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Memphis World, 1968 February 10th

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Written by Dr. Charles L. Hughes for the “This Week in 1968” MLK 50 email campaign, which was disseminated to the Rhodes College community in the winter and spring of 2018.

As we revisit the pivotal early months of 1968, we are privileged to be able to consult the *Memphis World*, a Black newspaper published in Memphis and available through the Rhodes digital archives. Every week, we’ll share the issue of the *Memphis World* from 50 years ago as it documented a city, nation and globe in transition. Not only does it give us a glimpse into the history that produced the Sanitation Strike and brought Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to our city, but it demonstrates that these world-changing moments were part of much longer and broader contexts. As we reckon with the #MLK50 moment and beyond, the *Memphis World* offers us a critical resource.

The February 10th issue is headlined by a suit brought against the Memphis Police Department by 15-year-old Miss Rosetta Holman Green, who alleges abuses against herself and other Black people in the city. Alleging violations of her constitutional rights during an investigation, Miss Green’s federal lawsuit hoped to end what she describes as the MPD’s “policy of arbitrarily searching, questioning and abusing indigent Negro citizens.” This lawsuit signaled a broader resistance to aggressive and unfair police practices in Memphis and around the United States that began in the era of slavery and became a key plank in the larger struggle for Civil Rights and Black Power. These objections have not dissipated, and Miss Green’s struggle indicates a specific precedent for the questions that motivate the contemporary #BlackLivesMatter moment.

Additionally, the issue spotlights the continued fight for open housing, which headlined the previous issue and which now continues after the Shelby County government rejected a commitment to fair housing within the city. Led by Squire Jesse H. Turner and others, the *Memphis World* documents local activist groups and national allies who hope to force the city to adopt fair-housing legislation as part of a larger national campaign for equal access to neighborhoods. Just as with the Sanitation Strike and other campaigns, the failure of the government to respond was only an expected early step in a longer struggle.

Also of note is the efforts by neighborhood residents to clean and preserve Zion Cemetery, the city’s oldest and most prominent Black cemetery. Established by freed people after the Civil War, Zion was the final resting place for thousands of Black Memphians, including prominent figures like Calvin McDowell, Thomas Moss and William Stewart, whose efforts to launch a Black-owned grocery store led to their murder and launched Ida B. Wells’s career as an anti-lynching activist. But Zion is also the final resting place for thousands of regular people whose lives may be less remembered, but whose contributions to the growth and strength of Memphis’s Black communities – and the entire city – is indicated by the sustained community interest in its preservation. This interest has continued in recent decades with the Zion Community Project, which has worked with Rhodes College and other local partners to ensure that this crucial site is maintained and celebrated.