

George Lee: An Unsung Civil Rights Activist
in an Overshadowed Movement

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On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was gunned down at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, TN. This moment would come to define an entire movement here in Memphis. King's assassination has put a dark cloud over Memphis history that often obscures the rest of the civil rights activity that occurred in the '50s, '60s, and '70s. Fourteen years before King's death, the Supreme Court handed down one of the most famous rulings in the history of the United States: *Brown v. Board of Education*. Although *Brown* did not have an immediate impact on the desegregation of schools in the South, it did spawn one of the most amazing protest movements in history. In Memphis, this active protest movement began in 1955 with the 'Patio 6' protest. The NAACP took the lead in this new active protest movement. They led sit-ins, boycotts, and marches. They organized political rallies. They sued local businesses. With the shadow of King's death and the prominent role of the NAACP in the civil rights movement in Memphis, Republican George Washington Lee is often overlooked by historians. Lee was one of the most prominent African Americans in Memphis for almost twenty years before the civil rights movement that began in 1955. Famous for his oratorical style and political prowess, Lee was the leading black politician in the city of Memphis for almost twenty five years, yet very little is written about what he was doing during the civil rights movement.

While many African Americans began protesting racial injustice through sit-ins and other direct actions, Lee maintained his position as a politician in the movement. He continued to work to increase voter registration. He encouraged the student movement that was beginning to develop in the late fifties. He gave speeches supporting the civil rights revolution that was occurring. He maintained an incredible amount of respect despite the fact that he remained a die-hard Republican in a time when African Americans were largely flocking to the Democratic Party. As the political landscape shifted in the South, Lee began losing his influence in the Republican Party, and his political career took a major hit in 1964 when the lily-white Republicans in Memphis were finally able to edge him out of the local Republican apparatus. However, Lee did not give up his position easily, and in 1964 he carried his own civil rights battle all the way to the GOP national convention where he attempted to expose the racist sentiment that had taken over the Republican Party in Memphis and across the country. Although Lee became less involved in the mainstream civil rights movement in Memphis after his battle at the GOP convention, he continued his service in the Elks Department of Education where he focused his efforts on trying to improve the education of African Americans across the country until his death in 1976. Beyond his involvement with the Elks, Lee was incredibly instrumental to the civil rights movement because he laid the political groundwork that would lead to the election of the first African American in Memphis since Reconstruction.

On January 4, 1894, a black boy was born to a reverend and his wife near Indianola, Mississippi. They named him George Washington Lee. Growing up in rural Mississippi, Lee faced some of the most intense racial prejudice that was present in the country. For instance, as a boy, Lee was hired as a clerk at a local grocery store and almost immediately fired when the white customers confronted the store owner. Even into his old age Lee remembered how the

store owner was confronted by his customers outside. He remembered how the store owner said that he had only hired him because “a nigger wouldn’t have the nerve to steal as much as a white boy.” Lee later moved into a rich white man’s house and became a house boy for their family. After several years working for this white family as little more than a well-dressed house servant, Lee eventually entered Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical School at the urging of his mother. Alcorn was a typical southern college that catered to African Americans. It aimed to prepare its students to be able to go into industrial field work and was probably more like the equivalent of a white high school education at the time.¹

During his tenure at Alcorn, Lee spent his summers working as a bellhop in the big city of Memphis, Tennessee, which was only a few hundred miles north of the school. After five summers of working at the Gayoso Hotel, Lee decided to cut his education short and join the U.S. military in 1917. Lee was selected by the military to enter into a small program that would commission African Americans to become officers for the first time in U.S. history. After an intensive four month long process, wherein many of his peers were eliminated, George Lee was commissioned along with 638 other African Americans as a Lieutenant in the United States Army on October 14, 1917. Lee served throughout the rest of the war as an officer of an African American unit and received a citation for bravery. After the war, Lt. Lee returned to Memphis, and connected with Robert R. Church Jr., a wealthy businessman who was one of the most preeminent black Memphians at the time. Lee was discharged from the army on March 27, 1919, and returned to Memphis to begin a political career under the tutelage of Church and a business career at Mississippi Life Insurance.²

¹ David M. Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971), 4-13.

² David M. Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street*, 14-42.

Lee started out at Mississippi Life as salesman, but after only a few weeks, he had already been promoted to manager. Lee used his tenure as a salesman to point out to poor families that they were not just buying insurance, they were also helping advance the black race. By investing in an African American company, Lee claimed, these families were helping black business grow which in turn helped shape the image of African Americans in the larger society.³ While this idea was probably an effective sales pitch in 1920, it also became one of the pillars of Lee's political ideology. Lee would continue to preach a version of this type of black capitalism even into his late life. Lee worked at Mississippi Life for four years, and his yearly salary rose to an enormous \$6,500. In 1923, however, the business was sold to a white insurance agency, and George Lee refused to work for them anymore, making a stand against whites trying to destroy the efforts of black capitalists. In a speech delivered to the white insurance executives, Lee said:

You have told us time and time again that we should live here in the South by your side and develop our own institutions without interference. And now, when we build an institution that is a credit to the race, you conspire to take it by sheer force and influence. Shall I interpret these actions to mean that you no longer want among you the thrifty and intelligent group of Negroes who are able by their own shoulder straps to lift themselves to the highest plane of self-determination? Shall I interpret this to mean that you want only the headscratching and Sambo Negro, who has no ambitions save to serve you and whose ambitions don't extend beyond being your body servant and wood chopper, to live here in the South?⁴

After this skirmish with the white insurance agency, Lee became the manager of the newly created Atlanta Life Insurance Company office in Memphis. Lee would remain an employee of Atlanta Life Insurance until his death in 1976.

³ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street*, 43.

⁴ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street*, 51-2.

During this same period, Lee had grown closer to Robert Church. In addition to being an extremely wealthy and prominent black Memphian, Church was also on the board of directors of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Through his relationship with Church, Lee became involved in the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks of the World (Elks). The Elks were a black fraternal order that was comprised of businessmen, NAACP leaders, and politicians from across the country. In 1926, Lee received national attention within the African American community when he gave a riveting endorsement to a candidate at the national Elks convention.⁵ The Elks would become one of the most important organizations for Lee during the civil rights movement. He would use the Elks to help educate thousands of African Americans.

Throughout the 1920s, Lee made a name for himself as an insurance executive, orator, and most importantly as spokesman for the race. Lee became known throughout the city for his positions on black capitalism and black pride. In 1925, he wrote, “The development of race consciousness by stressing and lauding of things Negro creates a line of defense against white newspapers and white propaganda that plays the Aframerican up as an underling. It saves his pride and self-respect from the effects of Jim Crowism....”⁶ Even when controversy struck Beale Street after a black business was brought down for fraud, Lee maintained his position on racial pride and the strength of black capitalists. In the defense of the race, he proclaimed, “Crookedness is not a racial trait. Main Street has been sending her white crooks to the

⁵ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street*, 54-5.

⁶ George W. Lee, “Group Tactics and Ideals,” *Messenger IX* (April 1925), 110 quoted in Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street*, 57

penitentiary for years. Beale Street must do the same and then march on with confidence in our race....”⁷

While establishing himself as a spokesman for the race in Memphis, Lt. Lee began his political career as Robert Church’s right hand man. He organized voter drives and spoke on behalf of Republican candidates. Church secured positions for Lee in presidential campaigns. He was an alternate delegate to several of the national GOP conventions. In 1932, as African Americans began leaving the Republican Party to support the New Deal programs of Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Lee maintained local control of the Republican Party and remained politically relevant in the community through his ties with Boss Edward Crump’s political organization. Lee was one of Crump’s leading vote-getters in the African American community during his reign over Memphis politics.⁸

As the Crump era came to an end in Memphis, George Lee teamed up with local NAACP President Dr. J. E. Walker to dramatically increase black voter registration in Memphis. Walker, President of the Tri-State Bank and Universal Life Insurance Company, was one of Memphis’ leading African American politicians. While Lee was the head of the local Republican Party, Walker had organized his own group of black Democrats. The two joined together in 1951 and created the Non-Partisan Voters’ League, which aimed to increase black voter registration after the abolition of the poll tax in Memphis. In an effort to increase interest in their group and in voting, Dr. Walker decided to run for the City School Board. In a three month long drive leading up to the election, Lee and Walker, with the help of local women and ministers, increased black

⁷ George Lee, “The Negro’s Next Step,” *Memphis Triangle*, January 28, 1928 quoted in Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street*, 65.

⁸ David M. Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971).

voter registration three fold.⁹ Although Walker failed to garner the necessary votes to win the election, this election set the precedent for African Americans actually running for office in Memphis, something they hadn't done since the days of reconstruction.

A year after Walker's campaign and the voter registration drive, Lee made splashes on a national stage when he attended the GOP national convention in 1952. When Lee made his debut at the national convention, he was asked to lead the entire convention in the Pledge of Allegiance. Known for oratorical skills, Lee was also given the great honor of delivering a seconding speech for Robert A. Taft, the candidate whose nomination Lee supported. In a riveting speech, Lee proclaimed his great admiration for Taft and his voting record on civil rights.¹⁰ He vigorously proclaimed, "Over the fortunes of my people, above their hopes, amid their anxious tears, Taft has stood and fought for an atmosphere in which we might live, where joy and hope come down in twin kisses of encouragement and faith, unloose the ancient muscles against despair.... Mr. Chairman...in the name of 15,000,000 people who are today suspended beneath a fatalistic cynicism and a compensatory desperation, I second the nomination of Robert A. Taft." Although Taft was defeated by Eisenhower for the nomination, Lee had received national attention, as one of the few African Americans to ever have the honor to deliver such a speech. He returned to Memphis as a local hero at the height of his political power.¹¹

Thirteen years before the Sanitation workers walked out and began the most famous strike in Memphis history, there were actually six black workers who refused to put up with the racism of their bosses anymore and walked out of a local downtown café, known as Joel's Patio, in April of 1955. The workers could take no more when the white owners hired an elderly black

⁹ Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 205-6.

¹⁰ Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland Publishing, 200), 39.

¹¹ *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, July 14, 1952.

woman to sit out front of the store, wear a bandana, and ring a bell to attract customers. Furthermore, in the window behind the elderly woman, there was a “mammy” rag doll. The owners of the store were using a popular racist stereotype to attract more white customers to their restaurant, so the workers complained to their white employers and were told, “Look if you all don’t like it, get your clothes and get out.” In an act of defiance, the workers, dubbed the “Patio 6” by the local media, decided to leave.¹²

Unfortunately when they left the café, they were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct and disturbing the peace. Their arrests and eventual convictions actually prompted the creation of an organization, known as the Memphis Citizens Committee for the Promotion of Justice. This organization, comprised of local ministers, businessmen, and other leaders in the black community, paid the legal fees for several of the “Patio 6” workers and felt that it was their responsibility to stand up for the “heroes in the common place.”¹³ Although this incident was by no means the first instance of protest or community action regarding civil rights in the city of Memphis, it marked one of the first protests after the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board*.

Meanwhile Dr. J. E. Walker and George Lee were once again trying to increase the number of registered black voters in Memphis. In 1955, they again led a massive registration drive that increased the black electorate to almost forty thousand voters. Similarly to their 1951 drive, they decided to put another black candidate in the race so that African Americans would be driven to turnout to vote. In 1955, they settled on Reverend Roy Love to run for the city school board. In choosing a Reverend, Lee and Walker gained allies in ministers across the city. Although Love was ultimately unsuccessful, more than twenty thousand African Americans

¹² 23 April 1955, “Six Employes Revolt Over Bell Ringer;” 30 April 1955; and 7 May 1955 “Seek Justice in ‘Patio Six’ Case” all in the *Tri-State Defender*.

¹³ Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 183, 211.

voted for Love in the election.¹⁴ This number was a dramatic increase from the 1951 election, and it showed the power of the black electorate and forced the newly elected Mayor Edmund Orgill to take their concerns seriously.

In fact, immediately after the election, the NAACP used the newfound power of the African American electorate to put pressure on Orgill to desegregate a local golf course. Pressure came immediately because the former mayor had promised to let blacks use a municipal course to host a tournament of black golfers. Orgill received pressure from both the NAACP and local white groups that opposed the integration of public areas, but in the end Orgill sided with the NAACP and opened up municipal golf courses for use by blacks in November of 1955.¹⁵ Furthermore, the next spring, O.Z. Evers, a black Post Office employee, boarded a city bus and sat on the front row. When the driver demanded that he move to the back of the bus, Evers refused and was forced off the bus by the police. With the help of attorney H. T. Lockard, a youthful NAACP attorney, Evers filed a suit in federal court.¹⁶

As the civil rights movement took off in Memphis, Lee headed to the 1956 GOP convention several months after Eisenhower had opened a Post Office named in Lee's honor. The first of its kind in the South, the post office would be run completely by African Americans. With his newfound political patronage, Lee redoubled his efforts to elect Eisenhower when he returned from the convention. Using the political apparatus that he had maintained during Boss Crump's reign, Lee used massive amounts of poll workers and ministers to organize African Americans to vote for Eisenhower.¹⁷ With his efforts, Lee was able to return enough African

¹⁴ Ibid., 208-9.

¹⁵ David M. Tucker, *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Racism, and Civic Reformers 1948-1968* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 83.

¹⁶ Ibid, 119 and Bobby L. Lovett *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 114.

¹⁷ G. Wayne Dowdy, *Crusades for Freedom: Memphis and the Political Transformation of the American South*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 55-6.

Americans to the Republican fold to deliver Shelby County and the entire state of Tennessee to Eisenhower. In local and statewide press, Lee was almost singlehandedly credited for delivering the state to Eisenhower.¹⁸ Lee had managed to use his political influence to corral enough African American votes for Eisenhower in the Memphis area to dramatically change the political landscape temporarily in the state of Tennessee. The next year, Eisenhower's administration signed the landmark 1957 Civil Rights Act.

While important, this legislation failed to address the issue of segregation in a meaningful way, so the next year local activists took matters into their own hands. Jesse Turner decided to begin his fight against segregation by going to an all-white public library. Turner, a local businessman and officer in the NAACP, was ejected from the library in late 1958 and eventually challenged the law in court.¹⁹ Meanwhile, two young black women, Tarlease Matthews and Anna Williams, were ejected from the Overton Park Zoo for going there on a day not reserved for blacks. On October 13, 1958, fifteen police cars arrived at the zoo to make sure the two young women were not a threat to the white folks at the zoo that day. The police, however, did not assume the worst immediately, and they asked the two women if they had any white children with them. Obviously black women could be in the park on any day if they were taking care of white children. After being ejected, the women filed suit with the help of Lockard on January 5, 1959.²⁰ After a series of incredibly long drawn out court battles in which judges attempted to stall the proceedings over and over again, the City of Memphis finally decided to desegregate the buses, the libraries, and the zoo "willingly" in the fall of 1960. City officials worried that the

¹⁸ "Black Voters in TN Carry Votes for Eisenhower," Memphis *Press-Scimitar*, November 1956, George Lee Collection, Memphis Public Library and Information Center.

¹⁹ David M. Tucker, *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Racism, and Civic Reformers 1948-1968* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 119.

²⁰ Bobby L. Lovett *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 116.

NAACP and other Memphis Civil Rights activists would only be strengthened if they won Court decisions in support of desegregation, so they preempted them by eliminating the segregation issue in all of the cases that were currently being tried.²¹

With the impending local elections of 1959, politics took center stage in Memphis once again. That year young NAACP lawyers A.W. Willis, Benjamin Hooks, and Russell Sugarmon teamed up with two pastors Henry Bunton and Roy Love to create the Volunteer Ticket. The ticket was a bipartisan attempt to elect black men to office in the city of Memphis. During the months prior to the election, 1,200 African American campaign workers, in addition to handing out campaign literature and sample ballots, were able to raise black registration to an incredible 57,109. In an attempt to raise funds, the ticket held a rally on July 31, 1959. In addition to the candidates, Martin Luther King Jr. and gospel singer Mahalia Jackson came to the rally to support the Volunteer Ticket. A key organizer in the Volunteer Ticket Movement, George Lee was also one of the headline speakers at the rally.²² During his speech, he promised to deafening cheers, “We’re going to fight till hell freezes over and then skate across on the ice!”²³ Although none of the candidates were able to win office, this ticket marked large gains in the black electorate and the first time that African Americans legitimately challenged white opponents in a local election.

In the middle of his own campaign separate from the Volunteer Ticket, O.Z. Evers and other leaders of a local black organization known as the Birmingham Civil League contacted the president of the Greyhound Bus Company because there were still signs at the Memphis bus station denoting separate “White” and “Colored” rooms. Although the bus company had

²¹ David M. Tucker, *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Racism, and Civic Reformers 1948-1968* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 120.

²² G. Wayne Dowdy, *Crusades for Freedom: Memphis and the Political Transformation of the American South*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 67-8.

²³ George Lee, “Mason Temple- Volunteer Ticket Rally” Speech, 31 August 1959, Lee Collection.

complied with Supreme Court decisions involving desegregation, local law enforcers and city officials kept the signs up because they claimed segregation was still the law in Memphis, TN. However with the pressure from Evers and the Birmingham Civil League, company officials forced local officials to remove the signs in October of 1959.²⁴

Also in 1959, other local black organizations joined the fight against unfair treatment in the public domain. For instance, the Binghampton Club petitioned the mayor demanding to know why African Americans were excluded from jobs in the city government other than sanitation jobs.²⁵ Also with the support of 20,000 plus members, the Bluff City and Shelby County Civic Clubs hired Russell Sugarmon to represent them in a dispute with Police Commissioner Claude Armour. The civic clubs hired Sugarmon to pressure Armour into investigating instances of police brutality, which was a daily reality for most blacks in Memphis.²⁶

On Friday, March 18, 1960, seven students from Owen Junior College began the student sit-in movement in Memphis that would become a daily occurrence during 1960. These seven students decided to begin their struggle to desegregate public facilities at a downtown variety store named McClellan's. The very next day, forty-two students from both Owen and LeMoyne Colleges sat in at two different branches of the local library. Over the next few months, college students and high school students began sitting in almost every single day. They started with the libraries, the museums, and the parks, and then they moved to Main Street. They protested everywhere. One high school student recalled that year saying, "We would get up in the morning and get dressed as though we were going to school, and go down to the NAACP office

²⁴ Bobby L. Lovett *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 117.

²⁵ Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 221.

²⁶ Bobby L. Lovett *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 117.

where we congregated. And then we would go downtown and disburse to our assigned locations and sit in at whatever was segregated.”²⁷ During all of these sit-in movements, NAACP members were negotiating with local city officials to try to effect change.

Although the NAACP had taken the lead in organizing the sit-in movement, George Lee was also vocal in his support of the students. In a 1960 speech given at Owen College, Lee encouraged the student protestors when he said, “The manner in which the young Negroes are now organizing in the South reveals a purpose and technique that cannot be withstood, the authorities can fill the jailhouses and bloody a million heads, race riots can break out in a 100 cities, but the fight for equality won’t be stopped!” While Lee normally contained his involvement in the civil rights movement to the political sphere, he certainly was in favor of the newly emerging protest movement that had erupted in Memphis and the rest of the South. In the same speech, Lee also encouraged the students to use their economic power to challenge the white community by not spending their “dollar where [they are] insulted or where [they] can’t work.”²⁸ This idea of black economic power was the same idea that he had championed in the 1920s in Memphis, and it would remain one of Lee’s most consistent political messages throughout the civil rights era.

While the student sit-ins were raging during the summer of 1960, NAACP attorneys were also working within the courts on the one issue that had yet to be challenged in the city of Memphis: school integration. In March of 1960, the local NAACP chapter, with the help of powerhouse national attorneys Thurgood Marshall and Constance Baker Motley, filed a suit to desegregate the Memphis city schools. Although the litigation would not go very far, the schools were finally desegregated in 1961 after the NAACP worked tirelessly to find qualified students

²⁷ Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 232-237.

²⁸ George Lee, “Road Blocks to Freedom” Speech, 23 March 1960, Lee Collection.

to enter the public schools in the first grade.²⁹ On October 4, 1961, the NAACP was finally successful in achieving token desegregation in the Memphis City Schools. That day, thirteen African American first grade students entered four formerly all-white elementary schools. In what would be a common trend of civil rights in Memphis, the integration was done without any publicity. The teachers were not told that it was going to happen until the night before. Parents were never warned. And the *Commercial Appeal* agreed not to cover the event at all. All of this was done so that Memphis could avoid a spectacle and violence such as that that took place in Little Rock. Other than a few instances of police officers using racial slurs, the integration occurred without incident, and the kids innocently played together at recess without any idea of the magnitude of what was happening.³⁰

Meanwhile in nearby Fayette and Haywood counties, hundreds of families had been evicted from their land for registering and attempting to vote in the 1960 national elections. The farmers were kicked off tenement farms and had no place to go so they created shanty towns as temporary housing. As a champion of black voting rights, Lee decided to lend his help by sponsoring a yuletide program featuring Mahalia Jackson. Lee used his fundraising experience to raise thousands of dollars for the evicted farmers, and all of the money raised went to pay for food and clothing for the evicted farmers. As the situation in rural West Tennessee started receiving national attention, larger organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership

²⁹ Sherry L. Hoppe and Bruce W. Speck, *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis's Civil Rights Classroom* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 35-6.

³⁰ Sherry L. Hoppe and Bruce W. Speck, *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis's Civil Rights Classroom* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 35-6 and David M. Tucker, *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Racism, and Civic Reformers 1948-1958* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 121-2.

Conference (SCLC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) lent their considerable means to aid the evicted farmers.³¹

Back in Memphis, the sit-ins and boycotts by African Americans were finally starting to put considerable pressure on larger department stores to desegregate. With the pressure mounting, the NAACP was able to negotiate with business leaders to desegregate several of the department stores downtown. In November of 1960, the NAACP began negotiating with sympathetic white business owners, and they came to an agreement. Although the white business owners agreed to desegregate their facilities, they refused to do it until after the holiday season. In the meantime they required that the protesting and boycotting cease until that time. Although many of the young students were hesitant to comply because they feared the white business owners were simply trying to bring large holiday revenues, they eventually agreed. Keeping their promise, the business owners desegregated their department stores in January of 1961.³²

Despite the desegregation of these department stores, the Zoo, the libraries, and the buses, the sit-in movement raged on during the summer of 1961. Students continued to protest department stores that were unwilling to desegregate. They sat-in at Goldsmith's, Bry's, Lowenstein's, Gerber's, and Walgreen's. They also sat-in at the bus stations and the train stations throughout the summer. Boycotts continued as African Americans refused to buy from stores and restaurants that were segregated. Picketers surrounded these places with signs encouraging others not to buy from them. Marches also occurred throughout the city during that summer. These efforts, coordinated by Maxine Smith and the NAACP, resulted in the arrest of

³¹ Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 229-30.

³² David M. Tucker, *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Racism, and Civic Reformers 1948-1968* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 121.

almost twenty-five people per day during that summer. For those arrested, legal aid was provided by the young attorneys that were working for the NAACP while bail money was provided by local church fund raising efforts.³³

While the city was engulfed in the protest movement of the early sixties, local white business leaders began pushing to reform and consolidate the city and county governments. As a well-known businessman and politician, Lee was selected to serve on the Special Committee on Local Government, which was commissioned to draw up a plan that would allow for a new consolidated government in Memphis. In 1962 after almost a year of discussions and negotiations, the Committee finally came up with a plan that would create districts within the city and the county that would elect individual councilmen. The plan, however, was scrapped when another committee was commissioned to actually draft a constitution. Serving as the only black representative on this committee, George Lee used his position to object to the new plan on the grounds that the new government would use an at-large voting system rather than the earlier agreed upon district system. Lee objected, saying, "My constituents feel that their only hope for survival is a council based on districts." Lee and others in the black community recognized that this new system would effectively kill any chance that African Americans would have of electing a black councilman. Unsurprisingly, the measure was voted down by African Americans and others opposed to the measure when it was brought up on a referendum vote in 1962.³⁴

In the fall of 1962, the NAACP turned their efforts towards new venues to desegregate. With Vasco Smith in charge of the new effort, the NAACP began trying to desegregate movie theaters in Memphis. They began their efforts at a Malco Theatre where they had quietly

³³ Bobby L. Lovett *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 195.

³⁴ David M. Tucker, *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Racism, and Civic Reformers 1948-1968* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 106-9.

arranged with the owners to integrate the establishment. They did it very slowly by initially only sending one couple. Once again they also made a deal with local papers to keep the incident out of the news so that opposition would not rise and violence would be avoided. Smith managed the integration of the movie theaters at a very slow pace by only sending a couple or two at a time to the different movie theaters. This method was in direct contrast to the method employed by his wife, Maxine, who had been the organizer for the student sit-in movement. Equally successful, Vasco Smith's method yielded results, and by April of 1963, fourteen different movie theaters had been integrated in Memphis.³⁵ Also in 1963, the NAACP rededicated its efforts to desegregating restaurants. When negotiating failed with the restaurant owners, the NAACP began picketing again in December 1963. However, before they could really mobilize, the twenty largest restaurant owners in Memphis agreed to desegregate to avoid a long money-draining battle with the NAACP and the picketers.³⁶

Throughout the 1960s, student groups were very active. Beyond the students who were involved in the sit-in movements, there were also politically active groups. For instance, in early 1964 at Southwestern College, a group of students organized a campus wide march to urge newly appointed U.S. Senator Herbert Walters to vote in favor of the Civil Rights Bill. The same year the Intercollegiate NAACP, which included students from Southwestern, Memphis State, LeMoyne and Owen Colleges, organized and tried to desegregate the local Second Presbyterian Church.³⁷

During this same period, there were also several efforts to begin organizing African American labor. In 1964, the sanitation workers who would become so important in 1968 were

³⁵ David M. Tucker, *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Racism, and Civic Reformers 1948-1968* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 122, 133.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

³⁷ Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 255.

finally successful in organizing under the AFSCME labor union. After several unsuccessful attempts to join the AFI and create independent local unions, O.Z. Evers finally managed to create a local chapter of AFSCME in Memphis. The next year, Hazel McGhee was also successful in organizing the workers at Metro Uniform. Although often overshadowed by the Sanitation Strike, the women of this Union actually went on strike for seven months immediately prior to the Sanitation Strike.³⁸

In 1964, as one of the few black Republican holdouts, George Lee found himself locked in a battle for control of the local Republican Party. African Americans had almost completely abandoned the Republican Party to vote for Kennedy in 1960, so Lee no longer a large enough constituency to guarantee him a seat at the GOP national convention. While Lee had been able to hold onto his seats at the convention through the years, the party switch of the South had finally been completed, so in 1964, when the New Guard Republicans, who were almost unconditionally white conservatives opposed to Civil Rights, took over in Shelby County, George Lee was not selected to represent Memphis at the National Convention. In March, Lee walked out of the party caucus in protest realizing that he did not stand a chance to win a seat at the convention. Lee created his own caucus made up of almost exclusively African Americans, and his caucus nominated Lee and Benjamin Hooks to represent Memphis at the convention.³⁹ Thus began, Lee's strange protest to be seated at the GOP national convention.

In May, Lee appealed to the State Executive Committee to have his caucus recognized as the actual Shelby County caucus. Lee, however, was voted down 34-1 by the committee, but his battle did not end there. The next day, he tried to appeal directly to the state convention, but he

³⁸ Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 260.

³⁹ David M. Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971), 183-5 and G. Wayne Dowdy, *Crusades for Freedom: Memphis and the Political Transformation of the American South*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 99.

was stonewalled by the white opposition and was actually unable to make a direct plea to the convention after the convention voted to send the delegates with instructions to vote for Barry Goldwater for President. Despite his lack of success in Nashville, Lee made the decision to continue his fight all the way to the National Convention. Presidential hopeful William Scranton agreed to fund Lee's appeal, and an attorney from Knoxville, Tennessee, R.C. Smith agreed to represent him before the Contest Committee at the National Convention. Lee, represented by Smith, was unable to convince the Contest Committee that the New Guard Republicans had taken any illegal action against Lee, so the petition was denied.

Lee could not be stopped. After making personal pleas to one of Goldwater's top advisers at the Convention, Lee endeavored to make a stand on the floor of the convention. However, Lee's supporters were quickly shutdown by the Goldwaterites, who dominated the convention. Finally Lee appeared before the Credentials Committee where he was able to appeal the decision of the Contest Committee. Although Smith had three and a half hours to argue Lt. Lee's case before the committee, he eventually was defeated by an overwhelming majority.⁴⁰

Although Lee was not participating in sit-ins or representing protesters in court, he was actively working for civil rights in his field of expertise, politics. Lee chose not to simply cave to the lily-white Republicans who were taking over the party. He chose to fight his forced exclusion from the GOP every step of the way saying, "The issue is whether the National Convention with delegates from every area of our great nation is going to tolerate a deliberate anti-Negro tactic of the radical right who desire to make the Republican Party a lily-white group appealing to racism and hatred."⁴¹ He received national press⁴² for his fight and became the

⁴⁰ Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street*, 188-198.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁴² *New York Times*, July 14, 1964.

symbol for the exclusion of black Republicans from the party and a champion against the conservative leanings of the Republican Party.

While George Lee was losing his political battle, NAACP activist A.W. Willis was winning the most important political battle in Memphis history to that point. In 1954, A.W. Willis became the first African American to be elected to the Tennessee state legislature since the days of Reconstruction. Although Willis was elected from a majority black district, the importance of his election was enormous. African Americans had finally had the electoral success that they had been working for years. Three years later Willis decided to try to expand his political power by running for mayor in 1967. Along with Willis, six other African Americans entered the race for the city council. Although Willis would be defeated handily after reports surfaced that he had actually been paid by mayoral candidate Henry Loeb, African Americans Fred Davis, James L. Netters, and J.O. Patterson were successful in their campaigns when they became the first African Americans to serve on the Memphis City Council.⁴³ These elections set a precedent for black political representation in the city of Memphis that would culminate in the election of Harold Ford to the United States House of Representatives in 1974. Although Lee was not directly involved in these campaigns, the electoral groundwork that he and Dr. Walker had laid during the 1950 registration drives were essential to Willis' success in 1964.

After the many gains of the early sixties in the area of desegregation, the NAACP shifted its focus to creating equal employment opportunities. African Americans were no longer willing to tolerate token hiring in white collar jobs. They wanted forty percent of the jobs that they were entitled to because they made up that much of the population in Memphis. So in the fall of 1965, Reverend Samuel Kyles and the Employment Committee of the NAACP began putting pressure on local businesses to hire more African Americans. They started by boycotting a local beer

⁴³ Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland Publishing, 200), 63-4

distribution company that refused to hire African Americans at all. However, before the boycott could really get started, the company actually gave in and agreed to begin hiring African Americans as salesmen.⁴⁴

This push for equal employment opportunity and equality continued into the latter half of the 1960s and became the central issue of the civil rights movement in Memphis, as evidenced by the Sanitation Strike that occurred in 1968. Although the sanitation workers had threatened to strike before 1968, they had feared reprisals and firings too much to actually follow through on their threats⁴⁵ until a tragic incident in the early months of 1968 pushed them to their limits.

February 1, 1968, was a cold day, but the two sanitation workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker were used to that. They were used to standing on the truck and braving the cold winters in Memphis as the garbage truck went around the streets of East Memphis. That afternoon it started to rain so the two men did what they normally did when it rained. They climbed into the back of the truck where the trash was compacted, where they were sheltered from the rain. They had probably done this countless times, but on that day the truck malfunctioned. The driver and crew chief Willie Crain heard the machine turn on, but the mechanism would not turn off. There was absolutely nothing he could do but look and listen as his two coworkers were crushed to death.⁴⁶

To make matters much worse, the two men did not have life insurance or workmen's compensation, so their loved ones were left to fend for themselves. Needless to say the sanitation workers were furious. They were tired of having to deal with terrible working conditions, substandard wages, and faulty equipment. On Monday February 12, the sanitation workers

⁴⁴ David M. Tucker, *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Racism, and Civic Reformers 1948-1968* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 139.

⁴⁵ Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 277.

⁴⁶ Wayne Dowdy, *Crusades for Freedom: Memphis and the Political Transformation of the American South*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 122-3.

decided it was time to go on strike and demand to be treated like men. Although the workers had organized with the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) several years before the strike, the city refused to recognize their local union chapter. At the time Mayor Loeb was incensed by the notion that city employees felt that they had the right to go on strike, so when union representative T. O. Jones and national AFSCME officials went to meet with the Mayor, he flatly rejected their demands.⁴⁷ For the next sixty five days, sanitation workers refused to go to work. They marched. They boycotted. They went to city hall and refused to leave until the Public Works Commission agreed to recommend union recognition and the meeting of their other demands. After several peaceful marches, one of the marches finally erupted into violence on February 23 after marchers tried to tip over a police car. Marchers claimed that the car had run over one of their feet, but it did not matter to the police. They started beating marchers with clubs. They shot canisters of mace. And they chased away many others.⁴⁸

The reaction was incredible. This strike was no longer just about sanitation workers. The city was divided, white against black. Mayor Loeb received incredible support from whites in the city for his paternalistic but unyielding approach to handling the strikers.⁴⁹ Blacks were furious. The strike was not just about sanitation workers demanding equal pay or better working conditions. The strike became the battlefield for blacks to demand to be treated as men and women that deserved equal treatment. The Reverend James Lawson, a veteran of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and minister in Memphis, took control of the strike. He organized nightly meetings, daily marches, and a boycott of downtown stores. The famous

⁴⁷ Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 279.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 279-80.

⁴⁹ Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland Publishing, 200), 68.

slogan “I Am a Man” spread across the protest and became the message of the strikers and the activists.⁵⁰

Leaders of the civil rights movement descended on Memphis. Roy Wilkins and Bayard Rustin lent their support to the strikers, and finally Martin Luther King Jr. decided to join the activists in Memphis. On March 18, King came to Memphis and spoke to an incredible crowd of twenty five thousand people. He encouraged the strikers and the African Americans of Memphis to continue fighting for equal treatment, and he agreed to lead a march in Memphis. Ten days later he led that march, but it erupted into violence due to a small contingent of looters. King, ashamed that his non-violent protest had erupted into violence, agreed to lead another march in one week’s time. However, King was gunned down on April 4 before he could actually lead the march. As the news spread of King’s death, blacks throughout the city were overwhelmed, and there were many acts of violence, vandalism, and looting throughout the night.⁵¹ After King was slain, Mayor Loeb received pressure from all sides. He had to settle the strike, so on April 16, 1968, Mayor Loeb agreed to recognize the workers’ union and increase wages, therefore ending the strike.⁵²

After George Lee’s unsuccessful attempt to be seated at the 1964 GOP convention, he floated into the background of the mainstream civil rights movement in Memphis. It appears as if he had absolutely no involvement in the sanitation strike, but on May 4, 1968, one month after Dr. King’s death, George Lee announced that the Elks Department of Education would be sponsoring a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship Fund.⁵³ In the aftermath of the ’64

⁵⁰ Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 280-2.

⁵¹ Wayne Dowdy, *Crusades for Freedom: Memphis and the Political Transformation of the American South*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 127-30.

⁵² David M. Tucker, *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Racism, and Civic Reformers 1948-1968* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 160.

⁵³ “Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Scholarship,” *Tri-State Defender*, 4 May 1968, Lee Collection.

convention, Lee had redoubled his efforts to the Elks Department of Education. Having served as the Grand Commissioner of Education since 1951,⁵⁴ Lee had elevated the Department of Education to “the most outstanding of the Grand Lodge’s 45 active departments.” Furthermore, the *Tri-State Defender* declared, “Its scholarship program is considered the greatest of its kind in America.”⁵⁵ The scholarship program had helped hundreds of African Americans go to college, including Dr. King, the Little Rock Nine, the Greensboro Four, and countless others who were involved in the civil rights movement.

While Lee faded from the political scene in Memphis after 1964, he continued to travel the country and give speeches pronouncing the message of the civil rights movement. For instance, in July of 1966, Lee gave a speech in Little Rock, AR, wherein he spoke critically of the militant aspects of the newly emerging Black Power movement; however, in the same speech he said, “We cannot grow bigger than our own feeling. If we feel inferior, then we are inferior. We will not accomplish more than we are. This fight for equality begins in own souls and then it must spread as wide as the world.”⁵⁶ Although critical of the militant aspect of Black Power, Lee was espousing one of the most important ideals of that movement, pride in a black heritage and culture. A year later in 1967 at Bethune-Cookman College, Lee told the students, “We should be just as concerned with the economic ownership of the businesses with which the Negro spends his money. A race that is always in front of the counter and never behind the counter; that is always buying and never selling can’t make itself felt in the American economy.”⁵⁷ This principle was the same one that Lee was espousing in his days as a salesman

⁵⁴ David M. Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971), 203.

⁵⁵ “Youth Programs Produce Men Like Dr. King,” *Tri-State Defender*, 25 May 1968, Lee Collection.

⁵⁶ George Lee, “Don’t Cut That Rope” Speech, July 1966, Lee Collection.

⁵⁷ “Lee Speaks at Bethune-Cookman College,” *Memphis World*, 9 December 1967, Lee Collection.

with MS Life Insurance, but a few months later this principle would be the main focus of the Memphis civil rights movement.

Even before the sanitation strike in Memphis, the focus of civil rights activists in Memphis had shifted to employment opportunities and equality. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, African Americans were now protected against discrimination in the workplace by law, so they now had legislation with which they could challenge the unfair labor practices that were rampant in the South. In Memphis, the NAACP specifically utilized the newly created Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), which was formed to eliminate discrimination in the workplace. In fact from 1965 to 1967, the local NAACP chapter filed and processed over 400 complaints on behalf of blacks in Memphis. Complaints ranged from the refusal to hire black employees in government jobs or the lack of opportunity for promotion for those African Americans that were lucky enough to be hired.⁵⁸

Blacks in Memphis, however, were not content to just sit by and wait for the national government to end these discriminatory practices, and in June of 1967, the NAACP Youth Council with aid from Maxine Smith organized a mass march to demand that half of the city sponsored summer jobs should be given to African Americans.⁵⁹ Meanwhile the larger branch of the NAACP was also pushing for equal employment opportunities. They were especially adamant that stores and shops which operated in predominantly black neighborhoods and were largely patronized by African Americans should hire black employees and invest in the community, a common wish of black capitalists such as George Lee. For instance, only months after the resolution of the sanitation strike, the NAACP began taking action to make this goal a

⁵⁸ Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 263.

⁵⁹ Sherry L. Hoppe and Bruce W. Speck, *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis's Civil Rights Classroom* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 104.

reality. In the first of a string of boycotts and pickets, the NAACP organized a picket of the Bellevue-McLemore Shopping Center after store owners had been unwilling to meet the demands of the NAACP to increase black employment and the promotion of blacks into management positions. After picketing the Pic-Pac Grocery store and other stores in the shopping center for two weeks, the stores were forced to capitulate to their demands because they had received almost no business during those weeks. Black employment in the shopping center rose from a mere forty-five percent to an incredible ninety percent after those two weeks, and almost every single store agreed to begin promoting black workers to management positions after a training period.⁶⁰

After this successful attempt, the NAACP began picketing at other shopping centers that also catered to predominantly African American neighborhoods. They used the black purchasing power to force employers to hire more blacks if they wanted to continue operating successfully in their neighborhoods. For instance, later in the summer of 1968, the NAACP also boycotted the Hollywood-Chelsea shopping area for several weeks until black employment had once again risen significantly. During their protests, black employment rose from forty-nine percent to eighty-five percent with the additional promises to continue hiring blacks as whites vacated positions.⁶¹

Although the NAACP was leading the charge for equal employment in Memphis after the sanitation strike, a group of unemployed mothers took the lead in a battle to improve the lives of those on welfare in Memphis. In May of 1968, ten women who were on welfare petitioned William H. Roberts, who was one of the directors of the welfare office in Memphis, and refused to participate in a program called Work Incentive Program (WIN). This program required

⁶⁰ Sherry L. Hoppe and Bruce W. Speck, *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis's Civil Rights Classroom* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 99.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

people on welfare work or enroll in a job training program. The women were later nicknamed the “mothers on welfare,” and they began meeting once a week and continuing their civil rights activity. In November, after learning that the welfare office in Memphis was withholding funds, they marched on the state office and demanded winter clothing and raincoats for their children. These women also boycotted and picketed downtown department stores that would not give credit cards to people on welfare. With the help of Memphis Legal Services, they were also successful in changing local welfare policies, which did not allow those on welfare to drive regularly or own a car, own a house valued over \$6,000, or have a man living in the house.⁶²

Although Lee was no longer an active participant in the movement in Memphis, he remained in Memphis and was heavily involved in charity work throughout the city. He worked with local charities that provided food to the poor, such as the Miles-O-Dimes campaign to which Lee presented a \$1,500 check in December of 1968⁶³ and a \$3,000 check in 1973.⁶⁴ Likewise in December of 1972, Lee and the Beale Street Elks hosted a Gospel Music Festival to help raise money for the needy during the holidays.⁶⁵ Furthermore, he also chaired a fundraising event for the United Negro College Fund in November of 1967. At the event, the group raised over \$5,000 and Lee spoke the crowd, emphasizing the importance of education in the American economy.⁶⁶ While these are a few of the examples from the newspaper clippings housed in the Lee Collection at the Memphis Public Library, there were probably countless other events and fundraisers that Lee was involved in during his tenure in Memphis.

⁶² Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 271-2.

⁶³ “G.W. Lee and Beale Street Elks,” *Commercial Appeal*, 22 December 1968, Lee Collection

⁶⁴ “Beale Street Christmas Check to Mile-O-Dimes,” *Commercial Appeal*, 14 December 1973, Lee Collection.

⁶⁵ “Beale Street Elks Gospel Music Festival,” *Tri-State Defender*, 16 December 1972.

⁶⁶ “United Negro College Fund,” *Memphis World*, 18 November 1967, Lee Collection

The next year, the NAACP once again took the lead in Memphis civil rights and turned their attention towards the city schools with the Black Monday protests. In September of 1969, the local NAACP chapter, frustrated by the slow pace of integration and the subpar schools that were located in black communities, submitted a list of demands to the school board. Their demands included calls for actual integration, the hiring of more black teachers and administrators, the promotion of those black administrators that had been hired but relegated to lower level positions, the teaching of more black culture in the city schools, and a black school board member.⁶⁷ Unfortunately the demands fell on deaf ears.

In a show of strong opposition to the school board's apathy towards their demands, Maxine Smith and the NAACP immediately began organizing a protest that would hurt the school board the most. They decided to have students skip school one day a week. This simple protest would greatly hurt the city schools because schools got funding based off their average daily attendance. By decreasing the average daily attendance of the schools in the black communities across Memphis, the NAACP aimed to force the school board's hand. On October 9 and 10, 1969, forty thousand black students across the city of Memphis either skipped school or left school early. Largely unplanned, these two days were more of a spontaneous show of support for the demands that had been submitted to the school board. Unsurprisingly the board was unhappy with this new form of protest and in response cancelled a planned meeting with the NAACP education committee to discuss the demands.⁶⁸

The NAACP reacted quickly and organized the first of several Black Mondays on October 13, 1969. In addition to students staying home, parents and others involved in the

⁶⁷ Sherry L. Hoppe and Bruce W. Speck, *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis's Civil Rights Classroom* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 45-6 and Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland Publishing, 200), 72.

⁶⁸ Sherry L. Hoppe and Bruce W. Speck, *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis's Civil Rights Classroom* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 47.

protest were asked to wear all black, buy only from black businesses, picket the board of education, picket the homes, neighborhoods, and churches of the members of the school board, and picket schools.⁶⁹ On the first Monday, about 63,000 students and 500 teachers skipped school. The school board was picketed, and the NAACP led an economic boycott on all white-owned stores.⁷⁰ The school board was forced to come to the table to discuss the NAACP demands, but they refused to agree to anything concrete, dealing in generalities instead. The following Monday on the 20th, 65,000 students and 674 teachers showed their disdain for the school board's attempted negotiation and skipped school. Boycotts and pickets continued, and the protesters marched through the downtown area.⁷¹

Mayor Loeb and the city government got involved at this point. The matter was no longer an issue for just the school board. Loeb did not want a repeat of the Sanitation Strike; nor did he want the protest to receive any national press. Loeb and the city government, however, were unwilling to meet the demands of the protesters and instead threatened a longer school term to make up for absenteeism. Loeb also threatened legal action against the protest leaders. Although Loeb's threats did weaken the resolve of some of the protester, 46,000 students and 165 teachers skipped school on October 27. Additionally the protesters marched through downtown again and maintained their fierce picketing of the school board.⁷²

One week later, the fourth and final Black Monday protest occurred on November 3, when 68,000 students and 660 teachers skipped school. In a show of support, the entire black community joined in the protest by skipping work and closing down businesses so that they

⁶⁹ Ibid., 47-8.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 48 and Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland Publishing, 200), 73.

⁷¹ Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland Publishing, 200), 73.

⁷² Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland Publishing, 200), 74 and Sherry L. Hoppe and Bruce W. Speck, *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis's Civil Rights Classroom* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 54.

could join in the picketing and marching. On that day, over a thousand sanitation workers joined in the protest by skipping work. Trash piled up. Pickets of schools and the school board continued. And over five thousand people marched to a rally downtown.⁷³ The city government and the school board budged. They capitulated and agreed to many of the NAACP's demands. In a statement released by the Memphis Board of Education, they supported legislation that would allow African Americans to serve on the Board of Education and immediately agreed to appoint two black advisers to participate in board meetings. Additionally, they established a new assistant superintendent post and hired an African American for that position, and finally they agreed to hire more black teachers, principals, and administrators.⁷⁴

The one goal that NAACP had not achieved through the Black Monday protests was true school integration, so in 1970 the NAACP and the African American community began working towards the goal of cross-racial busing. This type of busing would send African Americans into the nicer neighborhood white schools while white children would be bused into the subpar black schools. However, without representation on the school board, the black community was largely unsuccessful in pushing for busing, so in 1971, Maxine Smith ran for the school board. Although she was actually in the hospital during the campaign, she won an overwhelming majority of the vote and was elected to the Memphis City School Board.⁷⁵

While Smith worked from inside the school board to achieve busing, NAACP attorneys were fighting in court to make busing mandatory in the Memphis City Schools. In 1971, the NAACP won a victory, when U.S. District Court Judge Robert McRae effectively ruled that desegregation was not occurring in Memphis because there were still so many schools that were

⁷³ Sherry L. Hoppe and Bruce W. Speck, *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis's Civil Rights Classroom* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 55.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 255-57.

⁷⁵ Sherry L. Hoppe and Bruce W. Speck, *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis's Civil Rights Classroom* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 136-7.

not bi-racial.⁷⁶ Judge McRae ordered a group of experts to draw up multiple plans to eliminate the problem of segregation in the city schools using busing; however, in his ruling, he refused to hold that busing was necessary to achieve desegregation. The NAACP Legal Defense Fund immediately tried to get McRae's decision overturned so that a higher court would rule that busing was necessary to achieve desegregation in Memphis, but a three judge panel in the Circuit Court upheld McRae's decision. After several appeals and a continued lack of action by the school board to achieve desegregation, Judge McRae eventually issued a ruling that required the school board to present and implement a unitary plan for busing. After a heated three year battle in the Courts and on the School Board, Smith and the NAACP were finally successful in achieving busing in 1973 when cross-racial busing was implemented.⁷⁷

Two years before busing was achieved, the most violent incident of the entire civil rights movement in Memphis occurred after Elton Hayes was murdered by police officers in Memphis. Hayes and two of his friends were involved in a high speed chase with police officers on October 15, 1971. The chase ended when the truck in which Hayes was crashed into a ditch; however, this was only the beginning of an incident that would tear the city of Memphis apart and lead to massive rioting within the black community. When the truck was finally stopped, officers pulled Hayes and the others from the car and proceeded to beat them. Hayes received such incredible injuries from the beating that he had to be rushed to the hospital and was pronounced dead at 10:00 AM. The next day an autopsy revealed that Hayes had died of a "blow or blows to the head."⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ibid., 136.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 141-4.

⁷⁸ Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland Publishing, 200), 74-5.

The black community was furious. For years, the police had shown unnecessary force towards African Americans. They had finally had enough. On October 19, Elton Hayes was buried and rioting erupted. Stores were set on fire. Firemen were shot at for attempting to squelch the fires. A police helicopter was even damaged by gunfire. The black community had erupted into chaos. In the next few days, schools had to close because of violence, and shootings occurred at an alarming rate. Mayor Loeb instituted a curfew, but it was unsuccessful in quelling the massive rioting that was occurring throughout the city. On October 21, a three year old boy was run over by a police car when he ran into the street. Students marched through the streets carrying signs that called for “death to the pigs.” The next day the chief of police resigned and the City Council created a coalition of black citizens and police officers to investigate the occurrences of police brutality in the black community. The rioting slowed and the violence dropped off after nine police officers were charged in connection to Hayes’ murder. All were convicted of some offense whether it was murder, attempted murder, or neglect of duty.⁷⁹

In the aftermath of the Hayes riots, local and statewide elections of 1972 became the focus in the city. Although Lee had reentered the political arena when he backed Winfield Dunn for Governor in 1970, Lee made his first real contribution to Tennessee politics since the ’64 campaign when he threw his entire weight behind Republican Howard Baker Jr. for the U.S. Senate in 1972. In a surprising election, Baker actually won thirty-six percent of African American votes in Shelby County. Although Lee wasn’t the same riveting campaigner anymore, he did write a very appealing article that seriously asked African Americans to look at the records of the two candidates. He asked blacks in Memphis to look past the party affiliation of

⁷⁹ Ibid., 76-8.

the candidates, and it seemed to have had an effect.⁸⁰ Baker won an incredibly surprising amount of the black vote in Tennessee. Maybe George Lee was not politically dead after all.

Two years later in local elections, black Memphians achieved the most important electoral success to date when Harold Ford Sr. was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1974. Ten years after the election of A.W. Willis to the state legislature, the election of African Americans in Memphis had become a regular practice; however, almost all of these positions were voted on by districts with African American majorities. Nonetheless, in 1974, Ford announced his intention to challenge Republican Dan Kuykendall for the seat from Eight Congressional District of Tennessee, which had recently been redrawn so that African Americans made up 47.5 percent of the district. Despite the long odds of running against an incumbent in a majority white district, Ford prevailed and became the first African American to win election to the House of Representatives from the state of Tennessee.⁸¹ While it's difficult to pinpoint an end date to the Memphis civil rights movement, Ford's election marked a new era in the city of Memphis.

The George Lees of the civil rights movement are often written off as Uncle Toms. They are often simply considered members of a group that were only in politics for the patronage. They referred to as relics of a past era when writers examine the civil rights era, but that's not right. George Lee joined the civil rights movement at the height of his political power. He fought in Republican circles for African Americans. He truly believed that by sticking with the Republican Party, he was working to advance the cause of blacks nationwide. While he was a Republican, Lee showed an incredible amount of bipartisanship in the local politics when he made it his only goal to get a black man elected throughout the 1950s. He used his political

⁸⁰ "Adams Compares Black/White Voting in Memphis/Atlanta," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 15 November 1972.

⁸¹ Marcus D. Pohlmann and Michael R. Kirby, *Racial Politics at the Crossroads: Memphis Elects Dr. W. W. Herenton* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 69.

notoriety to speak on issues that were dear to him. He constantly fought to improve education so that African Americans could be on the “other side of the counter,” and most of all he had an intense pride in his race. In 1965, Lee told an audience full of Elks, “I wouldn’t want to lose my identity. I find no reason to want to be like a white man. I just want to be treated like one.”⁸²

Lee might not have been waving an “I am a Man” sign during the sanitation strike, but his entire life and involvement in the civil rights movement was a display of that sentiment. Without Lee’s electoral work to increase voter registration, A.W. Willis and the other African Americans elected during the civil rights movement would not have had a chance of winning in a predominantly white area.

⁸² George Lee, “The Elk’s New Frontier” Speech, July 1965, Lee Collection.