George Flaggs of Vicksburg, a self-taught politician from Vicksburg, proposed a change. He suggested removing the hospitals from the proposal, focusing only on growing the Medicaid program. During the discussion, there was a strong show of lawmakers arguing to keep the hospitals running. Tension rose between Flaggs and Mabus, almost leading to a fight. Flaggs angrily asserted that he believed in expanding the Medicaid program, but "not on the backs of charity hospitals" and that the Legislature could find \$6 million to expand the Medicaid program and save the hospitals. "You're picking on the poor," he angrily protested. When things calmed down, the Mississippi House decided by a vote of 68 to 52. This would officially close the hospitals, not letting any new patients in after June 15. The plan was to use the \$68 million meant for the hospitals to enhance the state Medicaid program, which would be boosted by federal money at a four-to-one match. With this bill, Mabus said, it meant that everyone, no matter their income or location,

should get health care of the same quality. He praised the House's action as "a bold step toward improving health care for needy citizens throughout the state."<sup>329</sup>

Supporters of charity hospitals were heartbroken when a proposed change was turned down. "People are crying," Omeria Scott declared. "They've been through this before; they know what's coming." Although exhausted, Scott and Barbara Jones remained hopeful. The thought that frightened them was the possibility of individuals avoiding medical care until it became an emergency, Jones emphasized, pointing out that just in 1988, the three charity hospitals dealt with 64,000 outpatient visits. Scott stated again that the uncertain future and limited federal funding only benefit a small number of patients and hospitals. She highlighted the importance of the charity hospitals in Mississippi, where the cost for a patient is \$220 a day, a stark contrast to the \$480 a day at other hospitals. Scott warned that if this affordable option is lost, low-income workers would be left with no choice but to endure their ailments quietly.<sup>330</sup>

Yearly struggles to secure funding for charity hospitals were commonly recognized in the state Legislature, but this year marked a unique situation with the proposal to shut them down originating from the governor's office. Officials from Governor Mabus' team highlighted his readiness to tackle contentious matters, despite the risks involved. Mabus emphatically argued that the hospitals were inadequately financed and symbolized a less favorable level of a two-tiered healthcare system in Mississippi. He stressed the importance of striving towards a future where a person's location and income would not dictate the quality of healthcare they receive.<sup>331</sup>

On February 23, the hospital advocates were delighted with the news from the legislative body. Cheers filled the state senate when the vote turned in favor of keeping Mississippi's three charity hospitals running, with a count of 28 to 23. Throughout the prolonged discussions and persuasion efforts, senators not only chose to broaden Medicaid but also deliberately excluded the charity hospitals from this legislation, while concurrently approving the financial support to maintain these facilities. Vince Scoper expressed satisfaction with the decision but acknowledged the lingering threat of a gubernatorial





Another protest in front of the South Mississippi Charity Hospital (Courtesy of Rachel Summer)

veto, recognizing that the final decision, despite public opinion, was still up in the air. Governor Mabus had not abandoned his plans to broaden Medicaid and shutter the charity hospitals by July 1. Despite this outcome, the matter remains unresolved, as Mabus reaffirmed his commitment to his goals, commenting post the morning senate vote that he would pursue the issue with unremitting effort, as noted in his office's public statement.<sup>332</sup>

Despite the recent approval of a Senate Bill, the state's financial commitment to funding hospital operations remained tepid. Dr. James Urban Morrison, medical director at South Mississippi State Hospital, spoke to the lawmakers to shed light on the obstacles they were encountering. He attributed the hospital's deficiencies solely to the lack of financial resources. Dr. Morrison shared alarming statistics that revealed Laurel Hospital's funding was a meager \$16,410 per patient per day, a sharp contrast to Jones County Community Hospital's \$48,234.<sup>333</sup>

Dr. Morrison argued that with sufficient funding to meet actual expenses and match the services provided elsewhere, they could ef-

ficiently handle the state's medical needs. Yet the situation was critical. South Mississippi was making do with outdated surgical instruments and a shortage of equipment. For example, having only one fetal monitor meant that if three women went into labor at the same time and faced complications, it could result in over \$100,000 in added healthcare costs. He also pointed out the disparity in wages, noting that while a top nurse at the University Hospital could earn \$15 an hour, his hospital was only able to pay \$9. The proposition to have these charity hospitals self-sufficient was dismissed as unrealistic by a former Eleemosynary Board member, given that these hospitals cater to the underprivileged, including employed people who do not have health insurance and don't meet the criteria for Medicaid or other state aid. Dr. Morrison recognized the lawmakers' reluctance to fund services that their voters may not directly benefit from, yet he stressed that it is the responsibility of the entire state to support the hospital.<sup>334</sup>

Supporters of the hospital worked hard to sustain public support that grew from earlier petitions and demonstrations at the start of the year. On March 12, about 150 of them gathered again at the Jones County Courthouse for a new rally set by the CFO. Hospital advocates were adamant on that critical Saturday night, declaring "We've lost some fights, but not the war." In this meeting, supporters of the charity hospital listened as a group of legislators and a past governor made assurances to continue their efforts until the very end. "The battle isn't over until it's over," proclaimed Rev. CE Appleberry, president of the Concerned Citizens of Lauderdale County, emphasizing their determination to fight on. He indicated that any defeat would be temporary, predicting that future events could see improvement. The absent Mabus faced severe critique from speakers in the crowded, hot courtroom. Attendees were reminded to remember Mabus and his actions during the 1991 reelection. Former Laurel Mayor Henry Bucklew passionately appealed to the audience not to cast their votes for someone who seemed uncaring and coldhearted.<sup>335</sup>

Former Governor of Mississippi, William Allain, was among the gathering. Known for his frequent references to the Bible, Allain delivered a talk stressing the significance of health care access for all citizens. He highlighted the constraints that Medicaid would impose



on the lower income working population. Peaking in his involvement, Allain actively sought out and spoke to those who would suffer from hospital shutdowns. “Throughout my time as Governor and Attorney General, I’ve prioritized access to quality healthcare,” he stated. “It’s my firm belief that everyone in this state, no matter their age, wealth, or background, should receive the medical care they need, whether they can pay for it or not.” Speculation grew about Allain possibly seeking the governor’s seat once more.

He was widely regarded as the preferred choice among African American voters due to his position on the controversy surrounding the charity hospitals. Mississippi Representative Aaron Henry, an admirer of Allain, commended his consistent rapport with civil rights activists, noting, “He’s kept good relations with those fighting for civil rights and has been an ally to our cause.” Mabus also saw his support among African American voters diminish because of his failed attempt to remove Ed Cole as the chair of the state’s Democratic Party. Henry expressed a belief that in a run-off with Mabus, the African American electorate would favor Allain if the vote occurred at that time.<sup>336</sup>

On March 16, after a half-hour debate, lawmakers voted 68-48 to fund Kuhn Memorial Hospital in Vicksburg—the first of four charity hospitals supporting bills they approved in a late morning session. The session was, however, highlighted by name-calling and bickering. Charity hospital opponents and proponents privately argued on the House floor, specifically between Representatives Barney Schoby and Horace Buckley. Schoby was one of thirteen African American House members who voted for the hospital’s funding, and Buckley was one of three who voted against it. Schoby, who spoke for the bills from the House podium, ignored three separate warnings from the House speaker to avoid personal attacks on Buckley. Schoby stood at the podium on the House floor, looked up at the fourth-floor visitors’ gallery jammed with mostly black hospital supporters, and expressed words defending his stances that many thought had undertones of the Uncle Tom caricature and impious. “I never thought I’d see the day when a black man would come to this podium and fight against [charity hospitals],” Schoby said. “These people feel these charity hospitals are theirs. I just can’t understand how a Christian—not only a Christian

but a minister of the Gospel—would come forward and speak against this.”<sup>337</sup>

Buckley, a Baptist minister, immediately made use of a seldom invoked legislative rule to claim his right to address the House, feeling personally offended. He approached the stand with anger and addressed the House, indicating that Schoby had cast doubts on his morals and wrongly accused him of being indifferent to the plight of the impoverished, which, he firmly asserted, was far from the truth. With a subdued yet passionate tone, he shared with the House his own experience of growing up in poverty on the south side of Jackson alongside his twin brother who became seriously sick in childhood. His brother was treated at a local clinic, which Buckley thought of as a charitable institution, though it was not among the three controversial charity hospitals. Buckley stated that if his brother had received adequate medical treatment, he would still be alive. He conveyed the pain of witnessing his brother’s death and asserted his deep understanding of poverty and the lack of proper healthcare. Now with a chance to make a difference, he found it unjust to be labeled as neglectful and insensitive.<sup>338</sup>

Setting personal feelings aside, few questioned that Mabus would hesitate to use his veto power on the funding bill—a move predicted to be the most contentious of his tenure. Despite demonstrations at the Capitol by supporters of charity hospitals, aggressive lobbying by influential African American leaders, and warnings of political consequences from lawmakers representing impacted communities, Mabus remained steadfast in his intent to overhaul the state’s Medicaid system.<sup>339</sup>

On March 21, with a signature, Mabus dashed the hopes of many Mississippians in need by shutting down the country’s last three charity hospital networks. He argued that his decision, focused on funneling the \$68 million budget into an expanded Medicaid scheme, aimed to deliver superior healthcare to the greatest number of residents. The Governor underscored that potential political backlash was not a factor in his decision. His politics made way for a bleak future as governor. Yet, Mabus stood undeterred.<sup>340</sup>

Mabus invited those opposed to the shutdowns to seek judicial in-

tervention. He maintained that the initiative was rooted in government authority, comprising both legislative and executive branches, and simply stated to the opposition, “go ahead.” The state Senate solidified the veto by ending its session on Tuesday without addressing the issue. Mabus stated his willingness to accept any political repercussions for cutting funding to the hospitals and their administration. However, Eva Farrish Ford, an advocate for the hospitals, contended that Mabus had committed a significant political error, emphasizing that the poor would not forget that moment.<sup>341</sup>

In vetoing the package of three appropriations bills, Mabus highlighted the need to carefully allocate scarce resources for maximum public benefit. Overturning his veto required a two-thirds legislative majority, but it did not happen. Regarding the closing of charity hospitals, Mabus was clear-cut. He did not worry about the politics involved, believing the policy’s value would eventually become clear. Mabus was candid about his setbacks, such as failing to secure the Walls nomination and fully reshaping the government. Yet, he took pride in the legislature upholding his right to appoint members to the Public Service Commission, maintaining his influence.<sup>342</sup>

Governor Mabus selected James C. Stubbs, who previously led the Mississippi State Hospital and managed the state Eleemosynary Board for a quarter of a century, to oversee the shutdown of the three hospitals. Although Stubbs had retired in early 1988, he returned shortly after to lead Mabus’s initiative for smoothly transitioning patients. The program’s main strategies were to increase the number of doctors where the hospitals being closed were situated and to set up assessment centers in related towns by mid-April. The centers aimed to connect those in need with available healthcare providers and facilities.<sup>343</sup>

As the hospital’s deconstruction was nearing, fresh thoughts were taking shape. Dr. JU Morrison and local entrepreneurs discussed setting up a nonprofit organization to run the hospital, focusing on helping people with Medicaid and those lacking health insurance in Mississippi. Toward the end of the legislative term, a law was passed allowing the shift of the charity hospital’s land to the municipal and county hands. These authorities could, in turn, pass it to a private en-

tity. Senator Vince Scoper outlined the immediate tasks. He needed to confirm that physicians with restricted licenses could work in any medical facility. The Senate had already given the green light to this provision, as well as to legislation that confirmed the transfer of state hospital land to local governance. This local governance could, thereafter, delegate the land to a non-governmental body if they chose to. Moreover, Morrison urged local officials to allocate \$500,000—which is equivalent to three mills of county property tax (a mill here means a tax of \$1 for every \$1,000 of assessed value)—to help keep the hospitals running. With a \$4 million operating budget, the hospital would be greatly improved. What they required from the officials was the tax cushion, to guarantee the hospital's doors stayed open.<sup>344</sup>

Supporters of a hospital aimed to pressure political leaders. Marzell Clayton, who had been leading protests, now zeroed in on Senator Rick Lambert of Hattiesburg. Lambert had openly backed Ray Mabus. During a 15-minute meeting with the feel of an old-time religious meeting, Clayton called for Lambert to be ousted. "If you're upset with Senator Lambert, put your name in this book," he urged those at a Hattiesburg church. "Our votes are powerful. We're the ones who support Lambert with our money. To oppose him, sign here if you're a voter." Cheers of agreement, like "Hallelujah!" and "That's right!" filled the room as people signed. Clayton then went from house to house with a petition to gather signatures to recall the senator representing District 45, with the goal of showing state officials the number of voters wishing to retract their support for Lambert. However, Clayton didn't know the exact number of signatures needed to achieve this. Not like a normal recall election where a politician is put to a new vote, Clayton's plan was to have people take back the votes they had given Lambert in the recent November election.<sup>345</sup>

A week later, Marzell Clayton, supported by a group of about thirty-six people from Laurel, Hattiesburg, and Meridian, marched from the Jones County Courthouse to the South Mississippi State Hospital in protest. Clayton addressed the assembly declaring a commitment to exhaust all efforts to keep the hospitals running. "We will fight for the rights of all poor people, both black and white, people who need these hospitals open. We will let the courts make the decision. I will wear

these blue jeans I have on up there to Washington if I have to because I ain't got no suit to wear," he professed.<sup>346</sup>

By July, People Helping People had a clear strategy to maintain hospital services. "Come Monday, we're requesting a court order to prevent the closures," Clayton announced. Should their appeals be ignored by a jury, their next step would involve seeking an audience with a trio of judges, and should Governor Mabus turn a deaf ear, they would initiate a recall against his governorship. "I know the way, and I don't mind doing anything I have to keep these hospitals alive. I know some people who have been talking, but they don't have the ways of getting him out of office that I do," Clayton asserted. He highlighted that Medicaid and Medicare, being federally funded initiatives, are not within the state's jurisdiction to control—that would form the basis of their legal challenge. The funds in question were federal, not state, which invalidated any state interference. Clayton's resolve was to either pursue legal action to immobilize those funds or bring forth a discrimination lawsuit, pinpointing the state's unequal treatment of its impoverished citizens.<sup>347</sup>

Shortly after, Clayton filed a class action lawsuit in the U.S. District Court in Hattiesburg, with the case set to be heard by Judge Dan M. Russell. For legal representation, he requested that the state's Eleemosynary Board allow People Helping People a chance to discuss the issue of the hospital's closure. The following day, according to a court clerk in Hattiesburg, Clayton came back to ensure that both a summons and a copy of the lawsuit were sent out to Governor Mabus and six Eleemosynary Board members. He stipulated that the Governor had 60 days to respond after receipt, and the summonses were to be served within a 15-day period.<sup>348</sup>

The previous year, Clayton had sent an official letter to the Governor, the U.S. Department of Justice, and the Eleemosynary Board, requesting that they hold off any decisions regarding the charity hospitals until he could present his case in a hearing. However, he received no answers from Mabus, and the Board rejected his request for a hearing, although he was later permitted to speak at the Board's meeting in December. "I know the Governor got my letter. In fact, I know they all got my letter because I got the green-certified cards back. I gave

the speaker of the House of Representatives and the chairman of the House Rules Committee a copy of my letter and asked that no action be taken on the charity hospitals until after a hearing. They wouldn't do it. And I don't believe they let the House members know about it, either."<sup>349</sup>

On a busy Tuesday morning on April 4, Mabus enacted legislation, concluding a strenuous debate concerning the ongoing financial support for state hospitals. In a subsequent press briefing, Mabus's comments were unclear regarding his intention to reconvene the legislature in Jackson to review measures about building upgrades and establishing a permanent Parole Board. "The bill that I just signed is going to have a measurable impact on Healthcare in Mississippi," Mabus said during a ceremony in which he signed the bill. In the next meeting, the Senate concluded its session without addressing the veto, effectively upholding it. Mabus expressed readiness to face any political consequences for reducing the budget of the three hospitals and their managing committee.<sup>350</sup>

The Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee approved the legislation but made a change that prohibits hospitals from trying to seize wages from those who cannot pay their medical bills. The modification meant the bill goes back to the Executive Reorganization Committee, which would decide before the end of that day to meet their deadline. The bill aimed to increase the Medicaid budget from \$100 million to \$130 million. It also planned to boost what doctors get paid, allowed patients more days in the hospital, and let them have more prescription medicines. However, on a less positive note, the bill laid out a method for what to do with the old charity hospital buildings. The closure of the hospitals began as planned with minimal issues.<sup>351</sup>

In a move to mend relationships, Governor Mabus extended a dinner invitation to the 22 African American legislators in Mississippi. However, the invite was declined. They felt it would be insincere to appear content with the Governor's actions. Among those who refused were Aaron Henry, George Flaggs, and Barney Schoby. Schoby stated he could not enjoy a meal at the mansion after Mabus vetoed the legislation crucial for charity hospital funding, calling the veto a poor decision by the Governor. The timing seemed insensitive, given the

ongoing debate over charity hospital funding, an issue the majority of the Black Caucus supported. Ultimately, only about half of the caucus members accepted the invitation to dine with the Governor.<sup>352</sup>

Despite the setback of Mabus's veto, the determined residents of Laurel kept pushing to save their hospital. The City Council unanimously decided to rent the hospital from the state and let a local non-profit group, directed by Dr. J.U. Morrison, named The Mississippi Hospital Corporation (MHC), run it. The Council also agreed to attempt leasing the hospital grounds for just \$1 a year from the Governor's Office of General Services, allowing MHC to do the same. Moreover, international doctors needed their licenses extended until they could be made permanent. Forty-two local doctors called on the Licensing Board to approve this, and the board did.<sup>353</sup>

According to the lease agreement, Morrison committed to upgrading the hospital with renovations worth \$750,000 within the next five years. Some of those upgrades would be completed promptly to meet state regulations for hospital operations. Pending state approval of the lease, planned improvements include updating emergency exits and creating a sterile area where doctors and nurses can scrub in before surgeries. The city secured a promise from Morrison that it would not be responsible for the hospital's management, which will be overseen by a board of directors. Once the mandatory repairs were done, the hospital would be ready to reopen.<sup>354</sup>

During the mandated closing week, Dr. Morrison halted his attempts to keep the state-funded hospital in Laurel open beyond its planned shutdown date. He faced unresolved legal issues regarding the employment of internationally trained physicians and the utilization of county tax funds. Speaking on Dr. Morrison's behalf, his representative told the press that Morrison was unlikely to return for the rest of the week due to taking a break after extensive efforts to maintain the hospital's operations. The spokesperson estimated that about 95 to 100 staff members would continue working through the week. The facility, South Mississippi State Hospital, was set to permanently shut down on Friday, June 30. Despite this, Morrison had until that Friday to secure state approval for the medical staff and confirmation of financial support from the Jones County officials. Morrison had anticipated that

the county board of supervisors would raise property taxes to support ongoing free medical services. However, the board was counseled by their lawyer that legally they were unable to allocate funds for the hospital. Morrison saw this legal advice as merely an opinion. From July 1, 1989, new strict regulations for medical facilities meant the building could not receive state approval to function as a hospital.<sup>355</sup>

On the final day of the state's charity hospital operations, tearful embraces and sorrowful expressions filled the corridors as staff completed their last shifts, coinciding with the state's budget year end. The facility's doors shut for good, leaving everyone affected deeply. "It's the lowest I've ever felt," lamented Omeria Scott. "It's that kind of empty feeling you feel when you lose a loved one. I guess we'll have to do as one does when they actually lose a loved one. I guess all we can go on is the spirit that the hospital is leaving and the memories of the people it has helped. It's just unreal," remarked Scott.



# 10

## NEVER BEING CONTENT

As you have people of more diverse backgrounds going into any situation, that brings a difference of opinions. In order to have fair representation, I think that is important.

- Omeria Scott, 1994

There is a sorting process, and people with jobs, education and resources live somewhere else, and people without live in the most undesirable places.

- Dr. Frank Glamser, University of Southern Mississippi Professor of Sociology

During the 1992 election season, many political advancements were made, one of which involved Omeria Scott stepping into the political arena by vying for a seat in the freshly established House District 80. This district came about following the redrawing of boundaries involving parts of Jones, Jasper, and Clarke counties, a change sanctioned by federal judges earlier that year. Her prior efforts in advocating for the Charity Hospital positioned her well for her campaign, which highlighted the necessity of educational and social program reforms, including universal healthcare. Scott's shot at office exemplified the demand for a fresh kind of leadership in the state's legislation, advocating for individuals with strong moral convictions and innovative approaches. Committed to moving forward, Scott declared, "It is time for us to have God-fearing people in elected positions. This is a time for new thinking, a time for a new face. I am dedicated to progress."<sup>356</sup>

The 1992 local elections sparked minimal interest from voters,

largely overshadowed by the presidential debates, despite the historic number of women progressing to the runoff stage. While women have held roles in the House before the 1990s, many highlight the significance of 1992, often referred to as “The Year of the Woman.” On July 14, candidates for the local legislative races took the stage to address around 40 attendees at an event hosted by the Laurel Business and Professional Women’s Club. Scott leveraged her brief three-minute allotment effectively, emphasizing her dedication to the community. She pledged to support those hardest hit by the 1989 shutdown of the charity hospital. Scott recounted the efforts in Jackson to sustain charity hospitals, acknowledging the challenges they faced. “We felt we needed something to carry us from that point on the charity hospitals to a brighter day when working poor people could have affordable health care,” said Scott, underlining the widespread impact the closure had, particularly the surge in insurance costs, and asserted the need for action.<sup>357</sup>

Although being the only woman on the ballot, Scott secured a notable lead over her competitors. In Jones County, she topped the chart with 527 votes, outstripping James B. Jones, an African American WWII veteran, who amassed 316 votes; James Belding of Heidelberg, with 262 votes; and Marzell Clayton, who received 94 votes. Despite her early lead, after the counts from Jasper and Clarke counties were in, Scott remained ahead with 916 votes while Belding moved up to second with 810 votes. Jones had a total of 562 votes, and Clayton ended with 253. With these figures, Scott and Belding were set for a runoff on August 25th. The lack of a Republican challenger ensured that the Democratic victor would go uncontested in the November elections.<sup>358</sup>

By the end of August, Scott clinched District 80’s victory with a count of 2,122 against 1182 votes. Scott’s triumph contributed to the rise of black representatives in the 1993 House to 27, an increase of six from the previous year. With the composition of the House seeing a growth of black representatives, female members grew from nine to 15. Additionally, Republican representation rose from 23 to 27. Notably, Representative Omeria Scott made history as the first black woman and person to serve Laurel in the Legislature, covering Jones,

Jasper, and Clark counties.<sup>359</sup>

Observers of African American political trends have noted the significant rise in black engagement in mainstream politics starting in the 1990s. The ability to register and vote, granted in 1965, led to a surge in black political representation. In 1970, only 1,460 black officials were elected across the U.S., but by 1989 the figure jumped to 7,226, and it topped 8,000 in the 1990s. Additionally, by the end of the decade, black elected officials were found in every state but Idaho, Montana, and North Dakota. In the legislative branch, African American representation increased from 10 or 1.9% in 1970 to 26 or 5.8% in 1991. In the realm of city governance, by 1989, 299 cities had a black mayor, a significant expansion from just 48 in 1970, and of these mayors, 26 governed large cities.<sup>360</sup>

Nearly 30 years earlier, the MFDP was striving for the increased representation of African American policymakers that the 1990s saw. Though it was not unrealistic to expect unanimous decisions from them, their significant presence formed a powerful coalition that could not be easily disregarded. Such a group had the potential to effectively challenge contentious legislation, including fiscal bills necessitating a supermajority for passing. Scott emphasizes that the key advancement is the newfound access and opportunities. The broader articulation of public issues was not merely due to the rise in African American officeholders but also to the influx of many fresh faces in the legislature.<sup>361</sup>

Scott's initial week in Jackson was filled with significant activities. She expressed satisfaction with her assigned legislative committees. A dedicated advocate for health care reform during her campaign, Scott proudly secured a spot on the Public Health Committee in the state's House of Representatives. "I am very pleased because we had the opportunity to request what [committees] we really wanted from 1-10," Scott stated. Additionally, she would contribute to the Oil and Gas, Apportionment and Elections, and Public Buildings committees.<sup>362</sup>

Still, African American lawmakers frequently crafted legislation focused on education, with 45 such proposals. Additionally, they stepped up efforts in economic and community advancement through bills emphasizing affirmative action, such as special programs for minorities. Of these, seven focused on affirmative action, but none were



Pro Tempore Robert Clark of Ebenezer was presented the Political Education and Economic Development Foundation's Leadership Award by Rep. Charles Young, Jr. of Meridian and Rep. Omeria Scott in January, 1995 at the annual PEEDF Banquet in Jackson. Rep. Clark was the first African American elected to the House of Representatives since the end of Reconstruction. Clark was Scott's deskmate (Courtesy of Omeria Scott)

successful. Representative Horace Buckley commented that when Black legislators introduced thorough and progressive bills, they often faced opposition. As a workaround, Black legislators would strategically move key elements from the bill to amendments or attach them to different bills. This approach increased the chances of at least part of the original proposals being enacted.<sup>363</sup>

A variety of reasons may explain why Black lawmakers have struggled to enact their own bills. Yet, the clearest explanation comes from Representative Barney Schoby, chair of the Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus. During an NPR interview in April 1993, Schoby, a forward-thinking White legislator from Mississippi, suggested that Black legislators faced constant defeat in their efforts despite doubling their numbers from 12 to 24. He said that the overriding message being sent to Black representatives and the wider Black community

in Mississippi was that their legislative power would be diminished regardless of their numbers. He highlighted that relationships had weakened with progressive White leaders who felt betrayed by the redistricting process.<sup>364</sup>

Additionally, Ayres Haxton, a progressive White lawmaker who kept his seat post the 1992 elections, commented on the impact of redistricting. He observed that it has created extremely split districts—ones with only White interests or only Black interests. This division meant that White lawmakers were not motivated to address Black constituents' needs and vice versa because their votes are not needed to win elections. Despite these obstacles and the belief that Black voices were still somewhat on the sidelines of policymaking, the analysis points to real progress by Black legislators in Mississippi. Even though this progress is limited, it resonates with the saying of an old preacher: “We ain’t where we ought to be, we ain’t where we wanna be, but thank God we ain’t where we used to be!”<sup>365</sup>

## **Local Politics**

Even with progress in political representation for African Americans, racial tensions persisted in Laurel. During the Charity Hospital Movement, city council members of Laurel, the Jones County Board of Supervisors, and local residents convened on a hot August evening to seek strategies for unifying their community and addressing its challenges. A team of eight was established from this assembly to plan actionable steps. This committee included community leaders such as Manuel Jones, Omeria Scott, and Susan Vincent. In 1989, Susan Vincent took leadership of the Jones County Concerned Citizens for Better Government. Before this role, she had already been working to bridge gaps between black and white community members. Over three years, she and her colleagues promised to thoroughly examine the community to improve racial harmony and tackle issues like economic growth, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and school dropouts. Their goal was to develop comprehensive strategies to improve life in Jones County for the coming century.<sup>366</sup>

Susan Vincent, inspired by her mother Billie Boone’s dedication to the community and passion for a litter-free Laurel, announced her

intention to run for mayor on February 25, 1993. The mayoral campaign became the hot topic on May 3, with Susan facing off against the incumbent Mayor Henry Bucklew and the former comptroller Don Bullock in the Democratic primary. Amidst her rising political efforts as an open supporter of Mabus, her campaign was soon the target of criticism. During a news conference on June 13, which Susan attended, Dr. J.U. Morrison accused her of backing a plan to restructure the government as a ploy to shut down the hospital. Susan firmly denied the claim, stating she only supported reducing government size, an opinion she had shared at a 1989 public hearing in Meridian. Morrison, who claimed he was not trying to interfere with the election or support Vincent's Republican rival Bobby Nichols, felt pressured to clear the air. He assured everyone that he did not vote in Laurel, nor had he donated to Nichols' campaign. Despite his assurances, the timing of his press conference made many suspects that it was designed to influence the election outcome.<sup>367</sup>

Roughly twelve of Vincent's supporters expressed their disapproval of Morrison with boos following his statement. They probed about his earnings as a medical director and if he was compensated for the press briefing. Morrison, denying payment for the event, disclosed a \$40,000 annual income from his director role, in addition to state-paid surgery fees. Subsequent to the briefing, Vincent, from her campaign office, produced a 1989-dated petition advocating for the charity hospital's survival, filed with the Mississippi Department of Archives in Jackson.<sup>368</sup>

Vincent remained confident that her direct outreach to the citizens of Laurel could help her overcome the charges against her and win. Her efforts were fruitful as she earned a two-to-one victory against Don Bullock for the Democratic mayoral nomination. The campaign's final weeks involved connecting with voters in face-to-face interactions, telephone outreach, and advertisements. Vincent described her campaign as grassroots, focusing on meaningful personal dialogue with the electorate. With 1,765 votes over Bullock's 925, she achieved a 65 percent win. Vincent's campaign promoted a platform of renewal, optimism, and dedication to improving Laurel's image.<sup>369</sup>

On July 3, Susan Vincent's grassroot mayoral campaign outshone

Bobby Nichols' expertly directed effort. With humility, Vincent offered a prayer at her inauguration held at Laurel's City Hall, marking the start of her historic tenure as the city's inaugural female mayor. The new leaders of Laurel called for unity and collaboration at their oath-taking ceremony, as council members, festively attired, dealt with the summer heat. During the occasion, Vincent delivered a brief, motivational talk, encouraging residents to back their local officials. "Let's join in moving our city forward," Vincent urged, imagining a Laurel free from racial divisions and shielded from crime. She emphasized teamwork as the key to success for both the citizens and Laurel. The newly formed Laurel City Council brought a blue-collar touch, comprising individuals like Jeff Bailey, proprietor of a car dealership in Ward 1; contractor Gordon Myrick from Ward 2; lawyer David Ratcliff representing Ward 3; another contractor, Jones Brogdon from Ward 4; former NAACP leader Manuel Jones in Ward 5; Lula Cooley, the first voted female council member from Ward 6; and Melvin Mack, an electronics sales agent from Sears managing Ward 7.<sup>370</sup>

African Americans were in powerful positions of local government, which was a distant thought in years past. Yet, the power level inside was still minimal in the 1980s. Before the Vincent Administration in Laurel, council members were still voting in "racial blocs" against proposals prevented by black councilpersons, which maintained a pseudo-integration of local government. Districts with majority-minority voters were largely created due to extensive racially divided voting. When white voters consistently rejected minority-favored candidates, minority voters only stood a chance to elect their preferred representatives if they were the majority within their voting district. Establishing such districts had been crucial in enabling victories for candidates favored by minorities. Nevertheless, doubts had grown about the long-term effects of crafting these districts. Some worried that they may cement or worsen racial voting divisions, limiting the potential for multi-racial political alliances and reinforcing racial identities in politics.<sup>371</sup>

An exasperated Lula Cooley hit her breaking point in a council meeting, exclaiming that the "the day is gone when we have to do what the white man says." Conflicts erupted but they did not lead to

any changes. The white council members ignored Cooley's passionate pleas for or against policies, routinely casting their votes without considering her arguments. The black council members discovered that their white peers were meeting secretly before the sessions, coordinating their approach. In response, the black council members started to hold their own private meetings.<sup>372</sup>

Amidst political tension, Cooley was at the forefront of enhancing the influence of African Americans and women in Mississippi's legislation. Establishing the Mississippi Black Caucus for Local Elected Officials (MB-CLEO) and the state's Women in Municipal Government (WIMG), she contributed to the creation of a unified force that leveraged their collective voting leverage to ensure that white male policymakers addressed the needs of black communities and women. This alliance not only spotlighted critical issues but also connected black representatives to a wider network, boosting their ability to secure state funds and augment their power within the Laurel city council.<sup>373</sup>

Following prolonged internal disputes among local leaders, Vincent committed to maintaining open lines of communication with the community and the newly formed council. Melvin Mack, speaking for the new council, echoed her call for healing after years of acrimony: "If there must be a fight, let it be a fight against crime and against drugs." The City Council acted swiftly to reintroduce public forums at its meetings. They considered an ordinance to eliminate two existing opportunities for public interaction at council meetings: a 30-minute period for six citizens to speak for five minutes each, and a 15-minute citizens' hearing that requires prior permission. The council members prioritized tackling crime and narcotics as an initial focus of their term.<sup>374</sup>

## **Crime**

In the 1990s, crime substantially increased, inciting widespread concern for safety even during seemingly calm moments. Eberta Spinks, at 77 years old, reflected on the stark contrast to the 1940s when she settled in Laurel, noting "Back then, I didn't have to lock my door.



Now, if you're in one end of the house, you'd better lock the other." She detailed a recent theft when burglars forcefully entered her shed, taking a lawnmower and a pair of clippers. She attributed such crimes to the lingering impact of the previous decade's crack epidemic, observing the prevalence of loiterers, many of whom are outsiders. Spinks suggested drug activity could be fueling the increase in loitering and cars slowly cruising by.<sup>375</sup>

Crime in the United States had been increasing significantly since President Lyndon B. Johnson's term, with the mid-1980s crack-cocaine epidemic intensifying the situation and causing the number of deaths by handguns to more than double between 1985 and 1990. Proactive policing reforms emerged as a key part of various community-focused strategies, pushing for changes in local law enforcement practices and rallying both political and private support for neighborhood policing. African American urban areas were torn on how to handle crime amid economic struggles and urban changes, with the decade seeing jails overcrowd. Black politicians, activists, and police were at odds, at times advocating for severe crime laws and at times rallying against forceful policing and privacy invasions. Community divisions influenced how black locals and activists handled policing methods and increasing crime rates, with grassroots workers focusing on rehabilitative solutions for drug and violence problems, and black political and law figures pushing for stricter drug laws and fixed sentences for gun-related offenses.<sup>376</sup>

On July 15, 1992, Laurel was struck by a severe flood, deluging local communities with 5 inches of rainfall. This led to 600-plus citizens evacuating their residences. The flood worsened the already poor condition of several homes, especially in low-income areas like Brown Circle in Queensburg, which suffered greatly. Nicknamed "Another Vietnam," Brown Circle transformed into a chaotic battleground. A week after the flood, under the scorching near 100-degree summer sun, women and children roamed the housing complex, fanning away the heat while grappling with anger and sorrow as they rummaged through whatever possessions they retrieved from the flood. Brown Circle was particularly inundated by the overflowing Tallahoma Creek, with water invading homes up to 10 inches deep. Amidst this

distress, a neon-green Chevrolet abruptly raced into the scene, its armed occupants firing guns wildly as they drove. The vehicle sharply stopped, and the gunmen sprang out, continuing their rampage on foot. The echo of gunfire and skidding tires filled the air. “Gun!” someone cried out. “Someone’s shooting!” another voice screamed. In terror, the community members dispersed chaotically, trying to protect the children. Some kids were whisked into the nearest flat, while others were left unattended as adults scrambled for safety. Individuals either found cover under cars or lay flat on the ground to dodge the bullets.<sup>377</sup>

Following the gunfire, approximately a dozen officers from Laurel Police arrived, prompting the residents to emerge from their cover to survey the aftermath. As residents cautiously checked the scene from shattered windows, they called out to one another to be cautious. Small clusters of people gathered, vigilantly guarding their young ones, and observed the bullet-riddled vehicles and buildings with alarm. They pointed to marks of gunfire on the ground and gathered spent shells and pellets. Conversations circulated about narrow escapes from being shot. A pregnant woman recounted a gunman passing by her firing erratically, while another person described bullets hitting his car as he stood by it, his voice filled with distress.<sup>378</sup>

The community’s apprehension to identify the culprits became clear. Vincent sympathized with the neighborhood’s fear of snitching. “I think a lot of people who live in high-crime areas are afraid to turn people in. They are afraid of retaliation,” Vincent observed. Inspired by the Jackson Police, she aimed to launch ‘Postcards for Pushers’ the following week, a scheme facilitating anonymous tips to the police. Residents could confidentially send 19-cent postcards to the LPD, which were also available in stores, post offices, and public housing complexes. On July 23, Police Chief Jamie Bush, Mayor Vincent, and City Council members assembled at City Hall for a press briefing to escalate the fight against crime. Chief Bush reported an increase in patrol personnel and the adoption of new policing strategies. Just a day prior, roadblocks resulted in four arrests, 19 traffic violations, and the seizure of three firearms. The authorities responded to five reports of gunfire, with three incidents in housing complexes, known hotspots for shootings. Although there are no budgets for hiring new officers,

the department was intensifying patrols with existing staff working overtime, some on extended shifts, while others were offering their service voluntarily.<sup>379</sup>

Between 1989 and 1992, communities faced a tough battle against a 13% surge in violent crimes, with some cities curbing this trend through community policing strategies, though many lacked the necessary resources for effective law enforcement expansion. Political disagreements hindered advancements in the fight against crime. As offenses rose, lawmakers in Washington squabbled over the false dichotomy of punishment versus prevention. These divisions delayed a national crime legislation for six years. Upon President Clinton's entry into office, violence, especially among youth and involving gangs and drugs, had surged, marking a twenty-year peak.<sup>380</sup>

Local authorities in Brown Circle were increasing their patrol efforts in response to numerous complaints from the community's residents about ongoing violence. Mayor Susan Vincent affirmed on the commitment to closely observe the area and deploy sufficient police forces to address the issue effectively. Following a demonstration by around 60 individuals at City Hall, which called for the removal of Police Chief Jamie Bush and an assurance from Vincent that their grievances would be acknowledged, an urgent meeting was convened. This meeting included Vincent and three other members of the council. Mildred Davis, a 46-year-old resident who brought up her nine children in the neighborhood, expressed her concern for safety and urged for an end to the violent incidents. Notably, a young man of 19 years was injured in a drive-by shooting, and a subsequent shooting involving several males took place days after, though no injuries were reported, and arrests were made following the event. Davis, who has been a part of the community for over a decade, pointed to non-residents as the source of the violence and implored the city council to keep the perpetrators out.<sup>381</sup>

The LPD aimed to strengthen the trust with residents of the housing project. Issues at these sites often stemmed from individuals not residing there, as Eberta Spinks highlighted. Spinks announced the eviction of any unauthorized occupants. Addressing reporters, Bush revealed that the police planned to implement visible and secretive

strategies and will accept tips without revealing sources. Vincent introduced the new “Postcard for Pushers” initiative. Lula Cooley noted that despite past strong stances on crime, previous political resistance hindered their impact. “This time, we’re warning everybody that we’re just not going to tolerate it.”<sup>382</sup>

In spite of continuous alerts, crime persisted. Many pinned the sharp rise in unlawful activities on gang conflicts, particularly those related to drug trafficking. Police Captain Don Scott noted, “It would not be exaggerating if I said we got calls to go out to Brown Circle twenty times a week.” Locals were adamant about removing the criminals from their neighborhood. While Vincent pondered introducing a community watch program, Robert Farrish, director of the housing authority, balked at the idea of eviction based solely on suspicion, with a strong commitment to the rights associated with public housing. Farrish pointed out, “The bottom line is going to be money. You can put police here, or you can even put National Guard troops here, but whatever you do, it’s going to cost money.”<sup>383</sup>

In his 1992 bid for the presidency, Bill Clinton aimed to shift the Democratic Party’s image from being perceived as “soft on crime” to supporting strict law enforcement and community-based policing. Numerous communities, especially African Americans, were troubled by crime, yet there was no consensus among black politicians on the crime bill. Congressman John Conyers, a leading figure in the Congressional Black Caucus, championed an alternative focusing on preventing crime and improving drug treatment and employment, rather than merely increasing prison capacities. In their pursuit of support from suburban white voters, Democrats embraced a tough-on-crime stance, aligning with a conservative view that expanded harsh state and local practices into federal law. This led to an increased incarceration rate and harsher sentencing, even though it was not the initial cause of the issue.<sup>384</sup>

Manuel Jones points out that racial inequality within the criminal justice system has deep historical roots and is entrenched in the policies of the justice system. In the post-Emancipation era in the South, African Americans were disproportionately subjected to harsh policing, sentencing, and imprisonment practices. In a notable September

1993 case, Paula Christine Fulmer, a 19-year-old black college student from Waynesboro, was convicted by a jury of manslaughter after her newborn son was discovered in a trash can outside her dormitory, concealed in a shopping bag. Despite her conviction, Fulmer avoided jail time altogether, receiving a suspended 10-year sentence, with a mandate to do community work, continue her studies, and undergo psychological treatment.<sup>385</sup>

In December 1993, 22-year-old Cheryl Garner, an African American student at the University of Southern Mississippi, faced allegations of infanticide. Alone in her Hillcrest Dormitory, she delivered a baby girl while her roommates were away. Two days later, her roommates discovered the newborn in a sports bag. Garner was tried and initially sentenced to life in prison, but not long after, her sentence was downgraded to manslaughter when a judge overturned the jury's decision. The courtroom, filled with African Americans, erupted in applause at the news. Conversely, approximately 200 African Americans protested against the Forrest County Judge and District Attorney, questioning their roles in the justice system. Reverend Kenneth Fairley of Hattiesburg suggested that they might seek a recall vote against these officials, emphasizing the community's right to choose its representatives and expressing dissatisfaction with local legal representation. This case intensified calls for the establishment of consistent sentencing guidelines and other judicial reforms that had long been under discussion within the state.<sup>386</sup>

On January 14, 1994, in a *Laurel Leader-Call* article, Manuel Jones voiced his discontent regarding racial sentencing gaps in Southeast Mississippi. He urged the community to call on the District Attorney, Attorney General, Justice Department, and FBI to scrutinize Jones County for discrimination, from biased hiring practices to unfair treatment within the local jail and courts. Although those in power offer seemingly fair responses when questioned, Jones believed that God, above all, will hold them accountable for injustices that African Americans are unjustly made to accept.<sup>387</sup>

Manuel Jones, the NAACP president, insisted that everyone should receive equal treatment under the law. He expressed dissatisfaction with the disparity in bail amounts for two recent cases.

Jones highlighted the case of Joe G. Alexander from Laurel, who was charged with a racially motivated drive-by shooting and was given a \$25,000 bail. In contrast, James Bester faced a \$200,000 bail for two aggravated assault charges after a shooting at the Ellisville State School, which resulted in an injured guard and property damage. Jones criticized the judicial system for its unequal treatment based on race, pointing out that different judges had set the bail for each man. Judge Jim Stricklin stated that he does not consider a defendant's race during bond hearings, believing the court to be "colorblind." He highlighted that a review of the past 15 or 16 months would reveal his tendency to set lower bonds, particularly on lesser charges.

Three African American council members showed support for the NAACP at the news briefing. Melvin Mack, the Council President, made it clear the Council has no authority over the setting of bond amounts, a task that lies with the judges. Although he mentioned some bond amounts might be inequitable, he respects the judges' responsibilities. The NAACP did not propose a specific solution for making the bond system more equitable, leaving it to the judges, according to Jones.<sup>388</sup>

The fight for fair sentencing took a hit when President Clinton supported a crime bill that laid down several of the foundations for dealing with crime. The Clinton administration began charting a fresh approach to tackling violent crime early in 1994. The Fiscal Year 1995 budget message highlighted this approach, prioritizing support for state and local law enforcement over federal intervention in combating crime and drug problems. Surprisingly, congressional crime bills during that period tended to increase federal crime responsibilities. The foundational element of this new strategy from the Clinton administration was to provide initial federal funds to assist communities in hiring additional community police officers, accompanied by a push for a robust crime bill.<sup>389</sup>

Residents of Jones and Forrest counties united to tackle pressing local concerns. On September 21, a town hall in Hattiesburg saw leaders from the community show up. About 600 to 800 citizens gathered to discuss issues of racial inequality in Forrest County, echoing concerns from the fall of 1993. Manuel Jones spoke about a dual justice

system, a topic he'd long championed. Melvin Mack commented on recent cases involving harm to children, criticizing the lack of appropriate punishment and noting stark differences in the cases' severity on a scale from 1 to 10 with African Americans facing prolonged jail sentencing being a 10. Mack announced a forthcoming community dialogue in Laurel, hoping to spark major involvement. The NAACP's Forrest County president, Jeanette Smith, who was born in Jones County, noted the high attendance at the meeting reflected widespread dissatisfaction related to racial inequality in the justice system, with an unsettling number of black inmates languishing in jail for months without charges.<sup>390</sup>

A CBS News article, "Justice Late But Justice Still," highlighted Southern legal officials efforts to rectify egregious historical crimes. Murder charges were brought against the KKK's White Knights by the state of Mississippi. Advocates for civil rights, such as Georgia's Congressman John Lewis, applauded the initiation of the trials. These actions indicated Mississippi's commitment to reconciling with its past prejudices. Nonetheless, the report questioned the likelihood of convictions given the time elapsed since the murders. Despite this, it argued that the pursuit itself was valuable, providing answers may be equally as important as securing convictions.

# 11

## THE SYSTEM

Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

– James Baldwin

Across the region, there were signs of a society moving beyond racial divisions. The guilty verdict of Byron De La Beckwith was generally seen as evidence that his views were no longer in line with the South's modern political climate. Media coverage depicted Beckwith as a man whose time had passed, suggesting the trial's outcome reflected positive change regarding race relations. Reports in USA Today highlighted how the trial was viewed by many in Mississippi as proof of the state's maturity. Because Beckwith symbolized historical racism in Mississippi, his conviction was seen as a removal of that blight. Manuel Jones felt that the conviction marked a long-overdue moment of justice and applauded the diligence of those who investigated. "The Beckwith trial is finally over, and I think justice has finally prevailed in the assassination of Medgar Evers."<sup>391</sup>

De La Beckwith's trial reignited the pursuit of justice. Early in 1995, the FBI made public 40,000 pages of confidential records from the Vernon Dahmer case, nearly three decades old. This uncovered evidence was the result of the Dahmer family's relentless four-year campaign to access these files, hoping to re-examine Sam Bowers' case. The Laurel-Jones branch of the NAACP, along with local religious leaders, organized a march named the Caravan for Justice. The



march started at the Sawmill Square Mall and ended at the Jackie Dole Community Center in Hattiesburg. There, community allies from other marches gathered to spend the day in unity, exchanging ideas and forming bonds. The newly appointed Laurel-Jones NAACP President James Jones expressed a desire to demonstrate unified support for the ongoing investigation into Vernon Dahmer's murder. This is not a 'black march' or an 'NAACP march.' This is a march to show that the citizens of this area do not condone the hideous crime committed against this family," he said. With national media attention, he hoped the march would convey how united support can alter misconceptions about the South.<sup>392</sup>

Suspected mastermind Sam Bowers was noticeable in the predominantly African American neighborhood of South Fourth Street in Laurel and maintained his job at his business, Sambo Amusement Company. Over the years, he consistently denied any wrongdoing despite not participating in media interviews. Forrest County's lead prosecutor, Glenn White, was actively pushing to reopen the investigation with a focus on Bowers' connection to various arson attacks. In the state's legislature, efforts to create a special division to look into civil rights-era injustices failed, despite Representative Percy Watson of Hattiesburg's proposal. In the 1994 legislative period, Watson's persuasion led to the allocation of another investigator for the Dahmer case, marking the fourth attempt to bring Bowers to trial within a three-year span.<sup>393</sup>

After a long three-year probe, investigators arrived at a house with a wooden frame and flaking white paint, where pinball machines decorated the entrance and a vintage 1936 Ford truck boasted the name "Sambo" alongside a tattered tiger image. On the morning of May 28, 1998, at 7:15 am, authorities knocked and were greeted by an aged man with white hair, Bowers, who they promptly arrested for his alleged connection to the decades-old Vernon Dahmer firebombing case. At 73 years of age, Bowers, dressed casually in a blue shirt and grey jeans, was escorted to the local jail in handcuffs by investigators for the state attorney general's office. He later appeared in a worn, red prison outfit bearing the words "Forrest County inmate." Amid a crowd of media, Bowers remained silent, offering no claim of inno-

cence. That day also saw the arrest of business leader Charles Noble, and not long after, Deavours Nix, another suspect, surrendered of his own volition. Despite suffering from lung cancer and aided by his relatives and an oxygen tank at his hearing, Nix was charged with arson but freed due to his delicate health status. While acknowledging his past ties to the Ku Klux Klan, Nix refuted any involvement in the crime. "I am absolutely, 100 percent innocent. I think that was O.J.'s plea," Nix said in a telephone interview with the *Clarion-Ledger*.<sup>394</sup>

Bowers found himself in court facing a judge who agreed to release confidential papers from a 1969 case for a new investigation into the Klan homicide. Mississippi officials initially aimed to destroy these records, then endeavored to keep them hidden until 2027. In 1989, however, District Judge Charles Pickering, whom Bowers wished to dodge, decreed that the files would be disclosed on March 17. Pickering responded favorably to the local prosecutors, Lindsay Carter and Bob Helfrich, who were eager to inspect these sealed files concerning the White Knights' murder of Vernon Dahmer. Bowers' lawyer, Chris Ford, attempted to thwart their review of the records. He took issue with Pickering offering the documents in court without Bowers' prior review. Pickering left the matter of viewing the files first to Circuit Judge Richard W. McKenzie. Carter viewed this as progress toward their ultimate goal. For the Dahmer family, this development signaled a nearing opportunity for justice.<sup>395</sup>

According to a document from the *Clarion-Ledger*, a member of the Ku Klux Klan mentioned that the last two booths at Nix's restaurant, John's Cafe, were used as their main meeting spot. Public Safety Commissioner Jim Ingram confirmed this, saying that anyone interested in Klan meetings would just need to visit John's. Nix, however, insisted he was unaware of any Klan activities in his cafe, accusing Billy Roy Pitts of lying to protect himself and attributing his own legal troubles to political maneuvers. He asserted that Attorney General Mike Moore was aiming to win over African American voters while warning him not to neglect white citizens. Nix contented that the only reason he joined "those people"—his apparent euphemism for the Klan—was he needed their political power in what proved to be an unsuccessful attempt to be elected sheriff of Jones County. Nix admitted knowing the

Klan's presence was common knowledge, although Bowers insisted in following a code of silence.<sup>396</sup>

On August 17, the start of the Dahmer case drew significant challenges and captured the nation's focus. Outside the courthouse on trial day, two young men from Florida disrupted the quiet afternoon by positioning themselves on the steps of the Forrest County Courthouse to express dissent against Sam Bower's trial. Most people walking by paid little attention to the visiting protestors and their signs. "He's already 72 or 73. This is an injustice," argued the protestors. One protestor was clad in a white t-shirt reading, "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children" while the other sported a hat displaying the Confederate flag. They carried white signs with messages of racial provocation written in black and disavowed any ties to white supremacist groups, although they expected other whites to join once evidence presentation started. Largely disregarded, the legal proceedings went ahead as planned.<sup>397</sup>

For the fifth time, Sam Bowers was being prosecuted for the murder of Vernon Dahmer. In Mississippi's hostile 1960s, the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan had a sinister code: a "No. 1" signified a cross burning; "No. 2", a beating; "No. 3", a firebomb; and the direst, "No. 4", meant murder. Klan informant Billy Roy Pitts revealed that only top-ranking members could authorize "No. 3" and "No. 4". As the Grand Wizard, Bowers had sole authority for such orders within the state. The then 54-year old Pitts, serving his sentence for involvement in the crime, recalled a critical meeting in 1965, near Laurel, where Bowers decreed Dahmer's assassination. Pitts testified that Bowers chose to kill Dahmer because his store in the Kelly Settlement had become a space for Black voters to pay poll taxes. Bowers assured Pitts that no Mississippi jury would convict a white man for killing a black man. Pitts indicated that Bowers orchestrated multiple sessions where the firebombing of Dahmer's property was plotted, with the involvement of Bowers' defense in the trial, Travis Buckley.<sup>398</sup>

The courtroom's discussions detailing the Klan's tactics in the 1960s were not the most animated. Yet one notable moment arose when an ex-Klansman turned barber, T. Webber Rogers, balked at disclosing his address. Acknowledging his fear after being previously tar



Sam Bowers walking out of the Forrest County courthouse (Courtesy of the Hattiesburg American)

geted for his testament against the Klan, Rogers emphatically affirmed his concerns. “Hell, yeah!” he exclaimed. This outburst, followed by a reprimand for his language, momentarily lightened the atmosphere. However, a hush fell over the crowd as they listened to the chilling account of how the Klan planned and executed a murder.<sup>399</sup>

As Bowers sat dispassionately in the courtroom dressed in an off-white suit, Rogers recounted Bowers’ intense frustration from that cold night. Bowers had been furious over a delayed task in the South. “He wanted to know why that job down South hadn’t been done,” Rogers stated. Bowers had orchestrated a rehearsal, as cars cruised by the Dahmer residence. Pitts acknowledged his presence, and as he did in earlier trials that resulted in convictions for four men for Mr. Dahmer’s murder, he detailed how eight men with loaded shotguns and gallons of gasoline headed toward the Dahmer house. They paused at a nearby graveyard where irreverence ensued. Sent by Bowers to supervise the group with a gun, Pitts, however, abandoned his weapon when

Dahmer, engulfed in flames and defending his family, repeatedly shot from a window. “A man’s life was taken, and I was part of it,” Pitts expressed with regret. He concluded by sharing his decision to relocate his family out of fear of Klan retaliation.<sup>400</sup>

The prosecution introduced an unexpected witness, Cathy Lucy, who was once married to a Klan leader. Their Jackson residence had served as the operational center for Sam Bowers during the incident involving Vernon Dahmer. Lucy recounted witnessing a beaming Bowers flaunting a newspaper headline about Dahmer’s demise shortly after the event, boasting about the “good job my boys did down south.” Subsequently, Lucy ended her marriage to join Robert Earl Wilson, who not only had ties to the Ku Klux Klan but was also sharing information with the FBI. Wilson was present when Bowers made his swaggering remark.<sup>401</sup>

The defense team, comprising attorneys Travis Buckley, Carl Ford, and Shawn O’Hara, aimed to challenge the credibility of the prosecution’s main witnesses. Their central witness, Deavours Nix, who had never before testified in the Dahmer case trials, gave crucial evidence. While his lawyer had advised him to claim his Fifth Amendment rights if he preferred not to respond, Nix addressed every question during his testimony. Despite his unclear role as “state investigator” in the Klan and having attended few meetings, Nix characterized Bowers as a respectful and patriotic man who, to his knowledge, never expressed racial hatred or used foul language. This claim was met with visible disbelief and laughter from some African American audience members in the courtroom.<sup>402</sup>

Nix commended Bowers for his humanitarian efforts and acknowledged joining the group due to their charitable reputation, including distributing Christmas fruit baskets and monetary gifts. Though Nix confessed to being at Klan meetings, he refuted having related items or documents at his business or house. Nonetheless, prosecutors displayed reports from a raid indicating the discovery of such materials in his café and a photo of Nix in Klan attire at his residence. When confronted with a copy of this photo, Nix denied his identity. His daughters, Judy Graham and Rita Robertson, testified, affirming they never encountered Klan-related material while employed at the family

restaurant and insisted the disputed photo depicted their brother Lannie in a Halloween outfit.<sup>403</sup>

Mike Moore, the Attorney General, described Bowers' legal defense as the weakest he had encountered in over two decades as a lawyer. On August 21, 1998, Bowers was found guilty by a jury for Dahmer's murder and received a life sentence, and Nix passed away before his trial. "Take him away," ordered Circuit Judge Richard McKenzie, following the announcement of Bowers' life sentence by the jury leader. Bowers' team gave no sign of planning an appeal. Dahmer's family, including his widow Ellie, embraced after the session ended. Overcome with emotion, Ellie shared that her tears were for Vernon, feeling his presence. Bowers was slated for immediate transfer to Parchman state penitentiary. Pitts found out about the conviction as he observed a deputy exhibit a gesture of victory, and expressed disbelief in Bowers' capture. "I didn't think they'd ever get him."<sup>404</sup>

### **Action in Jones County**

While the legal successes in Laurel were noteworthy, they could not overshadow the concerns expressed by prominent black figures. Manuel Jones relinquished his role as the NAACP's leader in 1993, making way for James Jones, who had no familial ties to him. James Jones, who served in the all-black 761st Tank Battalion during the Vietnam War, criticized Mayor Vincent for not including enough African American in her team. At a Laurel City Council meeting, he argued that Mayor Vincent had not kept her word about hiring African Americans for key positions. He cited the elimination of the city comptroller's job as evidence that Vincent had overlooked chances to hire African Americans. James Jones contended that a person of color could have filled that role instead of rehiring the previous comptroller, Don Bullock. He also expressed African American community's anger at placing a waste station in a primarily black neighborhood and threatened to escalate the issue to the Supreme Court. In response, Mayor Vincent maintained that she has been inclusive in her appointments, noting recent hires in the fire department. She clarified that a black candidate for the city attorney was not selected on the basis of

residential qualifications.<sup>405</sup>

While race relations were not ideal, there had been progress. In 2001, local sentiments were boosted by political figures of all races, bringing a sense of pride and encouragement. From Jones County, Judge Charles Pickering, who was nominated by President George Bush for the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals, faced criticism linking him to past racial tensions. During his nomination debate, opponents referred to his questionable past positions on race, including a 1959 pro-segregation article and legislative votes that seemed to weaken African American voter power. In Laurel, Pickering was well-regarded, far removed from the clash of political strife. Despite differing politically, African Americans respected his unique efforts toward racial harmony. As a white Mississippi Republican, this was notable. Local African Americans, typically Democrats, valued his progressive stance more than his past viewpoints.<sup>406</sup>

Support for Pickering by local leaders placed them in opposition to many black state representatives and the Mississippi NAACP, which objected to his appointment. Bennie Thompson, a Congressional Democrat from the Mississippi Delta, branded Pickering's black supporters as "Judas." Officials from the state NAACP believed the judge's local supporters were ignoring their true sentiments for minor benevolent gestures. Nevertheless, Pickering's advocates from the African American community denied any such deception could persist for years. Johnny Magee, a black councilman from Laurel, argued that African Americans' struggle is about the right to independent opinions, including within their own ranks. He suggested that if the judge has evolved past his former stances, it would be beneficial for others to attempt the same.<sup>407</sup>

In an effort to reconcile with its historical challenges, Mississippi established new societal standards, especially in the realm of politics. During the summer of 2001, the city of Hattiesburg elected Johnny DuPree, its first African American mayor. DuPree waited in his campaign office most of the night until nearly all votes were counted. After stepping out to a jubilant crowd, he expressed gratitude for their backing. His campaign emphasized developing the area east of U.S. Highway 49 and avoided additional city annexation efforts.<sup>408</sup>



In Laurel, incumbent Susan Vincent faced off against Jim Cegieiski, the Republican owner of Signature Coffee House in downtown Laurel. It was Vincent's third attempt to secure her political role. At the Laurel Mayor Forum, held in the Home and Health Auditorium at Jones Junior College, annexation was a fiercely debated topic among six others. Cegieiski voiced his opposition to the current annexation strategy but did not dismiss the idea entirely, suggesting tax raises would be inevitable to cover the expansion costs. Vincent challenged this view. She assured the audience that thorough analysis by financial and engineering specialists confirmed that tax increases were unnecessary, labeling the talk of inflated water and property taxes as a fear-inducing tactic aimed at troubling the elderly and those with fixed incomes.<sup>409</sup>

Vincent emerged a clear winner in the race, securing 57% of the votes. Despite the local resistance to her pro-annexation views, she triumphed. The proposal to expand Shady Grove had Vincent's full support, though some residents believed it was unneeded. Vincent held that annexation would increase the population close to 25,000, the threshold for attracting large retail chains. However, Larry Welborn, founder of the Concerned Citizens on Annexation, refuted the notion that Laurel was growing, noting a population decline since his military deployment in 1965. The decision on annexation would be made on May 1 by Laurel's citizens, determining if the poor will bear the cost. Welborn criticized city officials for misinforming citizens and urged voters to make an informed choice. "They have kept you in the dark and fed you a lot of manure! They have kept facts from you and labeled opposition facts as lies. But you Vote!"<sup>410</sup>

Mississippi's largest city, Jackson, was constricted by urban sprawl and a restrictive policy on city expansion. Byram, a town just south of Jackson, had been in legal conflicts with Jackson for over a decade concerning its status and land rights. Initially, Byram managed to fend off Jackson's annexation attempt in the 1990s. This struggle included Jackson's push to annex an area of 24.25 square miles, encompassing Byram, which led to the legal case known as "In re Enlargement and Extension of the Municipal Boundaries of Jackson." The process for incorporating the Byram area into Jackson was heavily restrict-



ed by Mississippi's rules for such expansion. The state's laws lacked clear direction about how annexation fits into planning for land usage. When a city wanted to include nearby unclaimed land, it must first get approval from its local leaders. Next, the city must get approval from the county's Chancery Court. This court approves the expansion if it is a logical move necessary for public benefit. In Mississippi, legal authorities looked closely at whether a city's effort to claim land is fair. Courts had to consider the interests of both the city and the property owners in the area being considered for expansion.<sup>411</sup>

In an act to preserve the land of their community, residents of Shady Grove filed a lawsuit against the mayor. The trial began at Jones County Courthouse in Ellisville at 9:30 a.m. on June 19. In her testimony, Vincent informed the courtroom that annexation would give the city some growing room. "Annexation will provide needed areas for new residential, commercial, and industrial growth for the city of Laurel," Vincent said. "Annexation gives the potential for Laurel and Jones County to grow economically, providing new jobs and new retail and commercial opportunities for those that live in Jones County." Not much land was available inside Laurel's city limits, and annexation would theoretically remedy the situation. She highlighted the construction of the Laurel Sportsplex outside of the city as evidence of the existing spatial constraints. She also noted the Sharon area was underdeveloped and that several commercial properties along 5th Avenue had been vacant for a long time.<sup>412</sup>

The case dragged on for several months, and Vincent found her systematic support dwindling. On December 2, during a brief talk at a dinner event about the unceasing courtroom saga surrounding the annexation issue, Vincent mentioned she sensed a conclusion was near, as signs stating "Susan Is Coming" began appearing throughout the county. She quickly clarified to those present that she had no hand in creating those distasteful signs. Fortunately, she gained temporary respite when the court adjourned until January 3, 2002.<sup>413</sup>

Support for expanding the city boundaries varied among the local political divisions. Council member Ralph Kinney put forth the idea to stop all city funds going to efforts for the expansion and to inform the local court that the city was pulling out of the case to expand includ-

ing Pendorf, Sharon, and Shady Grove. This suggestion was brought up for discussion at the City Council's evening session. Councilmen Manuel Jones, Johnny Magee, and Jerry Myrick, in a conversation with the *Laurel Leader-Call*, stated their opposition to withdrawing from the case. Nevertheless, Kinney seemed to have persuaded Councilmen Thaddeus Edmonson, Ann Clayton, and Arthur Logan, which could tip the scales in his favor with a vote of 4-3. In the event this occurs, Mayor Vincent made it clear she would reject the decision, emphasizing the city's need for growth, noting that Laurel had not expanded since the late 1950s and that successful cities usually expand every 5 to 10 years or sometimes even more frequently.<sup>414</sup>

The legal system suggested that justifying annexation through the need for more funds should be considered in a broader, regional context, suggesting that both the city center and the surrounding area stand to gain. The courts noted that the urban center was seen as pivotal in driving economic growth for itself and the surrounding territories. The court, however, did not embrace this viewpoint in their verdict and chose to interpret the factors affecting the city's economic prospects as confined within its local boundaries, rather than affecting the greater metropolitan area.<sup>415</sup>

On March 21, 2003, Chancellor R.B. Reeves decided that the city failed to justify its plan to incorporate the Pendorff Community. After two years of legal disputes, he stated that the city's plan was not practical because it covered too vast an area and the city could not afford it. He was also skeptical about the benefits to the inhabitants of the area potentially being annexed, particularly concerning the reliability of water and sewer services. Additionally, Judge Reeves pointed out that support for the annexation came only from city officials and staff. He raised concerns about how adding more white residents might impact the predominantly black communities regarding future voting dynamics.<sup>416</sup>

The trial scrutinized Vincent's ethical choices, as some criticized her of veiling prejudiced motives. The historic manipulation of neighborhood lines has often marginalized racial groups and impoverished citizens from community participation. Post Voting Rights Act, racial bias in city expansion efforts, which suppressed black political rep-

resentation and obstruct- ed their economic progress, has mostly been thwarted. People wondered if Vincent’s decisions were influenced by her implicit racial prejudices. “Mayor Vincent, can you refute that the current city boundaries encom- pass more African Americans than whites? Isn’t it true that once this fact emerged, a council member suggested annexation to ‘correct’ this demo- graphic shift? Are you troubled by the fact that African Americans are no longer the minority in Laurel? Perhaps Laurel’s African American leaders are better suited to govern,” they questioned.<sup>417</sup>

### **New Beginnings**

In 2005, the idea of a black nominee pursuing a mayoral position faced scrutiny. Melvin Mack stepped into the race as the lone Democratic candidate. Meanwhile, Vincent moved away from party affiliation to run independently, securing her spot just before the deadline. On the evening of May 10, a debate, hosted by the *Laurel*

Melvin Mack in front of the Laurel City Hall (Courtesy of the Mack Family)

*Leader-Call* and Laurel High School, provided a platform for Mayor Vincent and Mack to present their views. A notable gathering of 300 local residents and businesspeople came to the high school’s auditorium. The dialogue emphasized the city’s collective efforts with Jones County on key issues: curbing crime and drugs, bolstering the economy, expanding the city, and addressing the upkeep of schools and declining neighborhoods.<sup>418</sup>

Vincent initiated the debate in the full auditorium, stating the city’s impressive expansion, including new projects, increased revenues from taxes, decreased criminal activity, and improvements in other key areas. At that point, Laurel stood among Mississippi’s top cities for sales tax revenue, highlighting her effective governance. Amidst the audience’s murmurs, Mack countered by mentioning his role in managing a \$450 million budget and his extensive political experience, positioning himself as a capable candidate for mayor of Laurel. The debate concluded on a congenial note after two hours of exchange

with no contention. Vincent even referred to Mack as a friend. The candidates presented similar and differing views. In conclusion, they remained to engage with the public, offering handshakes and affectionate gestures to infants.<sup>419</sup>

To address low voter interest, Vincent and Mack offered free rides to polling stations for those in need. The election in Laurel was shadowed by concerns that race might overshadow candidate qualifications in voters' minds. An online poll suggested the majority believed race would be the central issue in the mayoral race. People predicted Black voters would choose Melvin Mack, while white voters would lean towards Susan Vincent. Laurel's community was not divided by political colors, but by racial lines. Casual surveys suggested that without the racial element, there would be little interest in the election's outcome. A resident remarked that while a shared adversary can unite people, the true fight in Laurel was against racism itself.<sup>420</sup>

The time had arrived to elect Laurel's fresh set of leaders. Over the weekend and in the days leading up, city clerk employees diligently prepared, sharpening pencils and collecting materials, anticipating a large voter turnout. Laurel had a voter base of roughly 13,000; however, not all were active in community matters. As the final vote tally was to be declared on a quiet Tuesday evening at The Courtyard, individuals came together in unison for a prayer. They sought divine support and wisdom for any outcome, be it a triumphant win or a dignified loss. In the end, it was Melvin Mack who triumphed over the incumbent Susan Boone Vincent with a preliminary count of 2,914 to 2,476 votes. This victory made Mack the first African American mayor in Laurel's 123-year history. Expressing his sentiments, Mack stated he was confident in the desire for change among voters and felt assured by his campaign's efforts and the public's response. "We worked really hard, and I knew people were tuning in to our campaign platform. People are ready for a change."<sup>421</sup>

## Epilogue

In a place like this we should be enjoying more and unity than any place in the United States of America. The eyes of the Nation is upon us. We must somehow pick up the broken pieces and put them together. I am wondering how this can be done?

– Dr. Benjamin Murph

Nearly thirty years ago, the busy shops in downtown Laurel had all closed, and the town's brick-lined streets were empty. In the mid-1970s, a city renovation effort led to the closing of Central Avenue for around two years due to laws against segregated businesses. This move blocked off direct parking access to stores, deterring potential customers. The opening of Sawmill Square Mall in 1979 dealt another blow to the local businesses. Shopkeepers who managed to hang on through the tough times of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s all said that the downtown area had been lifeless.

Chancellor RB Reeves Jr. determined the expansion of Laurel to be unauthorized. He noted the city's development efforts should center on its downtown region. Expert witness Joe Lusteck, having personally surveyed the area, indicated that the city did not require enlargement for additional residential or population needs. Chancellor Reeves also observed that nearly one-third of the city's land remains undeveloped and numerous local businesses have ceased operations.<sup>422</sup>

Lula Cooley once expressed optimism that the community would become significant. However, a shrinking population overshadowed this vision, as many left the town of Laurel, fleeing the troubled city

schools, ongoing disputes with municipal authorities, and crime. Despite this, Laurel maintained its industrial strength, supported by key factories like Howard Industries, Masonite Corporation, and Sander-son Farms, which helped sustain its economy. Economic growth hinted at a revival for Laurel's historic downtown area, becoming lively once more with the removal of old street facades and installation of new streetlamps along freshly paved walkways. A sidewalk sale drew crowds downtown, with local shop showcasing their merchandise.<sup>423</sup>

In 2008, the revitalization of downtown Laurel, called the Laurel Express initiative, took precedence. The community began shaping Laurel Main Street, working tirelessly for eighteen months to join Mississippi Main Street. Their efforts paid off when Laurel was considered for certification by the Mississippi Main Street Association. This development pleased City Council President Johnny Magee, who asserted it promotes preserving and improving historic areas. In support of community beautification, Mayor Mack and the City Council recognized February 9 as Arbor Day in Laurel, with Councilwoman Willie Evans highlighting the importance of trees to the city's aesthetic and ecological health. Mayor Melvin Mack formalized the city's dedication to Laurel Main Street on February 4, 2010, by signing an agreement of support with the Mississippi Main Street Association.<sup>424</sup>

Laurel had seen a renaissance in its downtown area's popularity, resulting in increased income and customer flow. This revival funded a \$20,000 endeavor to install streetlights reminiscent of the charm found in the 1920s section of Laurel. The term 'transplant' accurately describes many of Laurel's expanding community, thanks largely to the impact of the HGTV show 'Hometown,' which premiered in 2016. The show's hosts, Ben and Erin Napier, breathed new life into the area by restoring old homes and supporting local shops, all documented on screen. Their efforts have made Laurel an increasingly desirable place to live.<sup>425</sup>

Yet, like any southern town, their pastimes hung a dark cloud over the city. In 2020, during the teardown of Confederate monuments across the United States, Mississippi made national news for being the only state still hanging the Confederate flag high. In 2001, the people of Mississippi faced a choice about their state flag, which prominent-

ly included the Confederate battle emblem. With most of the voting precincts accounted for, reports indicated that 65% were in favor of the existing flag. Many white residents claimed the Confederate cross represents their ancestry and the virtues of bravery and dignity. On the other hand, a significant portion of the Black community saw it as a marker of a painful history of racial injustice and violence. When Mississippi voters rejected a new flag design that would have replaced the Confederate emblem with a circle of stars honoring various nations and Native American tribes that have ties to Mississippi, the state made a distinct choice to stand by the symbol. This position became more isolated as South Carolina and Georgia had both recently taken steps to lower or reduce the display of the Confederate symbol on their flags.<sup>426</sup>

The Confederate emblem flag has long served as a reminder of the state's central role in secession and the Civil War. The Mississippi Legislature adopted the current flag in 1894, nearly 30 years after the Civil War and just four years after the state revised its Constitution to include Jim Crow laws mandating segregated schools, poll taxes, and literacy tests as prerequisites for voting. The Confederate-emblazoned flag had been a fitting symbol for white Mississippians' intransigence toward perceived federal interference in their way of life. While many Americans came to see Confederate iconography as distasteful, racist, and backward, white Mississippians disagreed. Their view was preserving the flag as a piece of Southern history.<sup>427</sup>

Mississippi's GOP Governor, Tate Reeves, declared his intention to allow a change of the state's flag should the lawmakers decide to do so. He stated that a veto would serve no purpose once the legislative vote had passed, signaling the end of the debate and the transition to a new flag. On June 26, 2020, Laurel's Mayor, Johnny Magee, displayed deep emotion when he enacted an order to take down the state flag from city buildings, acknowledging the need for symbols that truly represent the unity and ideals of the people. Mayor Magee highlighted that the existing flag, with its Confederate emblem, stands for division and past racial strife, conflicting with the values of the nation, Mississippi, and Laurel.<sup>428</sup>

Protesters, galvanized by George Floyd's death under police cus-

tody in Minnesota, increasingly called for the removal of Confederate symbols. Though activists had long criticized such emblems, the widespread protests ignited a national demand to dismantle them. Amidst this wave, advocates—both African American and progressive allies—turned their attention to racially segregated drinking fountains at Jones County Courthouse, relics of the Jim Crow era. Originally marked for separate use by race, these fountains had plaques installed in 1989 to obscure the discriminatory inscriptions. When attempts to plaster over the inscriptions failed, the NAACP's pressure led County Supervisor Calvin Holifield to suggest a cleaning of the plaster and the addition of an informative plaque. This proposal was eventually implemented.<sup>429</sup>

As part of the nationwide effort to address historical injustices, the Jones County supervisors unanimously agreed to consider the removal of two racially segregated water fountains from outside their courthouse. Delegating the decision to the public, the issue was included in the November election. The referendum revealed a clear preference among voters to retain the fountains, which once bore signs marking them for 'Colored' and 'White' users, though the labels have been concealed by plaques and can no longer be seen. The ballot asked voters if they supported the dismantling of these inoperative fountains. The leadership of Jones County reached a consensus to contemplate the removal of two separate drinking fountains from the courthouse. They passed the decision to residents through a ballot in the November election, witnessing a 68% voter turnout. The community's decision was clear: the fountains would not be removed, with over 4,000 votes supporting their retention.<sup>430</sup>

This book narrates the journey of people who stood up for political change, invoking the Constitution's authority. These individuals shaped, interpreted, and sometimes created laws. Less celebrated activists, both elite and grassroots, men and women alike, worked alongside national powers to define what equal protection under the Constitution truly means. These players challenged the views of equality held by influential judges and attorneys. Leaders like Benjamin Murph from the Laurel-Jones NAACP read the Constitution and the pivotal *Brown v. Board of Education* in ways that often-favored middle-class



interests.

When the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) joined forces with the Laurel student activists to challenge segregated public spaces, they also staked their claim on the Constitution. Before initiating sit-ins, they composed a persuasive statement, referencing the Equal Protection Clause and the Declaration of Independence to substantiate their demonstrations for equal rights. In addition, they collaborated with Medgar Evers to fight local segregation laws. The students found support in Eberta Spinks and Carrie Clayton who offered their homes as bases for the students' political fight for racial justice. Similarly, figures like Flora Brooks and Susie Ruffin, along with the courageous Arwilla Davison, fought for educational equality. These episodes demonstrate how ordinary locals and often-overlooked freedom struggle contributors worked towards establishing a space where equality thrived.

In Laurel, generation after generation of civil rights campaigners shaped their own visions of equality and carved distinct pathways to its realization. Successive movements gave birth to another, each armed with fresh goals and methods. The inheritance they transferred to the current era is less about rigid objectives or tactics and more about the enduring spirit of contestation—the urge to confront inequity in all its forms. “The Crisis” magazine reflected this psyche and embodied this continuous tradition notably well. Their March 1966 publication celebrated Benjamin Murph for his unwavering valor in perpetuating the valiant quest for liberty across the nation.

The book provides an insightful look at legal developments in the 1980s, highlighting the important role of civil rights lawyers and the significance of the U.S. Supreme Court's stance. Historians acknowledge the influence of the justices in promoting progress during the civil rights era. Yet, they also recognize that the Court didn't create change directly. The case of Laurel illustrates how the Supreme Court's reluctance and caution actually spurred activists to take direct action. By dismissing civil rights issues, the Court inadvertently fueled the movement by frustrating activists who had hoped for support.

Scholars who believe external influences are key to societal transformation often advise public interest attorneys to be wary. They

warn that too much reliance on the judiciary for change might be misplaced. Yet, Manuel Jones, involved in many Laurel legal battles, strongly trusted the legal system to advance the NAACP's efforts against inequality, helping enforce the constitutional promise of equal protection. However, he wasn't the only one with such insight. A broader view of how law and societal shifts interact should consider a wider group of politicians and grassroots campaigners.



# Acknowledgments

As I embarked on the journey of writing this book, the completion date seemed like a distant dream. Over time, however, the book took shape, greatly evolving as I delved into various historical endeavors and crafted tales about Laurel, Mississippi, refining my skills in storytelling. Launching into this literary venture in my mid-20s, I was privileged to meet and learn from a host of fascinating individuals.

Sandra Davis, whose father was the esteemed Dr. Benjamin Murph, was the first to share her insights with me. After finding her contact through a newspaper clipping from 1972, our interaction began with a simple Facebook message which quickly led to an extensive interview spanning over two hours. Sandra generously offered numerous pictures of her father, which proved invaluable as I had none for the book's visuals. She marked the onset of my journey. I must express my gratitude to others who offered their perspectives, such as Larry McGill, Representative Omeria Scott, Faye Musgrove, Mayor Johnny Magee, Mayor George Flaggs, Dr. Gwendolyn Zoarah Simmons, Eugene Owens, Faye Jackson, and the many more who enriched Laurel's narrative. I genuinely appreciate their willingness to spare time and share their stories with me.

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# Abbreviations

**AFL**

**American Federation of Labor**

**AFL-CIO**

**American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations**

**AME**

**African Methodist Episcopal**

**BLEVE**

**Boiling Liquid Expanding Vapor Explosion**

**BPP**

**Black Panther Party**

**CFO**

**Continued Funding Operation and Expansion of the Charity Hospitals**

**CIO**

**Congress of Industrial Organizations**

**CORE**

**Congress of Racial Equality**

**CRC**

**Civil Rights Congress**

**EDA**

**Economic Development Authority**

**EFC**

**Education First Committee**

**FBI Federal Bureau of Investiga-**

**tions FEPC**

**Fair Employment Practices Committee**

**GROW**

**Grass Roots Organizing Work**

**HEW**

**Health, Education, and**

**Welfare IWA**

**International Workers' Association**

**KKK**

**Ku Klux Klan**

**LLC**

**Laurel Leader-Call**

**MDAH**

**Mississippi Department of Archives and History**

**MDC**

**Mississippi Democratic Conference**

**MFDP**

**Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party**

**MHC**

**Mississippi Hospital Corporation**

**MPA**

**Mississippi Perinatal Association**

**NAACP**

**National Association for the Advancement of Colored  
People**

**NLRB**

**National Labor Relations Board**

## NOTES

### Introduction: A Small-Town Struggle

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## Chapter One: The City Beautiful

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20. *The Laurel Ledger*, March 18, 1905. D.J. Randolph succeeded Brown in 1906, and started the Committee for Negro Schools with a committee of influential African Americans—E. D. Hubbard, W. H. Harrison, Dr. H. L. Brown, Mrs. D. J. Randolph, Mary Reid, A. E. Nelson, and Lula Dogan.

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morally and academically to white students, biases that were incorporated into the Hampton Model. He professed that saving Black people from themselves, not just liberation from slavery, was the priority—a view that influenced the Hampton School’s paternalistic foundation.

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institutions played a significant role in the development and site of Black-owned businesses. These enterprises initially took up space downtown, spread across multiple streets, later clustered on a single street, and eventually moved and took root on a different street. This shift shaped the street into a hub for businesses owned and patronized by African Americans.

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33. Jill Watts, *The Black Cabinet: The Untold Story of African Americans and Politics During the Age of Roosevelt* (Grove Press, 2020), 102-104. *Jones County Tribune*, August 3, 1933.

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35. *Chicago Defender*, December 11, 1936. Tuskegee Institute, News Clipping File, Series II, Part A, Lynching File 1936 – 1938, Reel 230, Frame 19 (Microfilm Edition).

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2 (1934): 71–76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25710303>; Bilbo used this language routinely in his correspondence in 1939. See, for example, Bilbo to R. E. L. Smith, February 11, 1939, Folder 15, Box 1057, Bilbo (Theodore G.) Papers (Special Collections, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg).

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39. David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 272-274, 360-634; For some background on Taylor, see, Jackson Advocate, November 13, 1943.

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56. *Ibid.*

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262. Faye Musgrove interview; For more on Willie Ricks, see, Interview with Willie Ricks by Charles Cobb, No-

vember 4, 2014, Brown University.

263. *Laurel Leader-Call*, March 14, 1972. Faye Musgrove interview.
264. *Laurel Leader-Call*, March 24, 1972.
265. Derrion Arrington interview with Larry McGill. For more about “white flight”, see, Charles C. Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle Over School Integration in Mississippi, 1870-1980* (University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 128.
266. *Biloxi Daily Herald*, June 5, 1974. Flowers was an active Klan member in during Freedom Summer. Klan informants name dropped him during multiple meetings at that time.
267. *The Commercial Appeal*, June 8m 1974; *Laurel Leader-Call*, June 5, 1974, November 20, 1974.
268. *Hattiesburg American*, June 7, 1974.
269. “Blacks March In Laurel,” *Clarion-Ledger*, June 12, 1974.
270. *Hattiesburg American*, May 21, 1975.
271. Derrion Arrington interview with Faye Jackson.
272. Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 188.
273. *Biloxi Daily Herald*, September 4, 1970.

Quotes, *Ibid*.

274. Derrion Arrington interview with Omeria Scott. *Laurel Leader-Call*, June 22, 1983. *Laurel Leader-Call*, June 16, 1994.
275. *Laurel Leader-Call*, March 18, 1978.
276. *Laurel Leader-Call*, March 27, 1978. Flora Brooks, also an Area Teacher Guide for Jones County, was an active participant in making schools adequate for students in Laurel. As a member of the Child Development Group of Mississippi who advocated for Head Start, she admitted that “all the centers need encouragement as they feel that this fight is more than we can stand.”
277. *Laurel Leader-Call*, April 8, 1978. Francis Wilson, a member of the Bi-Racial Committee—also the only white member in the organization—was quoted saying that the



city had two all-white schools being funded by black dollars.

278. For more on the school desegregation plan, see, *United States of American v. State of Mississippi (Laurel Municipal Separate School District)*, Civil Action No. 4706; *Laurel Leader-Call*, May 19, 1978. Bobby Stevens gave a great amount of push back to the dual program for teachers as he was being positioned at Oak Park, a school that he was not familiar with.

279. Derrion Arrington Interview with Eugene Owens.

280. Owens interview; *Laurel Leader-Call*, July 12, 1978; For more on the busing issue in Maryland, see, Prince George's 'White Flight' Seen Linked to Busing Order," *Washington Post*, September 24, 1978; *Busing of Schoolchildren: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights of...*, 93-2, Feb, 19, 20, & 21, 1974. United States: n.p., 1974.

281. *Laurel Leader-Call*, June 9, 1978.

282. "Open House Draws 833," *Laurel Leader-Call*, May 22, 1978.

283. *Laurel Leader-Call*, July 20, 1979.

## Chapter Eight: The Resegregation and Voting

284. *The Races in Mississippi: Old Order and New*, New York Times, April 2, 1985; John P. Marcum, Clifford Holley & Max W. Williams (1988) Residential segregation by race in Mississippi, 1980, *Sociological Spectrum*, 8:2, 117-131, DOI: 10.1080/02732173.1988.9981846.

285. Extension of the Voting Rights Act: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights of the Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives, Ninety-seventh Congress, First Session, May 6, 7, 13, 19, 20, 27, 28, June 3, 5, 10, 12, 16, 17, 18, 23, 24, 25, and July 13, 1981. United States: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982, 1733-1735; "Official says tape on Laurel unit fair," *The Sun*,

August 21, 1981.

286. For the transcript for the film, see, Extension of the Voting Rights Act, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights of the Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives, Ninety-seventh Congress, first session, on extension of the Voting Rights Act, May 6- 28, June 3- 25, and July 13, 1981, p. 1717- 1735.

287. *Ibid.*, 1722.

288. *Laurel Leader-Call*, April 23, 1981.

289. *Laurel Leader-Call*, July 16, 1981.

290. For issues in the NAACP, see, "N.A.A.C.P.'s Employees Walk Out," *New York Times*, April 16, 1977; *The Crisis*, November 1981, 462; "Twilight Zone for the N.A.A.C.P.," *Time*, July 12, 1982.

291. *Hattiesburg American*, March 21, 1988. Manuel Jones wanted to start attacking discrimination in the court while Susie Ruffin wanted to continue picketing.

292. *Ibid.*

293. *Laurel Leader-Call*, December 28, 1987.

294. For more on the Education Reform Act, see, Andrew P. Mullins Jr., *Building Consensus: A History of the Passage of the Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982*.

295. *Laurel Leader-Call*, March 1, 1983.

296. In 1982, the US federal government reduced its education budget by over \$1 billion. That year, what was originally known as Title I, now called Chapter I under the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (ECIA), received \$3.034 billion to enhance education. The majority of this money was given to local school districts, with state educational institutions getting much less. Chapter II received \$456 million, based on the number of school-aged children in each state. Local education agencies got 80% of these funds for programs focusing on basic skills, educational advancement, and support services, including special initiatives. States used the other 20% for developing curriculums, training, planning, technical support, managing, supervising, and ensuring compliance. Furthermore, Chapter III defined the authority of the Secretary

of Education to set rules.

297. Walter Stephan, *School Desegregation: Past, Present, and Future* (Plenum Publishing Corporation, 1980), 188-189, 194; Beyond the separation seen in neighborhoods, the uneven spread of different racial groups across school districts also plays a significant part in the overall divide within city areas. In fact, this division among districts could make up for more than half of the total separation seen in cities. Therefore, the phenomenon of white residents moving away has long been a key focus in research on school division. Such studies suggest that white departures reduced the impact of desegregation efforts by around one-third. Understanding the dynamics of both desegregation and the movement of white populations is further complicated by various demographic and economic factors which also drive where people live. Initial research into the movement of white residents faced criticism partly for these reasons. Scholars argue that, although efforts to desegregate likely played a role in white people leaving, there were additional influences, such as people moving to the suburbs and a general decrease in the number of white students. They believe that even if there hadn't been any official policies on desegregation, the number of white students in public schools would still have fallen by at least 10 percent from 1960 to 1990—this is close to the real decrease which was 13 percent.

298. John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (Knopf Publishing, 1988), 210; Orrin Hatch, *The Conservative Blues*, *New York Times*, Aug. 1, 1979, A23, at col.3; Douglas E. Kneeland, *Connally Calls Affirmative Action Divisive and Harmful to Nation*, *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1979.

299. A municipal charter is the legal document that defines the organization, powers, functions, and essential procedures of the city government. The charter also details the form of municipal government, of which there are historically five forms: council-manager, mayor-council, commission, town meeting and representative town meeting. "Laurel citizens organizations file plan for new council wards," *Hattiesburg*

*American*, January 3, 1985.

300. “New Council Eyes Transition,” *Laurel Leader-Call*, June 5, 1985.
301. *Laurel Leader-Call*, December 19, 1984.
302. *Laurel Leader-Call*, January 3, 1985.
303. *U.S. v. State of Miss.*, 921 F.2d 604 (5th Cir. 1991); *Laurel Leader-Call*, December 19, 1984.
304. *Laurel Leader-Call*, May 2, 1985.
305. *U.S. v. State of Miss.*, 719 F. Supp. 1364 (S.D. Miss. 1989).
306. *Laurel Leader-Call*, December 18, 1987.
307. *Laurel Leader-Call*, April 28, 1988.
308. *Hattiesburg American*, August 26, 1988.
309. *Laurel Leader-Call*, September 17, 1988.
310. *Laurel Leader-Call*, October 17, 1988; Derrion Arrington interview with Michael Alderman.
311. *Ibid.*; Michael Alderman interview.
312. *Laurel Leader-Call*, September 13, 1988.
313. *Laurel Leader-Call*, September 20, 1988. Michael Alderman interview.
314. *Laurel Leader-Call*, October 14, 1988.
315. *Ibid.*
316. Michael Alderman interview.

## Chapter Nine: Saving a Staple, Ridding a Problem

317. “‘Working Poor’ at the center of hospital feud,” *Hattiesburg American*, December 18, 1988; Mabus got his start in the state’s political machine in the early 1980s as a member of Winter’s brainy and ambitious young staff, known as the “boys of spring.” As a senior aide to Winter — a centrist Democrat still beloved in the state — he helped craft the state’s landmark education reform. Later, as state auditor, Mabus led investigations of local officials that uncovered more than a million dollars in misspent funds, resulting in jail time for scores

of state politicians.

318. Ibid.

319. Nannie Pitts McLemore. "The Progressive Era," in Richard Aubrey McLemore, *A History of Mississippi*. Jackson: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973 (volume II, pages 29-58); Thomas J. Ward, *Black Physicians in the Jim Crow South* (University of Arkansas Press, 2010), 45-47.

320. Derrion Arrington Interview with Mayor George Flaggs, Jr.; National Center for Health Statistics. *Vital Statistics of the United States, 1989*; VOI II sec 6 life tables, Washington: Public Health Service, 1992.

321. Brian A. Pugh, *Chaos and Compromise: The Evolution of the Mississippi Budgeting Process* (University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 72.

322. *Mississippi State of the State Address*. (1992). *C-SPAN*. Retrieved March 13, 2023. Brian Pugh and Ronny Frith, *Chaos and Compromise*, 88.

323. *Clarion-Ledger*, December 7, 1988. Scop-er's issue was that a study should have been conducted to see what to do about their health care. He deemed it putting the proverbial cart before the horse. Provost C, Hughes P. Medicaid: 35 Years of Service. *Health Care Finance Rev.* 2000 Fall;22(1):141-174. PMID: 25372498; PMCID: PMC4194689.

324. "Hospital battle rages," *The Clarksdale Press Register*, January 14, 1989; During the Winter administration, as Frank Parker explains in his book *Black Votes Count*, voting power allowed the Black caucus to be a significant driving force throughout the 1980s in passing education reform, blocking a statewide increase in sales taxes, and improving the provision of health care under Medicare.

325. *Hattiesburg American*, January 9, 1989.

326. *Clarion-Ledger*, December 30, 1990.

327. Omeria Scott interview; *Hattiesburg American*, February 2, 1988.

328. *Hattiesburg American*, January 8, 1989; Clayton was from Paulding, north of Laurel in Jasper County. He

came to Laurel in the 1960s to work for United Roofing due to it being too far to drive to Laurel from Paulding.

329. Omeria Scott interview; The Economic Development Authority (EDA) of Jones County got aboard the caravan of supporters of South Mississippi State Hospital. The EDA unanimously adopted a resolution opposing Gov. Ray Mabus' proposal to close the state's three charity hospitals—South Mississippi State in Laurel, Kuhn Memorial in Vicksburg and Mattie Hersee in Meridian. "The board of directors of the Economic Development Authority of Jones County realizes the service provided by the South Mississippi State Hospital to Jones and surrounding counties is essential to the health care of its citizens," EDA Executive Director Andy Pazahanick said as he read the resolution. "And whereas the board of directors of the EDA believes that the Continued Funding for the Operation of the State Charity Hospitals is vitally important to the necessary health care of the individuals they serve as well as the economic welfare of the community," he continued. "Now, therefore, be it resolved that the board of directors of the EDA respectfully requests the governor and the Legislature to provide the necessary funding to keep the state charity hospitals operational."

330. Ibid.

331. *Hattiesburg American*, July 15, 1988.

332. Omeria Scott interview; "Hospital supporters rally at the Capitol," *Laurel Leader-Call*, January 18, 1989.

333. *Laurel Leader-Call*, January 19, 1989.

334. Omeria Scott interview; *Laurel Leader-Call*, January 27, 1989.

335. *Laurel Leader-Call*, January 25, 1989.

336. Omeria Scott interview.

337. Mayor George Flaggs, Jr. interview.

338. Between 1980 and 1992, the expenses for administration within the overhead category surged more than any other area, increasing by \$160 for each patient release over that 12-year span, and by \$114 since 1983. During 1983-1988, admin costs rose at a rate similar to those from the surgical de-

partment, but after 1988, the two took different paths; surgery costs jumped to 17% yearly while administration costs went up by just 3% on average. In contrast, the cost of managing nursing services shot up to 12% after 1988, showing a bigger focus on nursing. Other overhead areas, like food service, laundry, cleaning, security, and utilities, didn't go up much after the Prospective Payment System (PPS) was introduced. Notably, in the early '80s, even though hospital leaders were worried about rising utility bills, admin costs still outpaced them, growing 18% compared to utilities' 15% increase. After 1983, the hike in fuel prices nearly stopped, but admin expenses kept climbing fast.

339. *Laurel Leader-Call*, December 13, 1988.

340. *Laurel Leader-Call*, February 24, 1989.

341. *Laurel Leader-Call*, March 22, 1988.

342. *Laurel Leader-Call*, March 22, 1988.

343. James M. Glaser, *Race, Campaign Politics, and the Realignment in the South* (Yale University Press, 1998), 172; *Laurel Leader-Call*, March 13, 1989.

344. *Ibid.*

345. *Sun Herald*, March 16, 1989.

346. *Ibid.*

347. *The Clarksdale Press Register*, March 21, 1989.

348. *Ibid.*

349. *Ibid.*

350. Brian A. Pugh, *Chaos and Compromise*, 80-83; The House, with a count of 90 to 25, and the Senate, by 44 to 6, successfully overruled the governor's disapproval without any discussion. Both chambers required a two-thirds majority to pass the override. On July 1, 1991, abortion clinics and physicians had to adhere to the new legislation, or they could be charged with a misdemeanor. Pro-life advocates believed there was a lack of substantial patient relationships by those providing abortion services. Opponents of the vote suggested that the decision was more a reflection of the legislators' disagreement with Governor Mabus on issues unrelated to the bill, particularly his educational reform initiatives which, despite being

approved last year, have not been funded. Although Governor Mabus is a Democrat and the Legislature has a strong Democratic majority, this political alignment was not evident in the vote.

351. *Hattiesburg American*, March 23, 1989.

352. *Laurel Leader-Call*, May 16, 1989.

353. *Hattiesburg American*, March 15, 1989.

354. *Hattiesburg American*, March 26, 1989.

355. *Hattiesburg American*, July 26, 1989.

356. *Ibid.*

357. *Ibid.*

358. *Laurel Leader-Call*, April 5, 1989.

359. Vicksburg Hospital and Meridian Hospital were running at about 20 percent capacity. However, South Mississippi State Hospital in Laurel was still operating at roughly 50 to 55 percent. The effort to close the Laurel facility was largely unsuccessful because it served as the primary local hospital for patients from nearby charity hospitals. Carolyn Boutwell reported that the clinic was still attending to 80 to 100 patients daily.

360. Mayor George Flaggs, Jr. interview. The Clarksdale Press Register, March 23, 1989.

361. Brian A. Pugh, *Chaos and Compromise*, 80; *Laurel Leader-Call*, July 21, 1989.

362. *Hattiesburg American*, June 21, 1989.

363. *Hattiesburg American*, September 24, 1989.

### Chapter Ten: Never Being Content

364. Jere Nash and Andy Taggart. *Mississippi Politics: The Struggle for Power, 1976-2008*, Second Edition (University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 231.

365. In the 1992 election, an unprecedented surge of female candidates emerged due to various factors. This phenomenon was not merely a statistic but influenced voter behavior, especially among women. Studies indicate a trend of



women being more inclined to vote for female candidates than male voters. The 1992 election's preliminary results support this, as exit polls showed a gender-based voting split in most Senate and some gubernatorial contests with women running. Kathleen Dolan. "Voting for Women in the 'Year of the Woman.'" *American Journal of Political Science* 42, no. 1 (1998): 272–93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2991756>; *Hattiesburg American*, August 2, 1992.

366. Omeria Scott interview. *Hattiesburg American*, August 5, 1992.

367. *Laurel Leader-Call*, January 9, 1993.

368. James Jennings, *The Politics of Black Empowerment: The Transformation of Black Activism in Urban America* (Wayne State University Press, 2000), 102, 113. Vernon D Johnson. Review of *African American Political Leadership in the 1990s: A Review Essay*, by Clarence Lusane. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 21, no. 2 (1995): 209–15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23263017>.

369. Omeria Scott interview; James Jennings, *The Politics of Black Empowerment, 187*; Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 120–216, 221–224, 317.

370. *Ibid.*, Omeria Scott interview.

371. Chandler Davidson, *Quiet Revolution in the South* (Princeton University Press, 1994), 364–366.

372. *Ibid.*, 257

373. Byron D'Andra Orey. "Black Legislative Politics in Mississippi." *Journal of Black Studies* 30, no. 6 (2000): 791–814. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2645924>.

374. *Laurel Leader-Call*, August 19, 1989.

375. *Hattiesburg American*, June 4, 1993.

376. *Ibid.*

377. *Laurel Leader-Call*, May 19, 1993; For the rise of local Democratic politics, see, Earl Black and Merle Black, *The Vital South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 85–86. Between 1865 and 1976, the troubled past of the

Southern states, marked by racial discrimination and enslavement, was a stumbling block for its politicians aiming for the presidency. Southern political figures could only advance to the presidency by utilizing the vice-presidential role as a platform, as seen with Andrew Johnson and Lyndon Johnson. It took until 1912 for a Southern leader to earnestly seek the Democratic ticket for the presidential race. The same could be argued for local political government.

378. Laurel Leader-Call, July 3, 1993; For information on local voting in Mississippi, see, Robert C. Smith, *We Have No Leaders: African Americans in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (State University of New York Press, 1996), 268, 292, 394.

379. Mississippi has a history of racial bloc voting during elections, a practice which continues to this day. This has been proven time and again in various court rulings. For example, the *Jordan v. Winter* case, which addressed the division of congressional districts, found through ample evidence that black candidates usually do not win elections because the majority of voters pick their candidates racially. Similarly, in the *Martin v. Allain* case, which looked at the election process of state court judges, it was noted that this pattern of group voting is widespread across Mississippi, as proven by statistical analysis. It showed that there's a clear divide, with black voters predominantly supporting black candidates and white voters primarily choosing white candidates in elections where the candidates are of different races. This trend has also been observed and documented in numerous other legal cases concerning local district remapping; See, e.g., *Teague v. Attala County*, 92 F.3d 283 (5th Cir. 1996); *Clark v. Calhoun County*, 88 F.3d 1393 (5th Cir. 1996); *Houston v. Lafayette County*, 20 F. Supp. 2d 996 (N.D. Miss. 1998); *Ewing v. Monroe County*, 740 F. Supp. 417 (N.D. Miss. 1990); *Gunn v. Chickasaw County*, 705 F. Supp. 315 (N.D. Miss. 1989); *Jordan v. City of Greenwood*, 599 F. Supp. 397 (N.D. Miss. 1984).

380. Derrion Arrington interview with Lula Cooley.

381. *Ibid.*

382. *Hattiesburg American*, July 8, 1993.

383. Laurel Leader-Call, September 1, 1992.
384. Jeff Grogger and Mike Willis, *The Introduction of Crack Cocaine and the Rise in Urban Crime Rates*, National Bureau of Economic Research, Inc., January 1998. Alfred Blumstein, "Youth Violence, Guns, and the Illicit-Drug Industry," *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology, Northwestern University School of Law*, Vol. 86, No. 1, Fall 1995.
385. Hattiesburg American, July 20, 1993; Laurel Leader-Call, July 21, 1993.
386. Ibid.
387. Hattiesburg American, July 25, 1993; For more on apprehension to talk to police, see, Alexandra Natapoff, *Snitching: Criminal Informants and the Erosion of American Justice* (NYU Press, 2011), 119, 124-126.
388. Allpolitics. 1997. "Clinton Unveils Flurry of Plans to Fight Crime." Available at <http://images.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1997/02/19/clinton.crime/>.
389. *Hattiesburg American*, July 21, 1993.
390. *Hattiesburg American*, July 25, 1993.
391. Ibid.
392. Yvette Marie Alex-Assensoh and Lawrence J. Hanks, *Black and Multiracial Politics in America* (NYU Press, 2000), 242.
393. Clarion-Ledger, January 2, 1993.
394. Hattiesburg American, September 16, 1993.
395. Laurel Leader-Call, January 1, 1993.
396. "NAACP blasts bond-setting system in Jones Co.," Hattiesburg American, November 13, 1992; Charles A. Gallagher, For information on the societal structure of color-blindness, see, "Color-Blind Privilege: The Social and Political Functions of Erasing the Color Line in Post Race America." *Race, Gender & Class* 10, no. 4 (2003): 22-37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41675099>.
397. Daryl A. Carter, *Brother Bill: President Clinton and the Politics of Race and Class* (University of Arkansas Press, 2016), 107-111, 118; Most Americans seen crime as the most pressing issue for the nation. Unbeknownst at that

moment, the pinnacle of violent crime occurred in 1991. The rise of crack cocaine since the mid-'80s, still devastating urban areas, was associated with increased gang-related violence and a widespread crime wave. President Clinton captured the prevailing anxiety when he remarked at the signing of a bill, pressing that gangs and drugs were dominating streets and corrupting schools. In retrospect, one of the key enduring effects of the act was the implementation of the Violent Offender Incarceration and Truth-in-Sentencing Incentive Grants Program. This program allocated \$12.5 billion to enhance prison facilities, with almost half reserved for states that implemented stringent truth-in-sentencing policies reducing parole options. States that qualified for these funds used them to increase space for incarcerating individuals guilty of violent offenses.

398. *Laurel Leader-Call*, September 21, 1993.

### Chapter Eleven: The System

399. Jerry Mitchell, *Race Against Time*, 135. For a detailed biography on Medgar Evers, see, Michael Vinson Williams, *Medgar Evers: Mississippi Martyr*.

400. *Laurel Leader-Call*, July 29, 1995; For more information on De La Beckwith, see, Reed Massengill, *Portrait of a Racist: The Real Life of Byron De La Beckwith* (St. Martin's Griffin, 1997).

<?> Gordon A. Martin, *Count Them One by One: Black Mississippians Fighting for the Right to Vote* (University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 220; *Hattiesburg American*, January 8, 1995; Devery S. Anderson, *A Slow, Calculated Lynching: The Story of Clyde Kennard* (University Press of Mississippi, 2023), 187.

401. *Enterprise-Journal*, May 28, 1998.

402. *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 1998.

403. Jerry Mitchell, *Race Against Time*, 308. Mike Moore told CNN, "We want them to have a very, very speedy trial. It's been thirty-two years and we think it's time justice is served."

404. *Hattiesburg American*, August 18, 1998.

405. *New York Times*, August 20, 1998. See, Howard Ball, *Murder in Mississippi: United States V. Price and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (University Press of Kansas, 2004), 34. Pitts was a Klan member turned FBI informant who took part in the January 1966 murder of Vernon Dahmer and the firebombing of his house and store. Pitts pled to both murder and arson and turned state's evidence. He received a life sentence but did not serve this sentence. He did, however, serve nearly four years of a federal conspiracy conviction before his release in 1971.

406. *New York Times*, August 20, 1998. See, Curtis Wilkie, *When Evil Lived in Laurel*, 349.

407. *New York Times*, August 20, 1998; *CBS News*, August 20, 1998.

408. See, Jerry Mitchell, *Race Against Time*, 201; M410-4, Robert B. Helfrich Papers, M410, Box 45, Folder 4, Historical Manuscripts, Special Collections, The University of Southern Mississippi Libraries.

409. Michael Newton, *White Robes and Burning Crosses: A History of the Ku Klux Klan from 1866* (McFarland, Inc., 2016), 242.

410. *Ibid.*

411. *Hattiesburg American*, August 21, 1998.

412. *Laurel Leader-Call*, October 20, 1993.

413. Confirmation Hearing on the Nomination of Charles W. Pickering, Sr. to be Circuit Judge for the Fifth Circuit: Hearing Before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, One Hundred Seventh Congress, Second Session, February 7, 2002. United States: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2003, 351.

414. "Blacks at Home Support a Judge Liberals Assail," *New York Times*, February 17, 2002; Confirmation Hearing on the Nomination of Charles W. Pickering, Sr. to be Circuit Judge for the Fifth Circuit: Hearing Before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, One Hundred Seventh Congress, Second Session, February 7, 2002. United

States: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2003, 220.

415. Benjamin Morris, *Hattiesburg, Mississippi: A History of the Hub City* (History Press, 2014), 189; *Hattiesburg American*, June 7, 2001.

416. *Laurel Leader-Call*, June 4, 2001.

417. *Laurel, Leader-Call*, June 15, 2001.

<?> *Jackson v. Byram Inc.*, 16 So. 3d 662, 2007 AN 946 (Miss. 2009); “Byram: ‘Worth Fighting For?’”, *Jackson Free Press*, June 15, 2005.

418. *City of Laurel, Mississippi v. SHARON WATERWORKS ASSOCIATION*, Shady Grove Utility District, Shady Grove Water Association, other objectors., caselaw.findlaw.com. Accessed March 18, 2023.

419. *Laurel Leader-Call*, December 2, 2001.

420. *Laurel Leader-Call*, June 3, 2002.

421. A.J. Abramson, S.T. Mitchell, & VanderGoot, M. R. 1995. The Changing Geography of Metropolitan Opportunity: The Segregation of the Poor in U.S. metropolitan areas, 1970 to 1990. *Housing Policy Debate*, 6, 45–72; *Laurel Leader-Call*, November 27, 2001. Faye Jackson interview.

422. *City of Laurel, Mississippi v. SHARON WATERWORKS ASSOCIATION*.

423. *Ibid.*

424. *Laurel Leader-Call*, May 10, 2005.

425. *Laurel Leader-Call*, May 9, 2005.

426. *Laurel Leader-Call*, June 5, 2005.

427. *Laurel Leader-Call*, June 8, 2005.

428. *City of Laurel, Mississippi v. SHARON WATERWORKS ASSOCIATION*.

429. Lula Cooley Interview.

430. *Laurel Leader-Call*, February 4, 2010.

431. For more about the Napier’s story, see, Ben and Erin Napier, *Make Something Good Today: A Memoir* (Gallery Books, 2018). The pair started dating and tied the knot in 2008. They then moved back to Erin’s hometown of Laurel, Mississippi, where they started gaining recognition after giving their 1925 craftsman cottage a charming upgrade. The couple earned

the attention of HGTV, and in 2016, they celebrated the premiere of their show, Home Town.

432. “*Mississippi Keeps Its State Flag*”, Washington Post, April 17, 2001; For more about the Confederate Flag, see, John M. Coski, *The Confederate Battle Flag: America’s Most Embattled Emblem* (Belknap Press, 2006).

433. Mayor Johnny Magee interview. WDAM, “Laurel mayor signs order to remove state flag from city buildings,” June 23, 2020.

434. Mayor Johnny Magee interview; “*Mayor chokes back tears before signing executive order to remove state flag from city-owned buildings*”, Laurel Leader-Call, June 23, 2020.

435. *Laurel Leader-Call*, November 6, 2020.

436. “Fountains Continue to Stir Emotions”, November 6, 2020; On April 7, 1989, the leaders of Jones County agreed to cover up outdated inscriptions on the Ellisville Courthouse water fountains that some viewed as discriminatory. Manuel Jones had recommended to the supervisors that the labels “white” and “colored” should be concealed or that the fountains, installed since 1907, be removed. The county’s legal advisor, Tony Thaxton, indicated that he had been approached by a representative from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History regarding the matter. Following the concealment by the county staff, he was informed that the Department wished to be involved in the resolution process.



























