

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



"Tent City / Fayette and Haywood Co. Tennessee"

(1950 - 1960's)

"Key Civil Rights Movement for Black Tennessee Voters"

The Tent Cities of Fayette and Haywood Counties, Tennessee was a grassroots voter's rights movement that was initiated, organized and maintained by black resident in the southwestern corner of Tennessee.

On May 23, 1940, a Fayette County Tennessee deputy sheriff was killed in a shootout outside the home of a black man named Burton Dodson. Although multiple deputies were shooting into the home of Mr. Dodson, his own son was grazed by an officer's bullet, Mr. Dodson was blamed for the deputy's death. Knowing the swift and violent backlash of being accused of killing a white man in the south, Mr. Dodson left town. A warrant was issued and eighteen years later, Dodson was captured in St Louis and returned to Fayette County to be tried for murder. At the time, mid 1950s, the population of Fayette County was about 70 percent black. However, there were no black jurors to serve on Dodson's case, because so few blacks were registered to vote in Fayette County. Mr. Dodson, 78 years old, stood trial for first degree murder of a white deputy with an all white jury. Although facts presented during the trial proved it was forensically impossible for Mr. Dodson to have committed the shooting, he was convicted of second-degree murder in April 1959.



Burton Dodson

Following the conviction of Dodson, his attorney, John Estes encouraged black residents of Fayette County and its neighboring county of Haywood to register to vote. Their effort was met with immediate resistance from the all-white county leadership. In response to this, black leaders formed the Fayette County Civic and Welfare League (FCCWL) and the Haywood County Civic and Welfare League. In June and July of 1959, these leagues held black voter registration drives for the August Democratic primary. Hundreds of black voters registered to vote for the upcoming primary.



EFFORTS of five deputy sheriffs from Fayette County, Tennessee, to bring about the Fayette County court room in face charges of slaying a Fayette deputy 18 years ago. Reporter Howard Pully

In August of 1959, black voters were blocked from voting in the Fayette County Democratic Primary. White party officials claimed that primary elections were not covered under the Civil Rights Act of 1957 and they had the right to deny any citizen the ability to vote in the party's primary. The Civil Rights Commission officials asked to inspect Fayette County voter rolls in order to investigate the allegations of disenfranchisement. In an attempt to stall the investigation and keep black citizens from continuing to register, the county's election commission resigned. This prompted a legal suit contesting the primary's legality. In April of 1960, a federal judge overturned the primary in a consent judgment that also put a legal end to all-white

VOTING PROTEST-The form of the affidavits which will be sent to Washington is prepared by J. E. Bates (second from left), attorney in Law McCoy (far left), Mr. Lee McCarty (third from left) and Mrs. Hester (Mrs. Wm. M. and Mrs. McCarty) and Mrs. White (far right) of the Fayette County Negroes who today filed protest with the Justice Department under the new Civil Rights Law.

elections in both Fayette and neighboring Haywood County. As a way to penalize black voters, a "Blacklist" was created. Those on the list were unable to buy food, gasoline, or take out bank loans. Some had their insurance policies cancelled and were fired from their jobs. There was also an embargo placed on the one black-owned gas station and any sympathizers. In September of 1960, the Department of Justice brought charges against twenty-seven businesses and two banks in neighboring Haywood County, which was also affected by the embargo.



In the Winter of 1960, white farmers evicted over 400 black sharecroppers from their land.

Many black sharecroppers had worked and lived on the land for generations. The evictions happened so quickly that many families were to forced pack their possessions into trucks and live in old army tents on the farms of Shepard Towles and Gertrude Beasley, the only two black landowners in the area. Their properties, located in both Fayette and Haywood counties became known as "Tent City" and "Freedom City." The displaced residents struggled to receive food and goods, due to threats and physical interference from the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Council. A story in the New York Post prompted the Justice Department to amend their lawsuit to include thirty-six white landowners who had evicted their tenant farmers. Meanwhile, the displaced black families faced violence and attempts to starve them out of their shoddy, makeshift homes. Even the Red Cross refused to provide supplies or emergency aid. Incidents of harassment and shots being fired into the camp continued.

Activists on the "Operation Freedom" bus filled with food and supplies arrived only to be met with a blockade from local white residents. In June 1961, President Kennedy issued an Executive Order sending surplus food to Fayette County. Previously, county officials declined surplus food from the government, even though the county was one of the poorest in the nation. The denial mostly affected black residents since the lack of federal assistance, including food, reinforced Black sharecropper's dependency on white landowners and the segregationist practices that had held sway over them since slavery.

In July of 1962, the federal district court formally prohibited the use of economic pressure to discourage black citizens from voting. While the Tent Cities remained until 1963, residents began moving into low-income houses. The FCCWL, with the help of a number of college students, continued to register voters until 1964. The Civil Rights Act of 1965, which put a legal end to formal and informal voter discrimination, undoubtedly owes its passage to the work of organizers and residents and allies of Fayette and Haywood County.

