

# Strides for Equality:

## A Resource Guide for the Civil Rights Struggle in Memphis

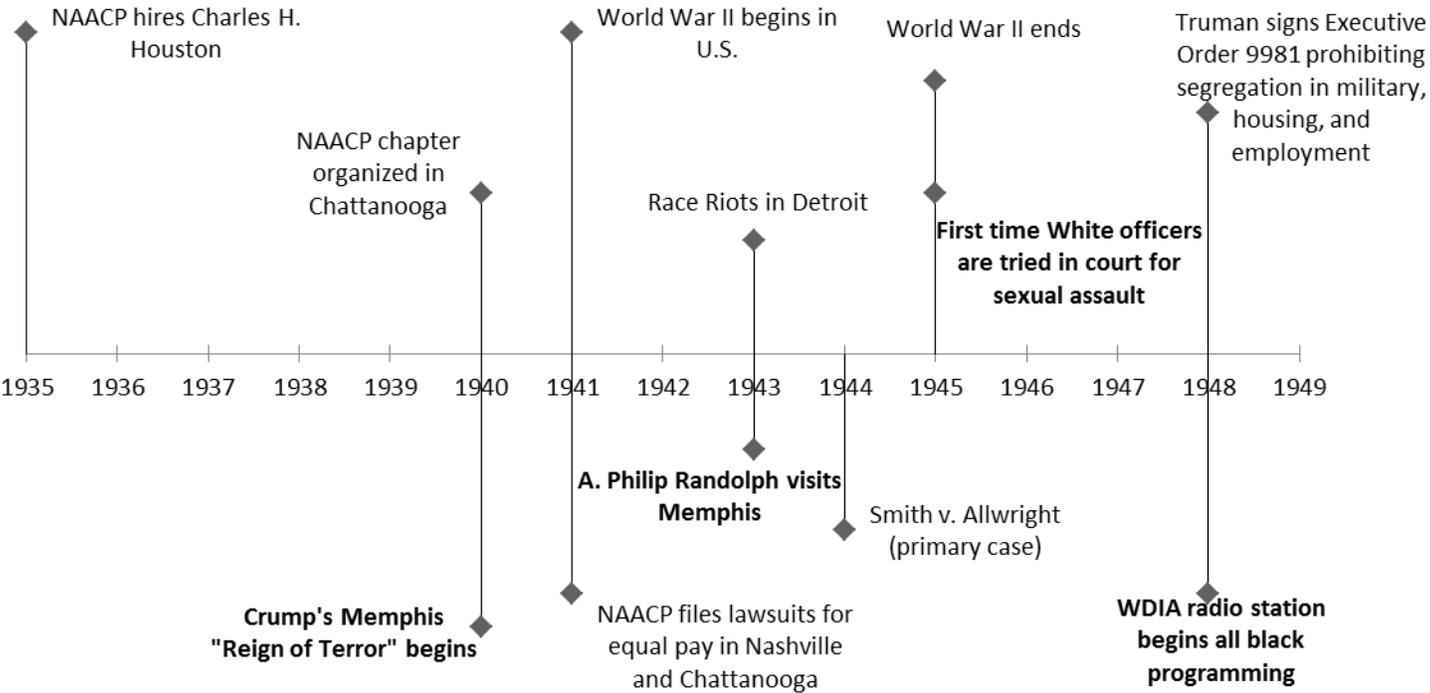
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Abstract:

As the public school systems of Memphis and Shelby County embark on a new trail, it is imperative that students receive an education that is second to none. *Strides for Equality* serves as a supplemental resource guide for teachers who wish to enhance the state mandated curriculum on Civil Rights. The resource guide chronicles Memphis during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Teaching the civil rights struggle in Memphis will enlighten students about efforts put forth by Memphians to better their city, thus making a lasting impression in their lives.

# Strides for Equality: The 1940s



## **Prominent People of the 1940s**



### **Lloyd T. Binford (1868-1957)**

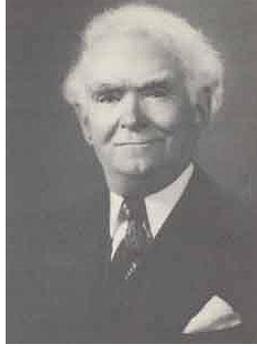
Lloyd Binford was born in Duck Hill, Mississippi. Although his formal education ended after the fifth grade, Binford was a natural businessman. In 1916, Binford became president of the Columbia Mutual Life Insurance Company and moved its headquarters to Memphis. In 1925, he began construction of the Columbia Mutual Tower, known today as the Lincoln American Tower.

Personally selected by Mayor E.H. Crump, Binford controlled the Memphis Censor Board from 1928 to 1955. The Memphis Censor Board was formed in 1921 to “censor, supervise, regulate, or prohibit any entertainment of immoral, lewd, or lascivious character, as well as performances inimical to the public safety, health, morals, or welfare.” Before Binford took control, the Censor Board rarely enforced its regulations. However, after joining the board, it was Binford’s decision that mattered. Binford was known for censoring movies in an effort to maintain social control and Southern ideals at a time of enormous instability. He had the power to ban any production he pleased, especially those pertaining to African Americans. One particular film that was banned was *The Imitation of Life*, which Binford banned due to the portrayal of African Americans as dissatisfied with their lives in the south. Other films that were banned were *Jesse James*, *The Return of Frank James*, and *The Outlaw*. Binford did not allow films that depicted African American independence, assertiveness, or any criticism of southern race and class relations. He took his authority so far that *The New York Times* denounced him and ridiculed Memphis for giving him so much power.

Binford suffered from health problems and resigned from his position several times. His supporters, however, always persuaded him to continue on the board. In 1956, he finally resigned as head of the Censor Board. He died the following year.

#### Additional Sources:

- [Crossroads to Freedom - Memphis World - Censor Binford Still Undecided about Film Ban](#)
- [Crossroads to Freedom - Memphis World - Imitation of Life Banned by Memphis Censor Board](#)
- [The Tennessee Encyclopedia - Lloyd T. Binford and the Memphis Board of Censors](#)
- [Memphis Flyer - Banned in Memphis](#)



### **Edward Hull “Boss” Crump (1874-1954)**

E. H. Crump was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi but moved to Memphis at the age of seventeen. He entered politics in 1905 as a councilman, and in 1909, he was elected mayor of Memphis. Although he never gave a single speech during his reign, Crump was a cunning administrator and used his political power to his benefit during the Great Depression.

Crump was known for building a political machine, including engagement in illegal activities such as gambling, prostitution, and alcohol. The business of the underworld brought Crump a large amount of money, which he used to maintain control. In 1915, however, Crump was forced to resign from office after he refused to enforce the prohibition law in Memphis.

Crump did not return to politics until 1927. He no longer ran for positions, but instead, endorsed several candidates, ultimately gaining control of elections. Eventually, Crump demanded absolute control over Memphis and Shelby County, and his wish was granted. Due to the Great Depression, Crump instilled fear in the citizens of Memphis. Many thought if they opposed his political machine, they would not receive work or assistance.

Although Crump carried out the day-to-day services needed to run a city, it all came at the cost of social freedom. All criticism and public opposition to Boss Crump was prohibited. He maintained his power until his death in 1954.

Additional sources:

- [The Tennessee Encyclopedia - Edward Hull "Boss" Crump](#)
- [Verissima Productions - Broadcast & Educational - Citizens Not Subjects! \(Documentary Clip\)](#)



### **Julia Britton Hooks (1852-1942)**

Julia Hooks was born free in Frankfort, Kentucky. In 1869, she enrolled in Berea College, an interracial program that allowed her to study music and instruct white students in piano. Britton moved to Greenville, Mississippi in 1872 to teach school. She married Sam Wertles soon after, but he died in 1873 during the yellow fever epidemic. In 1876, she moved to Memphis to teach and married Charles Hooks.

Julia Hooks was a leader in the cultural and educational advancement of African Americans. In 1883, she and Anna Church, wife of Robert Church, Sr., created the Liszt-Mullard Club to promote classical music and raise money for scholarships for African American musicians. She also founded the Hooks School of Music and later opened the Hooks Cottage School in 1892.

Hooks was a charter member of the Memphis chapter of the NAACP and the grandmother of Benjamin Hooks. She died at the age of ninety.

#### Additional Resources:

- [The Tennessee Encyclopedia - Julia Britton Hooks](#)



### **Blair T. Hunt (1888-1978)**

Blair T. Hunt was a Memphis native and is remembered for his tenure as principal of Booker T. Washington. He was also the pastor of Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church from 1921 to 1973. Hunt received his formal education at LeMoyne Institute, Morehouse College, Tennessee State University and Harvard University. A veteran of World War I who experienced the inhumane treatment of black soldiers, he became a pioneer in the fight for equality.

Although he was criticized, Hunt served as a liaison between the African American community of Memphis and the Boss Crump administration. He made the effort to keep the voices of African Americans alive. Hunt founded the Memphis Urban League and the “Negro YMCA.” He set the stage for several Memphis civil rights activists by effectively navigating through the social and political realms of Memphis.

#### Additional Resources:

- [Crossroads to Freedom - Memphis World Articles Pertaining to Blair T. Hunt](#)
- [WKNO of Memphis - Memphis Movement - Blair T. Hunt](#)



### **George Washington Lee (1894-1976)**

George W. Lee was born in Indianola, Mississippi and received his Bachelor's degree at Alcorn A&M College. After graduation, he joined the Army. During his service, Lee was commissioned a Lieutenant. He was one of the few black soldiers to achieve that distinction. After the war, he returned to Memphis and opened an insurance business on Beale Street. He joined the Republican Party and worked closely with Robert Church, Jr. Lee also cooperated with the Crump administration.

Additional Resources:

[The Tennessee Encyclopedia - George Washington Lee](#)



**John B. Martin (circa 1880-unknown)**

J. B. Martin was a well-known Memphian born in Mississippi. Martin, along with his three brothers, moved to Memphis to attend LeMoyne College. He and his brothers became important figures in medicine, politics, and sports. J. B., specifically, owned his own drug store on Beale Street in 1920, and he was an active Republican. Martin was also co-owner and a club officer for the Memphis Red Sox. After a quarrel with Boss Crump, who was a Democrat, J. B. was forced to leave Memphis and move to Chicago where he eventually served as President of the Negro American League.

Additional Resources:

- [WKNO of Memphis - Memphis Moments - The Martin Brothers](#)



### **Joseph E. Walker (1880-1958)**

Joseph E. Walker was born in Tillman, Mississippi. He conquered a childhood of poverty and fought his way through college and medical school. He practiced medicine in Indianola, Mississippi from 1906 to 1919. Walker was elected president of Delta Penny Savings Bank in 1912, and in 1917, he became president of Mississippi Life Insurance Company, which relocated to Memphis in 1920. In 1923, J. E. Walker, A. W. Willis, and J. T. Wilson established Universal Life Insurance Company in Memphis. He also founded Tri-State Bank of Memphis in 1946 along with his son A. Maceo Walker.

Walker was a civic leader in Memphis and helped finance the South-West Memphis Walker Homes Subdivision. In 1926, he organized the Memphis Negro Chamber of Commerce and was elected president of the National Negro Insurance Association. He was appointed president of the National Negro Business League in 1939. During the 1930s, JET Magazine, listed him as one of the “10 Most Influential Negroes in America.”

#### Additional Resources:

- [Crossroads to Freedom - Memphis World Articles Pertaining to J. E. Walker](#)
- [The Tennessee Encyclopedia - Joseph E. Walker](#)



### **Nathaniel D. Williams (1907-1983)**

Nat D. Williams was born in Memphis on Beale Street. After receiving his Bachelor's and Master's degrees, he returned to Memphis and in 1930 began to teach at Booker T. Washington High School. He taught history and social studies and participated in the school's extracurricular activities. Williams edited the school paper, trained the pep squad, and assisted with senior speeches.

Williams was also a longtime host of the Palace Theater's Amateur Night on Beale Street. Between 1938 and 1960, nearly all of the major talent that came out of Memphis was introduced and supported by Nat D. Williams.

In 1948, Williams became the first African American disc jockey at WDIA radio station. By 1949, WDIA became the first station in the United States with an entire cast of African American disc jockeys. In 1951, Williams was selected by the Tri-State Defender as their first city editor. He had practiced journalism since 1931 with his writing for the Memphis World and began contributing to the Chicago Defender in 1937. Throughout his life, Nat D. Williams continued to be an innovative thinker and shared his talent with his readers and listeners.

#### **Additional Resources:**

[Crossroads to Freedom - Memphis World Articles Pertaining to Nat D. Williams](#)

[The Tennessee Encyclopedia - WDIA](#)

[Crossroads to Freedom - Memphis World Articles Pertaining to WDIA](#)

[Music Memphis - Nat D. Williams and WDIA](#)

[Memphis Music Hall of Fame - Nat D. Williams](#)

## **Events**

### **Background information:**

The Civil Rights Movement, as we know it, began in 1935, when the NAACP hired Charles Hamilton Houston, dean of law school at Howard University and a law graduate of Harvard University, to develop a legal strategy to attack Jim Crow. Houston's expertise contributed to NAACP's mastermind strategy that consisted of four tactics: (1) attacking Jim Crow higher education, (2) suing in federal court against discrimination in pay between white and African American teachers (who were paid 25 percent less even with the same college degrees), (3) assisting African American citizens in fighting discrimination in the criminal justice system; and (4) filing suits against Jim Crow in secondary schools.

### **1935:**

The National Negro Congress, an organization focused on black liberation, is founded, with A. Philip Randolph as president. The NAACP and Donald Murray win *Murray versus Maryland* to begin desegregation of higher education.

### **1936:**

The Southern Youth Conference is founded. Tennessee begins out-of-state scholarships for African American to prevent the NAACP from forcing the desegregation of graduate and professional programs at the University of Tennessee.

### **1937:**

*Redmond versus Tennessee* is filed in an unsuccessful attempt to desegregate University of Tennessee graduate program.

### **1938:**

The Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW) is founded to fight Southern poll taxes and Jim Crow.

### **1939:**

A. Philip Randolph and his Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) fought to get the Black union recognized and gain equal pay in 1939. The members of the union agreed to donate an hour's pay to help the NAACP file the lawsuits against Jim Crow.

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### **1940:**

The Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW) moves to Chattanooga for its second biennial meeting; an NAACP chapter is organized in Chattanooga by Perry A. Stephens and others. **E.H. Crump** begins what is known as the Memphis "Reign of Terror".

### **E.H. "Boss" Crump**

From the early 1900s to the mid-1950s, E.H. Crump used the large black voting bloc to elect his machine's candidates, but refused to allow the black community to elect black candidates. During the 1940s, Crump's political machine targeted people and campaigns that either challenged or criticized his bossism.

In Memphis, in contrast to Mississippi, African Americans could vote so long as they paid the annual poll tax required by the Tennessee Constitution- or if Boss Edward H. Crump's Democratic political machine paid for them. In fall of 1940, the Crump machine launched an unabashed harassment campaign, dubbed the Memphis "reign of terror" by civil liberties proponents, aimed at repressing black republicans, subduing labor activism, and exerting social control over incoming migrants.

Dr. JB Martin, a local pharmacist, was forced to leave Memphis after he publicly campaigned for a Republican candidate. In October, Crump ordered the cancellation of all black Republican rallies in Memphis; yet, Dr. Martin refused to cancel a rally. Just days before the 1940 national elections, Public Safety commissioner Joseph Boyle, under orders from Crump, requested police surveillance and customer searches at Dr. Martin's South Memphis Drug Company and Elmer Atkinson's Beale Street establishment. Both establishments served as social and political hubs for African Americans. Martin's drugstore, which doubled as a US postal substation, represented a particularly prominent symbol of achievement. This harassment continued for six weeks, after which police maintained a regular watch outside the two sites.

In the 1948 elections, the black and labor union votes primarily led to the defeat of the Crump ticket; however, to put an end to the style of politics Crump practiced, voters in Memphis approved a referendum which changed the form of city government on November 8, 1966.

Crump died in 1954. Despite his notoriety, many places in Memphis are named in honor of Crump: E.H. Crump Boulevard, Crump Stadium, the Crump statue in Overton Park, and Crump Elementary.

### **1941:**

The United States enters World War II. Alexander Looby, Thurgood Marshall, and other NAACP lawyers file *Harold E. Thomas versus Nashville Schools* and *C.B. Robinson versus Chattanooga Schools*, forcing equal pay for black and white teachers. On March 11, the George Washington Carver Museum is dedicated at the Tuskegee Institute.

### **1942:**

The court case of *Joseph Michael versus Tennessee* convinces Tennessee to begin building graduate programs at Tennessee Agricultural & Industrial College. SCHW moves from Chattanooga to Nashville. Tennessee opens a graduate school at Tennessee Agricultural & Industrial to prevent enrollment of African Americans at University of Tennessee. A. Philip Randolph threatens a March on Washington (MOW); President Roosevelt issues Executive Order No. 8802, forbidding discrimination in employment.

### **1943:**

The Southern Regional Council is founded in Atlanta; the new president of Tennessee Agricultural & Industrial College, W.S. Davis, is told to make the school comparable "to University of Tennessee for white students." In June, **race riots** in Detroit and Harlem cause forty deaths and seven hundred injuries. Mayor Crump would not allow A. Philip Randolph to speak in 1943 on behalf of Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters due to his public critique of Crump's relationship with the African American community in Memphis.

## **Race Riots/ Censorship**

In 1943, race riots coincided with the release of two Hollywood hit musicals with all-black casts, *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather*. In Memphis, Public Service Commissioner Fredericks was concerned about white audiences viewing such films, thus issuing a new censorship policy.

The 1921 municipal code had already been established banning “immoral, lewd, or lascivious motion pictures and other entertainment.” However, following the riots, the board adopted explicitly racial restrictions regarding what could and could not be shown to white audiences.

### **Revised Censorship Policy:**

WHEREAS, serious public disorders and race riots have occurred in other sections of the country in areas where white and colored troops are stationed by reason of the exhibition of moving pictures with all negro casts or with casts of negro actors performing in roles not depicting the ordinary roles played by negro citizens;

And WHEREAS, large numbers of white and colored troops and seamen are now stationed in the City of Memphis and the necessity of preserving the public peace from outbreaks of violence due to racial prejudices now exist[s].

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that hereafter no moving picture shall be exhibited at any moving picture theater catering to white or to white and colored audiences in which an all negro cast appears or in which roles are depicted by negro actors or actresses not ordinarily performed by members of the colored race in real life.

**-Public Service Commissioner Fredericks**

In 1945, the Memphis Board of Censor’s chairman, Lloyd T. Binford, banned *Imitation of Life* (1934) because he asserted, the characters, Peola and Delilah, showed too much unhappiness about the lives of African Americans. Paradoxically, censorship prompted Black Memphians to develop a more critical perspective toward the issues of race, gender, and sexuality that were raised, but not resolved by the images and missing images on the motion picture screen.

### **1944:**

Challenged by the case of *Smith versus Allwright*, the winners of primary elections were no longer allowed to be promoted in subsequent general elections. The US Supreme Court held that the exclusion of black voters from party primary elections was a “state action” that violated the 15th amendment.

### **1945:**

Memphis: Statements in the local black newspaper pressured some black elites to speak out against the police rapes of two young women, and to push city officials--part of the Boss Crump political machine--to prosecute the policemen. The white patrolmen forced women into squad cars by claiming that the women were streetwalkers or intoxicated, then sexually molested them. Mothers of the young Memphis women, both heads of their households, contacted civil rights leaders, pressed charges, and submitted testimony. Their daughters withstood a court trial, the first in Memphis to try white men on charges of sexually assaulting black women. However, the men were acquitted, because the jury questioned the reputations of the young women based on their upbringings by single mothers.

### **1946:**

In September, a delegation of African American leaders, including NAACP executive director Walter White, met with President Truman in the White House to discuss the rise of racial violence occurring across the American South. In December, Truman issued an executive order creating the President’s Committee on Civil Rights to investigate civil rights abuses and propose federal statutes that would prevent them in the future.

### **1947:**

Tennessee and other southern states form the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) to contract with Meharry Medical College and other universities to provide medical, dental, and professional education to African American citizens; thus, preventing the desegregation of white universities in the South, including University of Tennessee. Jackie Robinson breaks Major League Baseball's barrier against colored players when he debuts at first base for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

### **1948:**

In January, the Freedom Train sponsored by the American Heritage Foundation, altered its itinerary to avoid Memphis after Mayor James Pleasants Jr. declared that he refused to concede to the foundation's desegregation policy for visitors to the train. President Harry S. Truman issues Executive Order No. 9981, prohibiting segregation and discrimination in the American military; he also orders no discrimination in housing and federal housing loans. In October, radio station **WDIA** begins black programming and hires **first African American disc jockey**. In November, Memphis hires **black policemen** to patrol Beale Street.

### **WDIA**

WDIA Memphis converted its entire format from classical and country to black appeal programming, becoming the first radio station in the U.S. to fully devote itself to African American listeners. WDIA owners John Pepper and Bert Ferguson initially converted WDIA to black appeal programming as a way to avoid bankruptcy, not to address racial discrimination. The two men were not “enamored of African Americans,” **Nat D. Williams** claimed, but they were innovative businessmen who “love[d] progress” and had identified the “Negro Market” as “one of the most neglected markets in the Mid-south.” WDIA started its first segment hosted by an African American woman, **Willa Monroe**, in August 1949. Monroe, a well-known socialite, hosted *Tan Town Homemakers*. **Martha Jean “the Queen” Steinberg** also proved to be very popular, becoming WDIA's most successful female DJ and, ultimately, one of the best-known women radio personalities nationally.

### **Black Memphis Policemen**

The issue of hiring African American policemen has long been a concern of the African American community in Memphis. From 1867 to 1895 blacks served with distinction in the Memphis police department, most notably during the 1878 yellow fever epidemic. However, these men were often given minor assignments such as monitoring street activity and were not uniformed police officers.

Following Memphis' recovery from the yellow fever epidemic, the racial dynamics of the police force returned to its standard practices. Yet, African Americans strongly desired black police officers and were willing to exchange votes for them. Many campaigns revolved around candidates' responses to the idea of hiring African American policemen. Mayor Pleasant refused to hire African American police stating, “We have made no promises and right here in the face of the election, we would not think of making one.” Hence, the refusal to hire African American police was a turning point in the campaign.

The Colored Democrats Club, which had been the African American wing of the Crump organization, endorsed Estes Kefauver for the Tennessee Senate. However, following the securing of Kefauver's Democratic nomination, James Mosby was killed by police, which caused various groups such

as Episcopal Church Pastors Alliance, the NAACP, and the East Memphis Citizens Club to further appeal for the hiring of African American officers.

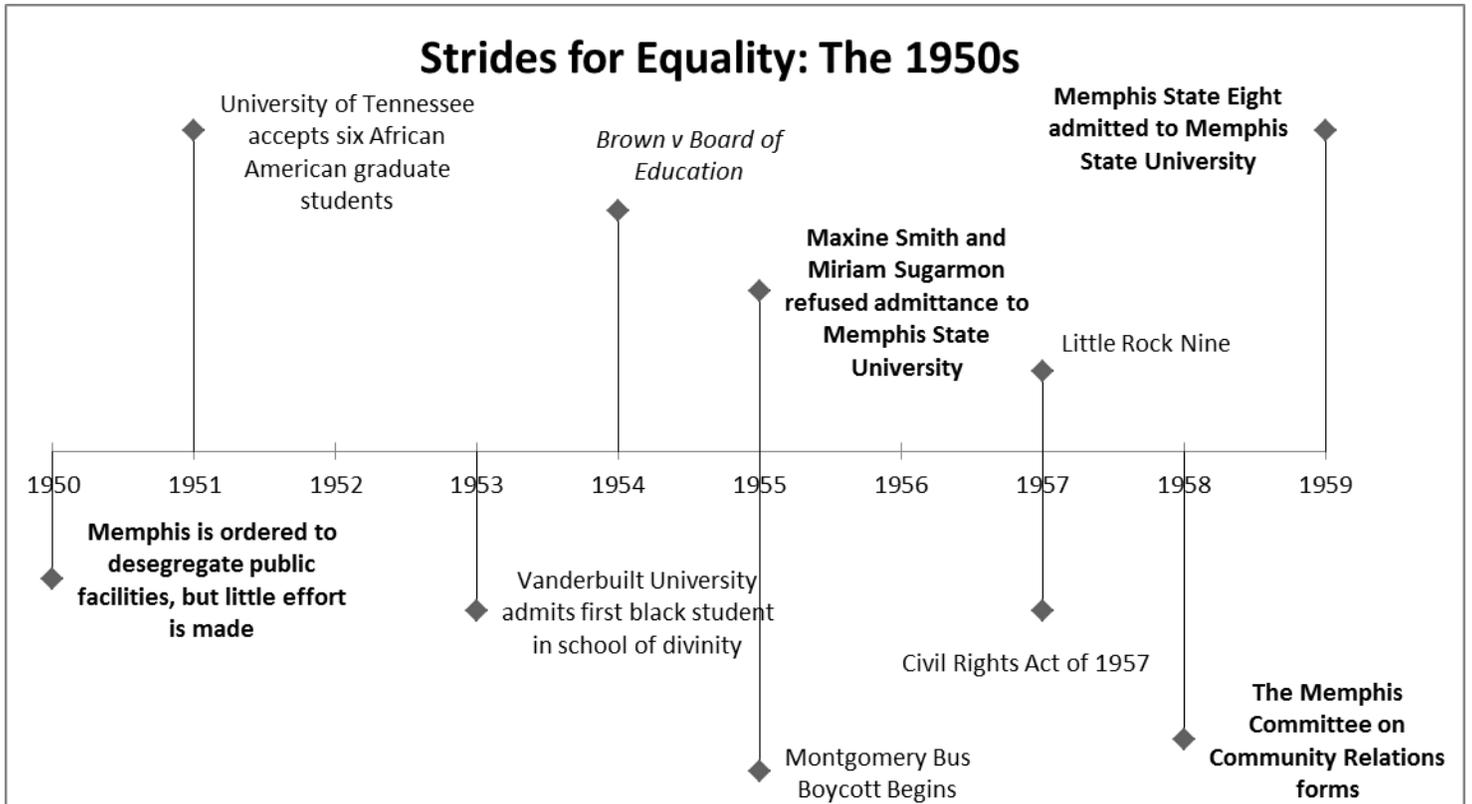
Fire and Police Commissioner of Memphis, Joseph Boyle, announced to the press on September 9, 1948 that applications would be taken from African Americans who wished to join the police force. In his prepared statement Boyles took pains to ensure that the decision would not be viewed as an endorsement of black civil rights: "Negro police won't settle the negro problem by any means, when three candidates for the presidency of the United States are advocating FEPC [Fair Employment Practice] and the elimination of the Jim Crow Law. In fact, they are advocating complete social equality, which will not happen in Memphis..."

On November 5, a segregated roll call was held for nine African American police officers. A month later thirteen African Americans began training to become patrolmen.

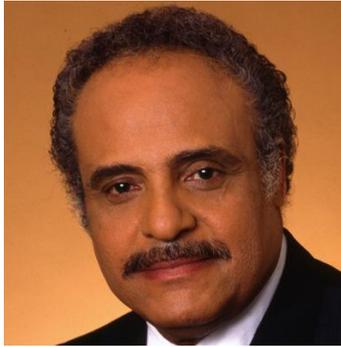
### **1949:**

George W. Lee (1894-1976), a well-known businessman, politician, and writer, broadcast a radio program on WHBQ from his Atlanta Life Insurance Company office on Beale Street. By the forties Memphis Blacks regularly voted Democratic, but black Republicanism also persisted, and as late as 1956 Lieutenant Lee secured a majority for Eisenhower in the local black precincts. Blacks deserted Lee to follow the younger civil rights leaders in Memphis who had recommended Democrats because of their stronger civil rights program and their promise of a \$1.25 minimum wage.

## Strides for Equality: The 1950s



## **Prominent People of the 1950s**



**Benjamin L. Hooks (1925-2010)**

Benjamin L. Hooks was born in Memphis, Tennessee. He came from a family that valued education and encouraged participation in community affairs. Upon graduation from high school, Hooks attended LeMoyne College, but was drafted to serve in the Army shortly after. He returned to the United States after his service ended, and earned his law degree in 1948 from DePaul University in Chicago.

After joining the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Hooks was ordained a Baptist minister in 1956. He became a pioneer in restaurant sit-ins and other protests sponsored by the NAACP. In 1972, Hooks became the first African American to be appointed to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). He was elected Executive Director of the NAACP in 1976. Under his leadership, the organization welcomed thousands of new members. Throughout his life, Hooks pressed the issue of civil rights. He died in 2010 at the age of 85.

Additional Resources:

- [Crossroads to Freedom - Interview with Benjamin Hooks and Frances Hooks](#)
- [Crossroads to Freedom - Interview with Benjamin Hooks](#)
- [The Tennessee Encyclopedia - Benjamin Lawson Hooks](#)
- [The Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change - About Ben Hooks](#)
- [The Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change - Duty of the Hour \(Documentary\)](#)



### **Hosea T. Lockard (1920-2011)**

H. T. Lockard was born in Ripley, Tennessee. Due to school segregation in Ripley, he attended school in Memphis. After serving in the Army in the early 1940s, Lockard completed his Bachelor's degree at LeMoyne College in Memphis and earned his law degree from Lincoln University in St. Louis in 1951.

In 1955, H. T. Lockard became president of the Memphis Branch of the NAACP. He held this position until 1958. He established a successful law practice and became the first African American member of a Tennessee governor's cabinet in 1967. He served as administrative assistant to Governor Buford Ellington until 1971.

Lockard later became a judge and served on the Shelby County Criminal Court from 1975-1994. He died in 2011 due to natural causes.

#### Additional Resources:

- [Capitol Words - Honoring H. T. Lockard](#)
- [Crossroads to Freedom - Article from Memphis World Newspaper](#)
- [The Tri-State Defender - Greater Metro - Judge Hosea T. Lockard Passes](#)



**Vasco Smith (1920-2009)**

Vasco Smith was born in Harvard, Arkansas. However, he grew up in Memphis, and graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in 1937. Smith earned his Bachelor's degree from LeMoyne College and his dental degree from Meharry Medical College in 1945. He opened his first dental office in Dyersburg, Tennessee. Vasco met Maxine Atkins in 1949, and the two wed in 1953. Together they produced social and political change during the civil rights movement.



**Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr. (1929- )**

Russell B. Sugarmon was born in Memphis, Tennessee and graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in 1946. After a year at Morehouse College, he transferred, eventually earning his Bachelor's degree from Rutgers University in 1950. He later earned his law degree from Harvard Law School in 1953. Sugarmon served in the Army for the next two years. After returning to the United States, he did graduate work in finance at Boston University before entering private practice in Memphis in 1956. In 1959, Sugarmon ran for public works commissioner. He also ran for mayor, but lost.

Sugarmon later became a founding partner in the Memphis law firm of Ratner, Sugarmon, Lucas, Willis, and Caldwell. He was elected to the Tennessee Democratic Party Executive in 1964; and two years later, ran successfully for the State Senate. Sugarmon was an active member of several organizations, including the NAACP and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). He was honored by both organizations for his pioneering efforts and contributions to Memphis.

Additional Resources:

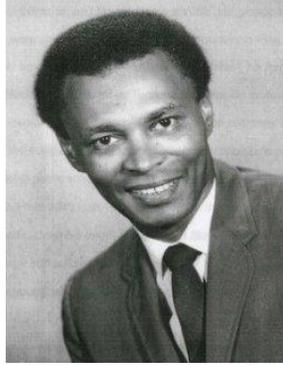
- [Crossroads to Freedom -Interview with Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.](#)
- [Crossroads to Freedom - Brief Biographical Sketch of Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr.](#)
- [The History Makers - Russell B. Sugarmon](#)
- [Memphis Library - The Memphis Room - Russell B. Sugarmon \(Video\)](#)

### **Jesse H. Turner, Sr. (1920-1989)**

Jesse Turner, Sr. was a major civil rights activists and former president of Tri-State Bank in Memphis. He had a long dedicated service to the NAACP, which began when he was a student at LeMoyne College. Turner even served as president for a period of time. He is known for his desegregation efforts during the 1950s and 60s. Turner was the first African American certified public accountant in Tennessee. He was also the first African American to chair the Shelby County Board of Commissioners.

#### Additional Resources:

- [Crossroads to Freedom - Memphis World Article - Jesse Turner is Man of the Hour](#)
- [Crossroads to Freedom - Interview with Jesse H. Turner](#)



**Archie Walker "A.W." Willis, Jr. (1925-1988)**

A. W. Willis was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1925. In 1950, he received his Bachelor's degree from Talladega College. He also received a law degree from the University of Wisconsin in 1953. He opened the first integrated law firm in Memphis in the mid-1950s. He served as a NAACP lawyer in the early 1960s during the battle to desegregate Memphis City Schools. In 1964, Willis became the first African American elected to the Tennessee General Assembly since the 1880s.

Willis served on many city, state, and national committees and commissions including Tennessee's first Human Rights Commission in 1965 and the National Civil Rights Museum Commission. He was also a member of the Memphis Committee on Community Relations. The Auction Avenue Bridge in Memphis was renamed the A. W. Willis Bridge in his honor. Willis died in Memphis in 1988.

Additional Resources:

- [Tennessee Encyclopedia - A. W. Willis](#)
- [Crossroads to Freedom - Interview with A. W. Willis, Jr.](#)

## **Events**

**1950:**

NAACP lawyers file secondary school desegregation cases in South Carolina, Maryland, Kansas, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington DC. Civil rights attorney **Avon N. Williams, Jr.** files *J. McSwain versus Anderson County, Tennessee* and *Gray versus University of Tennessee*

**Avon N. Williams, Jr. (1921-1994)**

Avon Williams, Jr. exhibited an interest in civil rights cases early in his legal career. During the turbulent decades of the 1950s and 1960s, Williams involved himself, without remuneration, in various civil rights suits--many of which reached the state and federal supreme courts. These cases involved such issues as school desegregation, public accommodations, employment and housing discrimination, and police brutality. He had been in solo practice less than a year when he filed suit for four black students applying for admission to the University of Tennessee graduate school. This case, *Gray versus University of Tennessee*, reached the U. S. Supreme Court; the university capitulated and admitted the young men. In 1950, Williams, Looby, and Carl Cowan filed the Anderson County school desegregation case (*McSwain versus Board of Anderson County, Tennessee*), which was the first such public school case in Tennessee.

## Additional Resources:

[The Tennessee Encyclopedia - Avon N. Williams, Jr.](#)

[Tennessee State University - Avon Nyanza Williams, Jr.](#)

**1951:**

University of Tennessee is forced to accept six black graduate students rather than fight the *Gray Case*. Tennessee A&I State College is upgraded to Tennessee A&I State University to help fight off Jim Crow lawsuits. On November 3, L.O. Swingler, the former editor of the *Memphis World*, published the first issue of the *Tri-State Defender*. The paper helped develop black social and political consciousness during the period; emphasized local news; and gave black leaders an opportunity to shape opinions

**1952:**

Federal Judge Robert Taylor of Knoxville delays the *McSwain versus Anderson County* school desegregation case in anticipation that the U.S. Supreme Court will soon rule on all school desegregation cases.

**1953:**

Scarritt College and Vanderbilt University admit the first black graduate students in divinity.

**1954:**

On May 17, in *Brown versus Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court orders school desegregation in five states and lays the groundwork for national desegregation.

**1955:**

On May 31, the US Supreme Court issues Brown II, which urges school desegregation “with all deliberate speed. The case *Robert W. Kelly et al. versus Board of Education of Nashville, Tennessee* is filed. A group of southern congressmen issues the Southern Manifesto opposing the Brown decision; Tennessee congressmen Albert Gore, Estes Kefauver, and J. Percy Priest refuse to sign it. Nashville’s Catholic schools voluntarily desegregate. In August, Oak Ridge schools desegregate voluntarily. In December, the Montgomery bus boycott begins. Black Memphis leaders begin a political civil rights movement, when Maxine Atkins Smith and Miriam Sugarmon are refused admittance to Memphis State College

**1956:**

On August 23, Clinton High School in Anderson County, Tennessee, desegregates under a court order; and eleven African American students are enrolled there. On October 5, the Tennessee Supreme Court says that *Brown* nullifies Tennessee’s school segregation law. The U.S. Supreme Court orders Montgomery buses to desegregate in *Gayle et al versus Browser*. In December, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) is founded by Martin Luther King, Jr. and others to fight Jim Crow in the South. Blacks in Memphis challenge Jim Crow buses.

**1957:**

The **Civil Rights Act of 1957** is passed by congress to further strengthen and support Black voting rights. In May, Bobby L. Cain becomes first African American to graduate from Clinton High School. On September 9, Nashville City Schools desegregate under federal court order; that same month, radicals bomb the Hattie Cotton Public School in Nashville.

**1958:**

In January, the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC) is founded by Kelly Miller Smith and other civil rights leaders. James M. Lawson Jr. moves to Tennessee and begins nonviolence workshops. In March buses in Nashville desegregate. The Memphis Committee on Community Relations (MCCR) forms in the fall.

**Memphis Committee on Community Relations**

The MCCR was a biracial committee organized by Lucius Burch in the fall of 1958. The committee’s mission was to form an interracial group consisting of black and white power elite to provide reliable communication between the races and moderate leadership for preserving law and order during the desegregation crisis. Prominent African American members were Jesse H. Turner, Dr. Vasco Smith, Russell Sugarmon, Jr., and A.W. Willis, Jr. In the 1960s, MCCR was replaced by an official Human Relations Commission appointed by the city and the county governments. On April 30, 1968, approval of the new Memphis and Shelby County Human Relations Commission marked the final retirement of the old municipal reformers from organized civic leadership.

**1959:**

In October, the Nashville Student Movement is organized by local college students. In November, the NCLC, Kelly Miller Smith, James M. Lawson and other local college students begin precise training for non-violence tactics to desegregate downtown Nashville. **Eight African American students** are admitted to Memphis State. Washington R. Butler, Jr. becomes the first African American elected to the Oak Ridge Town Council in Tennessee.

Additional Resources:

[OakRidgeTN.gov - Washington R. Butler, Jr.](#)

**Memphis State Eight:**



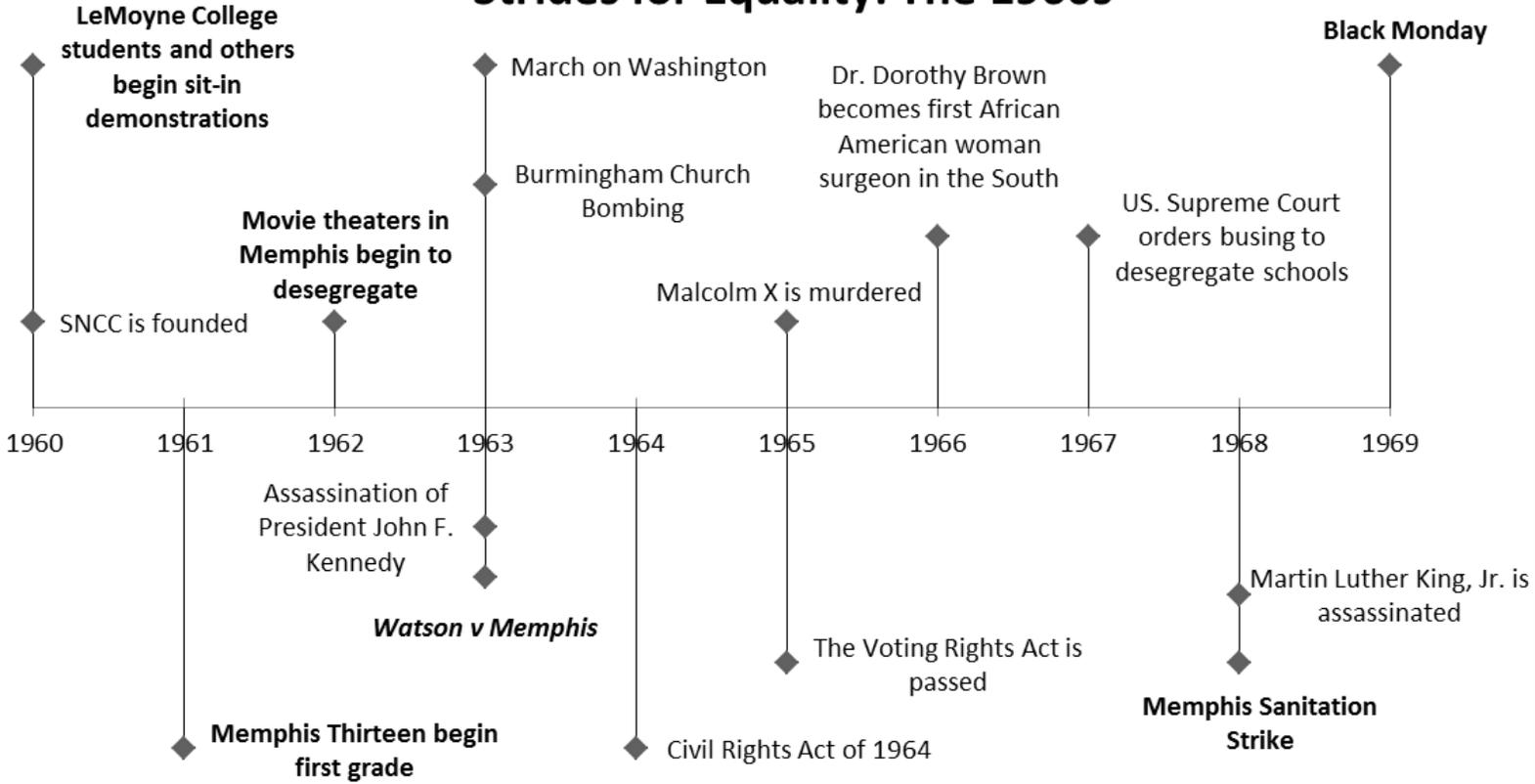
Additional Resources:

[The Commercial Appeal - Memphis State 8 were Torchbearers for the Integration at University](#)

[The University of Memphis Magazine - Eight Who Changed History](#)

[Vimeo - Memphis State Eight \(Documentary\)](#)

# Strides for Equality: The 1960s



## **Prominent People of the 1960s**



**Lucius E. Burch, Jr. (1912-1996)**

Lucius Burch, Jr. was born in a town outside of Nashville. He spent his childhood in Nashville but lived in Alaska for a short period of time. It was in Alaska that he developed his passion for the preservation of nature. He attended college and law school at Vanderbilt University. He moved to Memphis in 1936 to join the firm of Burch, Minor and McKay. He eventually inherited the practice.

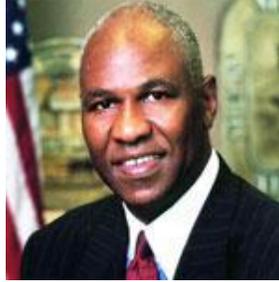
Throughout his life, he dedicated time to outdoor life and the civil rights movement. Burch was a Democrat and strongly opposed the Boss Crump administration. He became an active lawyer during the movement and participated in many well-known trials. He represented Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in a successful attempt to lift an injunction prohibiting a protest in Memphis just prior to King's assassination.

Burch was a member of several organizations. He was a founder, charter member, and president of the Memphis Community Relations Council, chairman of the Tennessee Game and Fish Commission, and life member of the NAACP just to name a few. Burch also received many awards during his lifetime, including an honorary doctorate from Rhodes College.

Lucius Burch was an intellectual who committed his life to the well-being of nature and the equal rights of African Americans.

Additional Resources:

- [Crossroads to Freedom - Interview with Lucius Burch](#)
- [Crossroads to Freedom - Interview with Michael Cody](#)
- [The Tennessee Encyclopedia - Lucius E. Burch, Jr.](#)



**Willie W. Herenton (1940- )**

Willie Wilbert Herenton was born in Memphis and graduated from Booker T. Washington High School. After deciding that he wanted to go into education, Herenton attended what is now LeMoyne-Owen College. He received his Bachelor's in 1963 and began to teach. In 1966, he earned his Master's degree from Memphis State University, and at the age of 27, became the youngest principal in the city of Memphis. Herenton completed his Ph.D. at Southern Illinois University in 1971 and became the superintendent of Memphis City Schools.

Dr. Herenton became the first African American mayor of the city of Memphis in 1991. He served until 2009. In 2009, he announced his plans to run for U.S. Congress, but lost in the Democratic Primary to Congressman Steve Cohen. Willie Herenton still resides in Memphis.

Additional Resources:

- [Crossroads to Freedom - Interview with Willie W. Herenton](#)



**Henry Loeb (1920-1992)**

Henry Loeb was a native Memphian and graduated from Kingsbury High School. He served as mayor of Memphis for two terms. His first term lasted from 1960 to 1963, and he was elected for his second term in 1968 to 1972. Loeb gained much national attention in 1968 during the Sanitation Workers' Strike. He died at the age of 71.

Additional Resources:

- [Crossroads to Freedom - Interview with Henry Loeb - July 1968](#)
- [Crossroads to Freedom - Interview with Henry Loeb - September 1968](#)
- [California Newsreel - At the River I Stand \(Documentary Clip\)](#)



### **Maxine Atkins Smith (1929-2013)**

Maxine Smith was born in Memphis, Tennessee. She graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in 1945 and received her Bachelor's degree from Spelman College in 1949. In 1950, Maxine earned her Master's degree from Middlebury College. She became executive secretary of the Memphis Branch of the NAACP in 1962.

With a dedication to education, Smith helped organize the desegregation of Memphis public schools, and in 1960, thirteen African American children enrolled in four previously all white elementary schools. Smith is also famous for the Black Monday student boycotts that lasted from 1969 to 1972.

In 1971, Maxine was appointed a position on the Memphis Board of Education, which she held until her retirement in 1995. Consequently, she became the president of the Memphis Board of Education in 1991. She lived a life of commitment to civil rights. Maxine Smith died in 2013.

#### Additional Resources:

- [The Tennessee Encyclopedia - Maxine Atkins Smith](#)
- [Crossroads to Freedom - Interview with Maxine Smith](#)
- [The History Makers - Maxine Smith](#)



### **Miriam DeCosta-Willis (1934- )**

Miriam DeCosta-Willis was born in Florence, Alabama, but graduated from Westover School in Connecticut. She received her Bachelor's degree from Wellesley College. She married Russell Sugarmon, Jr. in 1955; and later married A. W. Willis, Jr. In 1960, DeCosta-Willis completed her Master's degree at the Johns Hopkins University. She also earned her Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins in 1967.

Throughout her life, Decosta-Willis has expressed a devotion to education. She worked closely with Maxine Smith during the 1960s in an effort to desegregate Memphis public schools. She also taught at LeMoyné and Owen College and was the first African American to teach at Memphis State University in 1966. DeCosta-Willis chaired the Department of Romance Languages at Howard University and was named Commonwealth Professor of Spanish at George Mason University in 1989. She served as Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of African American Studies at the University of Maryland and retired in 1999.

#### Additional Resources:

- [Memphis World - Articles Pertaining to Miriam DeCosta-Willis](#)
- [The History Makers - Miriam DeCosta-Willis](#)
- [WKNO of Memphis - Memphis Moments - Miriam DeCosta-Willis](#)



**Ethyl H. Venson (1909-1998)**

Ethyl Venson was a native Memphian and graduated from LeMoyne College. In 1934, she and Dr. R. Q. Venson wed and later founded the Cotton Makers' Jubilee. Ethyl served as the Jubilee's first queen and later as director from 1970 to 1985. In 1966, Ethyl became the first African American to be appointed to the board of the Memphis Housing Authority. She was later elected as chair of the board in 1972.

In addition, Governor Winfield Dunn appointed her to the Tennessee Commission on the Status of Women. Mrs. Vinson dedicated her time to serving her community. She worked with the American Red Cross, the Memphis Urban League, and the Girls Club, among others. She died in 1998 due to health issues.

Additional Resources:

- [Crossroads to Freedom - Cotton Makers' Jubilee Programs](#)
- [Crossroads to Freedom - Negroes Biography - Ethyl Venson](#)
- [Memphis Library - Dig Memphis - Cotton Makers' Jubilee Collection](#)

## **Events**

## 1960:

On February 13, students launch the first sit-in demonstration in Nashville. On March 4, Nashville police invade First Colored Baptist Church and arrest James M. Lawson. That same month, students begin sit-in demonstrations in Chattanooga, Memphis, and Knoxville. The Nashville movement spreads across the south as the model to follow. In March, **LeMoyne College** students and others begin sit-in demonstrations in Memphis. In April, African American college students found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). On May 10, Nashville begins voluntary desegregation in downtown stores. That same month, citizens in Memphis file *Watson versus Memphis* to force desegregation of all city facilities and parks. In August, Chattanooga begins desegregation of downtown stores. By December, Memphis desegregates buses and libraries, but not swimming pools and other public facilities.

## LeMoyne College



LeMoyne students were active participants in efforts to enforce desegregation. The NAACP filed a suit regarding use of the zoo and park in 1959, but not until the student sit-ins of 1960 did the organization begin a suit against the Memphis Board of Education. On March 19, 1960, forty-one students at LeMoyne and Owen Colleges were arrested for entering two public libraries. LeMoyne was the only place in the city where interracial conferences and programs could be held, for the college adopted a policy that “events [would] be opened to the public on the non-segregated basis.” In the past, LeMoyne students met with professors and students at Southwestern organizing Memphis Community Relations Committee (MCRC); however, during the sixties, many of Lemoyne’s students identified more with black power ideals and tactics than those of the NAACP. These students formed the Black United Front. Members of the Black United Front presented grievances about the college administration’s approach to black education, which they considered bourgeois and conformist to the expectations of white society. Their sit-in efforts were a direct result of their differentiating perspective from the typical tactics of elder leaders of the community, causing such people and organizations to acknowledge the changing times and new tactics used by younger activists.

## 1961:

On January 20, President John F. Kennedy, a Democrat, is inaugurated. Schools begin court-ordered desegregation in Chattanooga, rural Davidson County, Knoxville and Memphis (*Northcross versus Memphis Board of Education*). University of Tennessee admits two Negro undergraduates with the threat of a lawsuit, while court-ordered desegregation begins at **Memphis State University**. On September 21, the Interstate Commerce Commission outlaws segregation on buses, trains, etc. October 4, **thirteen African American first-graders** were approved to attend four previously all-white Memphis elementary schools: Bruce, Gordon, Rozelle, and Springdale Elementary.

### **Memphis Thirteen**



Additional Resources:

[BlogSpot - The Memphis 13: The Story of the Civil Rights Movements Smallest Pioneers \(Documentary Clip\)](#)

[The Commercial Appeal - Photo Galleries - Memphis 13](#)

## 1962:

On March 26, *J.H. Turner versus Memphis et al* forces desegregation of restaurants at the Memphis airport. In July, a **civil rights bill** is introduced in Congress. In the *Baker versus Carr* case, the U.S. Supreme Court orders Tennessee to draw legislative districts fairly and according to the “one-man-one-vote” concept. In August, *Mapp versus Chattanooga* (1960) forces desegregation of Chattanooga-Hamilton county schools. **Memphis’ movie theaters** begin to desegregate.

### **Desegregation of Memphis Theaters**

**Lucius Burch** and **Dr. Vasco Smith** met with local theater managers to work out a plan for desegregation that fall. The desegregation process began with a single black couple at the Malco Theatre and gradually progressed to two couples. By April 1963, Smith reported that 14 theaters had been desegregated.



## **Dorothy Brown (1919-2004)**



Dr. Dorothy Brown graduated from Meharry Medical College in 1948, and became the first African American woman to practice general surgery in the South. In 1956, Dr. Brown became the first single woman in Tennessee to be granted the right to become an adoptive parent; and, in 1966 she became the first black woman elected to the Tennessee General Assembly.

Additional Resources:

[National Library of Medicine - Biography - Dr. Dorothy Lavinia Brown](#)

### **1967:**

The **U.S. Supreme Court orders busing** to further desegregate schools. The number of black congressmen increases to forty seats. The NAACP and other civil rights organizations begin to sue corporations for discrimination and biased employment practices. On May 17, Tennessee makes permanent its Human Rights Commission, today's Tennessee Civil Rights Commission. In November, **Joseph O. Patterson** becomes the first African American elected to State Senate.

### **1968:**

A **sanitation strike** begins in Memphis. **The Invaders** are accused of instigating the violence that breaks out during the non-violent protest for the sanitation strike. Martin Luther King, Jr. is murdered in Memphis on April 4, causing riots across the nation. Congress passes the Open Housing Act. In May, Rita Sanders (later Geier), a history instructor at Tennessee State University, and other plaintiffs file the *Rita Sanders versus Gov. Buford Ellington* suit to desegregate higher education in Tennessee.

Additional Resources:

[Prichard Thomas Smith - The Invaders - A Feature Documentary](#)

[I AM A MAN - Documentary Website](#)

## **Memphis Sanitation Strike**

On February 12, 1968, Echol Cole, 35, and Robert Walker, 29, were killed in a garbage truck packer due to a malfunction. These trucks were being phased out, but six were still in use. The two men did not have life insurance or workmen's compensation. As a result, the city paid the families of the men back pay, an additional month's salary, and \$500 toward burial expenses. This incident has often been cited as the cause of the Memphis Sanitation Strike; however, the death of Echol Cole and Robert Walker was the final straw for the Memphis' sanitation workers.

Efforts had been made by African American men employed through the city, years prior to the spring of 1968. T.O. Jones, the head of the Memphis branch of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), worked as a sanitation worker from 1959 to 1963. For years, Jones and other workers organized minor demonstrations and walk-outs in attempt to get better pay and better working conditions.

In January 1964, Jones and a small group of men formed a formal Independent Workers Association, complete with rules and bylaws. Through this organizations work with Pete Sisson, the public works commissioner, small changes were made. The pay scale was standardized and the men received three-wheeled push carts to transport open tubs, so that the men no longer had to carry things on their backs. Sasson also replaced the open bed trucks with mechanical packers and established the policy that the department would continue to work on rainy days, but the choice was up to the men. If they worked, they were paid; if they went home, they were not. Despite all of the efforts the workers were making to gain better working conditions, the resulting changes were minor.

Following the death of Cole and Walker, Memphis sanitation workers decided to take more direct action against the city. The men were earning less than \$70 a week, while New York sanitation men, following their recent strike, received \$160. During rainy weeks, local black workers received far less than \$70. After failed talks with Mayor Henry Loeb and the Memphis City Council, the sanitation workers with the support of the black community and AFSCME began an impromptu strike.

Workers, ministers, and community people raised \$15,000 in less than a week for the strikers. As a result of the strong support of the black community, downtown sales dropped by 35 percent as the black community unified firmly behind the garbage strike. Community members and workers dawned signs as they walked to and from work and other places in the city. The most notable sign has been the "I AM A MAN" sign.

Along with local support, the sanitation workers gained national support from prominent leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. King's support of the strike often overshadows the contributions made by the sanitation workers, especially his untimely death.

While the strike is often mentioned in relation to King's involvement and his death, it is important to acknowledge that the strike came to an end on April 16, 1968, with all 3,000 strikers returning to their jobs. As a result of their efforts, the men earned more suitable pay and working conditions; however, on the down side, the strike terminated organized civic reform in Memphis.

**1969:**

## **Black Monday**

The NAACP organized the Black Mondays which began on October 13, 1969. Because schools were funded on the basis of average daily attendance (ADA), the NAACP decided to ask African American students to stay out of school one day each week in protest of the education system's

racist policies. There were six Black Mondays and on two of these days over 62,000 of the Memphis City Schools' 134,635 children did not attend classes. On other days, tens of thousands of Memphis' African American students stayed home from school. On two Mondays dubbed "Super Black Mondays", over 600 black and a handful of white teachers (out of total 5,874 teachers) also stayed out of school.

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