

## The Original Fayette County Civic and Welfare League Scholarship Fund

The Fayette County, Tennessee Civil Rights Movement began in 1959 when John McFerren and Harpman Jameson, both African Americans, attended the trial of Burton Dodson, a black man accused of killing a white deputy sheriff. During the jury selection for Dodson's trial, it became apparent that there were few African Americans who could serve on Dodson's jury because only a few blacks throughout the entire county had registered to vote. Jury Pools were selected from the voter registration lists.

At the urging of Dodson's attorney, James F. Estes, an African American, McFerren, Jameson, and others organized African Americans to register to vote. In 1960, white landowners began retaliating against African Americans who registered, most of whom were sharecroppers, by evicting them from their farms. Shephard Towles and Gertrude Beasley, two black farmers who owned their land, allowed evicted sharecroppers to move onto their farms. Because these families had few resources and needed immediate shelter after eviction, Movement leaders set up tents to house them. These makeshift dwellings became known through the United States and other parts of the world as "Tent City," and came to symbolize the denial of basic civil rights to African Americans living in the American South.

The evictions only fueled the determination of Fayette County blacks, who believed that they were entitled to the same constitutional rights as whites, to force change by organizing mass demonstration marches and economic boycotts of white merchants. In their mission, black leaders successfully obtained the intervention of the federal courts to enforce their civil rights. As a result of their efforts, African Americans were able to register and vote in mass numbers for the first time; schools were desegregated; the disparity in pay between black and white teachers was narrowed; and blacks gained access to public and private schools.

In December 2010, The Original Fayette County Civic and Welfare League Scholarship Fund was established by Viola H. McFerren (President), Mary Williamson (Secretary), Levearn Towles (Treasurer), James Braswell (Board Member), and Daphene R. McFerren (the daughter of John and Viola McFerren). This Scholarship Fund was created from the proceeds of 2008 sale of the building called "Community Center." Movement activists constructed the Community Center during the 1960s to create a place where they could hold mass meetings and other activities to advance the cause for civil rights for African Americans. This scholarship fund is intended to advance the educational opportunities of African American students to create a more just nation and world.

Applicants for The Original Fayette County Civic and Welfare League Scholarship Fund must:

- ◆ be African-American students graduating from a public high school in Fayette County, TN
- ◆ have a grade point average of 2.5 (a "C" average) or better
- ◆ read the *History of the Fayette County, TN Civil Rights Movement* (referred to as the "History" and provided with the scholarship application)
- ◆ submit the application form and the required attachments.

Required attachments are as follows:

- ◆ one page essay describing how this history might impact their education and career goals to advance the social, economic, racial, or other conditions that affect African-Americans.  
Applicants should also describe any academic or extracurricular activities (for example, church,

community or other service) that demonstrate a commitment to serving the African-American community in Fayette County, TN or in the United States. (please limit to one page)

- ◆ two current letters of recommendation from teachers, clergy or persons other than family members who are familiar with the applicant's skills and abilities
- ◆ most recent high school transcript
- ◆ copy of applicant's ACT and/or SAT scores
- ◆ copy of applicant's Student Aid Report (SAR) and Expected Family Contribution (EFC) information, which you will receive when you complete your Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

# HISTORY OF THE FAYETTE COUNTY, TENNESSEE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT<sup>1</sup>

## A Jury Trial Sparks a Voter Registration Drive in the African American Community

The Fayette County, Tennessee Civil Rights Movement began in 1959 when John McFerren and Harpman Jameson attended the trial of Burton Dodson, an African American, who was accused of killing a white deputy sheriff. During the jury selection for Dodson's trial, it became apparent to James F. Estes, also African American and Dodson's attorney, that few blacks in Fayette County were registered to vote making it unlikely that African Americans would be chosen to serve on the Dodson's jury. Appalled, Estes urged McFerren and Jameson to encourage members of the African American community to register.

John McFerren, Harpman Jameson, and other black men gathered at the small wooden store owned by Robert McFerren, John's brother, to discuss why blacks had not registered and concluded that the fear of losing their jobs kept blacks from registering to vote. Moreover, members of this meeting decided that since they were either independently farming or unemployed, they would be insulated from white reprisals if they registered and voted. Although history proved them wrong on that point, their initial analysis led them to seek institutional, historical, and legal changes in their community that, in the process, changed them, their community, and their nation.

By August 1, 1959, John McFerren and Harpman Jameson coaxed a small group of blacks to register to vote. However, when they went to vote in the primary that fall, they were told that the primary was an "all white election and no colored could vote." With Estes' assistance, McFerren, Rufus Abernathy, Ed Brooks, Roy Brown, Harpman Jameson, Isaiah Harris, John Lewis, Houston Malone, Levearn Towles and William Towles, Sr., incorporated and organized the Fayette County Civic and Welfare League to, among other things, contest the legality of the all-white primary. Shortly thereafter, Estes filed a lawsuit in federal district court alleging that the Fayette County Election Commission had illegally prohibited blacks from voting in the 1959 primary election. After this suit was filed, pandemonium broke out between the black and white communities.

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<sup>1</sup> —This text was adapted from "The Fayette County, Tennessee Civil Rights Movement: How African Americans Changed Themselves, Their Community, and Their Nation By Demanding the Right to Vote" created by Daphene R. McFerren while a Visiting Scholar at the Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change at the University of Memphis. This text was included in the booklet for the program held on October 28, 2006 to honor Movement activists. Quotes taken from this text should appropriately note its source.

### **Retaliation for Voting: Tent City and the Blacklist**

In the fall of 1959, Early B. and Mary Williams registered to vote. While working in the field, the “Raleigh Man,” a traveling salesman who sold candy and other assorted goods to people living in rural areas, told the Williams that they would have to move because they had registered to vote. Shortly thereafter, the white landowner for whom the Williams sharecropped confirmed the Raleigh Man’s prediction when he personally ordered the Williams to move.

Shepard Towles owned his farm located on Old Macon Road (now Rhea Dr. and Road No. 195) and agreed that the Williams family could live there. Because the Williams family needed immediate shelter, a tent was erected on Towles’ farm. Starting in the early 1960s, in rapid succession, numerous evicted families found shelter on the farm of Shepard Towles. The Towles farm could not accommodate all of the families who needed shelter. Indeed, the Towles’ family water well ran dry because Tent City residents used all the water. Gertrude Beasley, a landowning elderly African American woman with meager resources, agreed to accommodate additional families. Like Towles, Beasley sheltered numerous families in tents on her farm located 4 miles east of Moscow, TN, off Hwy 57.

Feeding and clothing these displaced families became an urgent matter for the League. Because whites took the additional step of retaliating against registered black voters, or those deemed troublemakers, by identifying them on a printed list, called the “blacklist” and circulating it to business owners in the county, the black community’s problems grew. African Americans who found their names on this list could not buy food, clothing, or gasoline, nor could they obtain credit from any business in Fayette County. Movement leaders knew that if they didn’t get food and clothing soon, Fayette County blacks might be forced to leave the county, or worse, starve.

### **No Turning Back:**

### **Movement Leaders Appeal to the Nation and the Federal Government for Help**

Almost immediately after the evictions began, John and Viola McFerren began speaking locally and nationally, publicizing the plight of the Tent City residents, raising funds, and obtaining food and clothing. Through the various speaking engagements and through media reports on Tent City, food, clothing and money were sent to the League for distribution to the black community. James Puryear, a Fayette County resident and a long-distance truck driver by profession, took personal initiative and drove to cities, collected food and clothing from supporters, and drove these items back to Fayette County for distribution. Other people heard about the plight of residents of Tent City, and drove to the location to extend some act of kindness—like installing wood floors in the Tents so that residents did not have to live directly on the dirt—then left as anonymously as they came. Finally, in July 1961, President John F. Kennedy ordered the federal government to dispatch surplus food to blacks both in Fayette County and Haywood Counties (in Haywood County, African Americans had also begun to register to vote and were retaliated against by whites) who were suffering because they had registered to vote.

Prior to 1961, the events in Fayette County were already being watched by the federal government. In December 1960, the Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, filed a lawsuit under the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first lawsuit under this statute, to stop white landowners

from evicting black sharecroppers because they had registered to vote. In July 1962, a consent agreement was filed in federal court in which white landowners agreed to stop this conduct.

In 1961, a dispute among the League members about the fairness of the distribution of money, food and clothing donated to it, resulted in the group dividing and the formation of a second organization, The Original Fayette County Civic and Welfare League, Inc. (referred to hereinafter as the "League"). John McFerren, Viola McFerren, John Lewis, Levearn Towles, Noah McFerren, Shephard Towles, Roy Brown and Reverend June Dowdy were the incorporators of the League. The League entered the 1960s with an urgent civil rights agenda: to increase voter registration, elect officials responsible to the community, improve the welfare of blacks through education and training, and dismantle barriers that prevented African Americans access to credit and decent employment.

As early as the 1960s, the League began receiving support from organizations and individuals from outside the State. Reverend Maurice McCrackin and Virgie Hortenstine from Operation Freedom in Cincinnati, Ohio, raised money through Operation Freedom and extended loans to African Americans who had been denied credit or faced hardship because they registered to vote. In 1960, Charlie Butts, a white student from Oberlin College, came to Fayette County and worked with the League's secretary, Minnie H. Jameson, and taught her to type and to operate a mimeograph machine. Minnie Jameson and Butts worked together to produce the League's newsletter, "The League Link," which carried news to the African American community about demonstration marches, voter registration, and other activities.

Despite the fear of Movement leaders and others that the church might be burned by whites for allowing such meetings, Mt. Olive M.B. Church in Somerville, Tennessee, allowed the League to use their building to hold mass meetings with the community. Although appreciative of the church's graciousness, the League resolved to have a place of its own, and in 1962 it purchased 2 acres of land (later adding 2 additional acres) on Old Macon Rd (now Hwy 195) for the construction of a building called the Community Center.

### **A New Building, New Programs and Initiatives**

Raising money to pay for the land and the construction of the building proved a formidable task given the fact that the black community had few financial resources for daily living, let alone construction. Nevertheless, construction was funded by local and national monetary donations, and the donation of labor by local people and college students.

In March 1963, Cornell college students, led by faculty advisor, Professor Doug Dowd, drove to Fayette County and brought money to help with, among other things, the construction of the Community Center. In 1964, students from Cornell University spent much of the summer working with the League to support the election of two candidates, Reverend June Dowdy, a black man, for Tax Assessor, and L.T. Redfearn, a white man, for Sheriff. Although the African American community believed that election irregularities resulted in their candidates losing the election, they were not deterred in their efforts to change their community, in part, through the ballot box. In March 1965, University of Chicago graduate students drove to Fayette County, performed construction work on the Community Center, and participated in a mass demonstration march with the African American community to show their support of black efforts to obtain civil rights. In August 1966, for the first time in Fayette County history, the

African American community elected six black people – 4 men and 2 women to The Fayette County Quarterly Court (now called The Fayette County Commission), the governing body that decides, among other things, county planning and appropriations.

### **Movement Leaders Institutionalize Their Work by Taking on Causes Beyond the Right to Vote**

Movement leaders believed that the disparity in pay between African American and white teachers, the physical conditions of schools attended by blacks, and the outdated educational materials used to teach black children deprived them of a quality education. Moreover, Movement leaders believed that Fayette County should comply with the holding of the United States Supreme Court that found unconstitutional segregated schools. In July 1965, Avon N. Williams, Jr., a cooperating attorney for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, filed on behalf of parents, most of whom were League members, a lawsuit to desegregate Fayette County Schools. The McFerrens consented to have John McFerren, Jr., their son, serve as the named plaintiff. The following also consented to join the lawsuit: the families of Houston Malone, Houston Gray, Willie Elsberry, William Henry Ghilchrease, Simon Wilkerson and Sanford Wright.

From 1965 through the 1970s, federal district court judge Robert M. McRae presided over the school desegregation case and approved, among other things, a school desegregation plan to include new school buildings, including a new high school (now located on hwy 59) and the redesign of the educational curriculum. On the same day that the desegregation plan was approved by the court, a private academy was announced to effectively re-segregate the county's students.

In addition to seeking enforcement of their rights through the federal courts, Movement leaders remained committed to their belief that change must come from within the community and that the black community had to initiate it. Toward that end, throughout the 1960s, Movement leaders, community members, and persons from outside Fayette County held mass demonstration marches to protest physical abuse of African Americans by whites, discrimination of blacks in employment, segregated public facilities, and denial of civil rights to African Americans. League Leaders, including Viola McFerren and Harpman Jameson, were arrested and jailed for their activities.

Indeed, long after other movements had lost their momentum and other communities had turned their attention to other pressing issues, like the Vietnam War, the League's leadership continued to press the cause for civil rights. In an article published by the New York Times on October 12, 1969, the Fayette County Movement was called the "longest sustained civil rights protest in the nation."

While the League provided almost the only source of leadership on civil rights in Fayette County, groups comprised of young blacks in their teens and early 20s, emerged in the mid-1960s and took on a role in furthering the civil rights agenda. Some of these youth worked with civil rights workers from other parts of the country who initially came to Fayette County to assist the League. In July 1965, a few Fayette County black youth attended the Freedom School in Chicago, Illinois, operated by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, where they were taught black history, freedom songs, and protest demonstration tactics. Other African American

youth, through the media and from speaking with others, observed how other communities throughout the nation challenged the historical disenfranchisement and second-class treatment of African Americans.

Some black youth viewed the League's approach to integration as too conservative and sought more immediate results. Some black youth and white civil rights workers sought immediate integration of public restaurants in Fayette County. A few were severely injured when racists operating those establishments used force to drive home the point that they would resist integration. In September 1969, African American students marched to the all-white high school and demanded to be enrolled. The Fayette County police turned these black protestors away, and many were injured in confrontations with the police.

While the League and these other groups did not always agree on the tactics to accomplish their objectives, they agreed on one core principle: the time had come to end the injustices suffered by African Americans.

### **Creation of the Original Fayette County Civic and Welfare League Scholarship Fund**

From the inception in 1959 to its dissolution in 2010, a core group of people provided leadership to the League. John McFerren was the League's first president. Viola H. McFerren became president of the League during the 1970s, and remained president until The Original Fayette County Civic and Welfare League Scholarship Fund (also referred to as the "Scholarship Fund) was established. From 1959 to approximately 2001, the late Minnie Harris Jameson (Viola's sister) was secretary, and her late husband, Harpman Jameson, was treasurer of the League. Many others, including Houston Malone who served for more than 30 years as treasurer of the League, remained faithful to the Movement and League's mission.

In 2010, this Scholarship Fund was established by the following: Viola H. McFerren (League's president), Mary Williamson (League's secretary), Levearn Towles (League's treasurer), James Braswell (League board member), and Daphene R. McFerren (the daughter of movement activists). The funds that endow this Scholarship Fund came from the 2008 sale of the Community Center. This Scholarship Fund is intended to advance the educational opportunities of African American students in the ongoing effort to create a more just nation and world.

# The Original Fayette County Civic and Welfare League Scholarship Fund

Academic Year \_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_  
 Deadline: April 2, 2012

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  

Last
First
Middle Initial

Social Security Number: \_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_ Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ Sex: \_\_\_\_\_

Street Address: \_\_\_\_\_ City, State, Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

State of Residency: \_\_\_\_\_ Country of Citizenship: \_\_\_\_\_ Telephone: (\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

Class Rank (if available): \_\_\_\_\_ Class Size: \_\_\_\_\_ Cumulative Grade Point Average: \_\_\_\_\_

Class year you will enter in college: Freshman\_\_\_\_ Sophomore \_\_\_\_ Junior\_\_\_\_ Senior\_\_\_\_

College, university or vocational school you will attend:

Name	Address	City/State/Zip
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Cost of tuition for one year: \_\_\_\_\_ Cost of room and board for one year: \_\_\_\_\_

Intended major/minor: \_\_\_\_\_

Degree you will pursue: AA\_\_\_\_ AS\_\_\_\_ BA\_\_\_\_ BS\_\_\_\_ MA\_\_\_\_ Ph.D.\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Month/Year you will graduate from college: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_ Will you be registered full-time? \_\_\_\_\_

Will you attend the full academic term?\_\_\_\_ If no, which terms will you attend? \_\_\_\_\_

Where do you plan to live? On campus \_\_\_\_\_ With parent \_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

List all school/work activity in which you have participated during the last four years (e.g., student government, music, sports, part-time employment, volunteer community service, etc.).

<i>Year(s)</i>	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Special Awards and Honors</i>
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Please list below the source and amount of any grants or scholarships pending or awarded for the coming school year:

Name of Grant/Scholarship	Amount	Granted or Pending?
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

If there are any unusual family or personal circumstances that affect your ability to pursue your educational goals, please describe: \_\_\_\_\_

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***Applicant Certification:***

I (we) affirm the information reported is true, correct, and complete to the best of my knowledge. I (we) agree that to verify the information reported on this form, I (we) will, on request, provide documentation necessary to verify information reported. Falsification of information may result in termination of any scholarship granted.

Applicant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Applicants for The Original Fayette County Civic and Welfare League Scholarship Fund must:**

- be African-American students graduating from a public high school in Fayette County, TN
- have a grade point average of 2.5 (a C average) or better
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- a copy of most recent high school transcript, which must indicate cumulative grade point average
- a copy of SAT and/or ACT scores
- two letters of recommendation from teachers or persons other than family members who are familiar with the applicant's skills and abilities
- a copy of applicant's Student Aid Report (SAR) and Expected Family Contribution (EFC) information, which the applicant will receive when they complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

**All applications are due by April 2, 2012 to:**

**Community Foundation of Greater Memphis  
Attention: Scholarships  
1900 Union Avenue  
Memphis, TN 38104**

**No staples, folders or bound copies please. The Foundation reserves the right to process only those applications found to be complete as of the deadline date. Please contact Vanessa Langston at 722-0032 or [vlangston@cfgm.org](mailto:vlangston@cfgm.org) if you have any questions. For more information: [www.cfgm.org](http://www.cfgm.org)**