Cotton Coated

CONSPIRACY

BOOK ONE

JOHN McFERREN'S WORD

An investigative series on the death of
DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

John Roberts

Clear Lens Publishing, LLC

Cotton Coated Conspiracy
Book One: John McFerren's Word

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In loving memory of

John McFerren

From the Cambridge University Dictionary

cotton: the threads that grow around the seeds of a tall plant grown especially in the U.S., China, and South Asia

coated: thickly covered

conspiracy: the activity of secretly planning with other people to do something bad or illegal

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Introduction

Before lifelong Fayette County resident John McFerren passed away at the age of ninety-five, he regularly told one of our investigators, "Everything happens for a reason. There is a purpose behind everything that happens in this world, good and bad. All of it happens because God wills it to. He is in control of everything, and no matter how long it takes, or how much pain we go through, the Lord will always make sure the truth comes out in the end."

When I was considering how to begin this introduction, Mr. McFerren's now transcendent voice kept replaying in my mind, and the word "purpose" embedded itself within the fabric of my soul. The word itself and its definition first reminded me of the catchy lyric "every purpose under heaven" repeated by the Byrds in their famous 1965 song, "Turn! Turn! Turn!". After some light internet digging, I quickly discovered that the popular melody was first written by legendary folk singer, songwriter, and recording artist Pete Seeger in

the late 1950s, a full six years before David Crosby and his pals turned the tune into a national hit.

But then I was floored to learn that Seeger's prior talents once touched on an issue much closer to home. In 1961, he also wrote, performed, and recorded "Fayette County," a folk song about the plight of a small African-American community of civil rights activists who lived right here in West Tennessee, one of whom was John McFerren himself. Still, it was Seeger's immutable lyric "and a time to every purpose under heaven" that kept haunting my thoughts. Interestingly, the phrase dates back even further than Seeger's writings. In the first and second verses of Ecclesiastes 3, the Bible declares:

> To every thing there is a season, and a time for every purpose under the heaven; a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted.

How incredibly apropos. If ever there were narratives that best describe the purpose of the following story, it's Seeger's previous songs and the two verses above. Indeed, this book is a true-life account of Fayette County, its cyclical seasons of cotton planting and harvesting, the multi-generational struggles the county's African-American residents have endured, and the joyous births and tragic deaths that have occurred in West Tennessee under God's eternal heaven. In John McFerren's own words, "There is a purpose behind everything that happens in this world, good and bad. All of it happens because God wills it to." As such, I emphatically believe that the time has come, according to the Almighty's divine purpose and will, to finally convey the true, untarnished story of John McFerren and his testimony regarding Fayette County's involvement in the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Under that primary purpose of conveying unadulterated truth, however, several other secondary purposes for the creation of this book must too be explained.

First, it is our intention to simultaneously educate and entertain. While all of the dry, Dr. King and James Earl Ray facts and figures contained in the following pages were thoroughly researched and corroborated by historical documentation, the proceeding text was written in a dramatic style that we believe lends itself to keeping you, the reader, engaged. And the vehicle for that drama was the creation of true-crime investigator "Randall Stephens" and whistleblower "Marcus Holmes" It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that, in the spirit of first expressing profound truth, we also include a full disclosure; The characters of "Randall Stephens" and "Marcus Holmes" are a conglomeration of several private researchers who toiled over a period of nine years to vet this story. There was no single "Randall Stephens" or "Marcus Holmes" nor are those names the genuine titles of anyone who worked on this project. While all of Mr. Stephens' and Mr. Holmes' actions, conversations, and conclusions actually took place as described in this book, those endeavors were performed by a multitude of separate individuals. To be clear, "Randall Stephens" and "Marcus Holmes" are fictitious, umbrella monikers assigned to a group of willfully anonymous men and women who executed the intense investigative narrative you're about to read.

With that single instance of dramatic license aside, the second underlying purpose of this book is to provide unrelenting clarity and accuracy. A great deal of methodical research and data mining went into ensuring that precise names, dates, and locations were used within the proceeding text. Unlike some other King and Ray narratives, no misspelled derivatives of individual names or pseudonyms (other than "Randall Stephens" and "Marcus Holmes") were used. In addition to our staunch desire to provide a painfully accurate record of historical events, it is also our hope that these exacting details equip other researchers with the essential breadcrumbs needed to conduct and/or verify their own investigations. What's more, we also invite those same researchers and untold number of future critics to form their

own conclusions by fact-checking our work. While we are confident that we have portrayed said events as truthfully as possible, we are not immune to making mistakes and welcome scrutiny and verifiable corrections. Quite simply, it is our hope that this book is viewed as a highly accurate investigative guide that inspires others to initiate their own research.

Third, it is our utmost desire to honor the legacy of John McFerren. Through the printed communication of his long-consistent assertions, we intend to publicly reveal the uncomfortable truths John prayed would someday come to light. By exposing these shocking realities, it is our intention to also refute, once and for all, the less than honest individuals who have tried to silence Mr. McFerren throughout the decades. Stated simply, it is the purpose of this book to posthumously honor John McFerren by providing him with a modicum of long-overdue justice.

It is our intention, through the accurate portrayal of John McFerren's well-recorded testimony, to shed light on James Earl Ray's willing involvement in the 1968 conspiracy. We intend to demonstrate that Ray, in his thirst for quick cash and ultimate freedom, found himself entangled with powerful government officials and organized crime figures who were deeply rooted in the racist South. But it is also our contention that, because of this unholy alliance, Ray was unfairly sentenced to life in prison for a crime that he was at least partially innocent of.

Finally, it is our goal to honor the memory of the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Through this body of work and our intense evaluation of John McFerren's evidence, we prayerfully hope to enlighten the otherwise ill-informed public as to why the civil rights icon was assassinated and who orchestrated his murder, thereby providing Dr. King with a degree of justice as well. In conclusion, we simply believe that it is our predestined purpose to honor historical fact for future generations, and we believe that now is the time to do so.

JOHN ROBERTS

Prologue

ACCIDENTAL INVESTIGATOR

October 2015
Memphis, Tennessee

It was unseasonably warm as Randall Stephens meandered down the gently sloping pavement of East Butler Avenue toward Mulberry Street. Encamped at the base of a wooden utility pole, on the sidewalk corner ahead of him, the permanent vigil of Ms. Jacqueline Smith cast a disapproving shadow over the touristy foot traffic. Final resident and self-appointed guardian of the former Lorraine Motel, Ms. Smith was evicted from the modest motor lodge in 1988, twenty years after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. lost his life there.

The building's entrails, minus its unaltered west-facing façade, were being transformed into the National Civil Rights Museum/NCRM at the time of her expulsion, and as such was necessary, the motel's last living piece of history had been summarily dumped on the sidewalk outside. Incredibly, she stayed there and demonstrated for the next twenty-seven years. After waving politely in the direction of the steadfast African-American protester he knew only as "Ms. Jackie," Stephens crossed Mulberry and entered the well-manicured

grounds of the museum, a place once home to both the Lorraine Motel and its now-exiled final occupant.

After making his way from the western edge of the NCRM's brick-inlaid courtyard, Stephens stopped at the waist-high barrier built of additional bricks and painted steel, raised his head, and set his solemn gaze upon the infamous, still-preserved second-story balcony where Dr. King was struck down by an assassin's bullet on April 4, 1968. It was a decisive blow, handed down by a society still entrenched in the Jim Crow South; a bullet with a decisive message, born of hate, intolerance, and fear. The death slug, it seemed, had traveled through time, from slavery, past Reconstruction and Emmett Till, to the Freedom Rides, through Selma, Alabama, and Philadelphia, Mississippi, into white-only schools, through segregated restaurant doorways, past a sanitation strike in Memphis, and into the neck of the world icon. After pondering the final tragic moments of Dr. King's life, Stephens' thoughts drifted off to another, albeit far lesser, injustice in the recent past.

Marcus Holmes, an African-American construction contractor and friend of Stephens, had just recently been sent back to prison. Stephens and his family had moved to Somerville, the intimate, rural centerpiece of Fayette County, Tennessee, a number of years earlier, and had often called upon Holmes to do repair work on their home. It was during that frequent interaction that Stephens and Holmes soon stuck up a long-lasting friendship. Just an hour's drive east of Memphis and its parent jurisdiction of Shelby County, Holmes' hometown of Somerville had been his own family's stomping ground since before the Civil War.

To the outsider looking in, Fayette County's Rockwell-esque town capital was the ostensibly tranquil, rural little sister to the nearby urban, heaving and clawing, trouble-making Memphis. The quiet county that surrounded Somerville was, and still is today, marked by

vast family farms, dense clusters of hardwood timber, and small-town monuments dedicated to the area's former war heroes. Bisected by Highway 64, the same path that saw hundreds of Native Americans driven from the Southeast by President Andrew Jackson, Fayette was full of cotton and history, less akin to cities like Memphis and Jackson, Tennessee, and more in line with Mississippi and its slave-holding delta.

Fayette County's wealthy elite did not look favorably upon the smallest legal infractions, nor did they tolerate even the slightest challenge to their archaically antebellum way of life, especially by those living within the local African-American community. As a result, Holmes, a black man and perceived troublemaker throughout his nearly fifty-year life, often found himself on the losing end of countless legal battles with Fayette County's despotic, notoriously corrupt law enforcement community.

Then, in the late summer of 2015, during a surprise vehicle inspection at the office of his parole officer, state law enforcement and prison officials found small traces of marijuana in Holmes' truck. Initially, Holmes' parole officer released him immediately after the finding with little more than a verbal reprimand. But less than twenty-four hours later, the officer was telephoning his recently freed parolee to warn him that Tennessee state officials within Fayette County were steadfastly opposed to the recent release and that an arrest warrant was imminent.

Before the warrant could be served, Holmes took heed of the tip. Fearing this was perhaps his last opportunity to blow the whistle on Fayette County's more devious transgressions, the soon-to-be fugitive scheduled a secret meeting at a nearby hotel with Randall Stephens. Over the next two days and late into the uninterrupted hours of the successive starlit nights, Holmes revealed the jaw-dropping evidence he had gathered throughout his lifelong predicament in Somerville, explaining to Stephens what he

had personally uncovered regarding Fayette County's involvement in the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Holding nothing back from the sometimes confused and often dubious Stephens, Marcus handed over countless official documents, played Stephens several audio recordings, and rattled off dozens of names, locations, and dates. Tapping upon the thin plastic keys of his laptop computer, Stephens worked feverishly to keep up with the fast-talking Holmes, sometimes taking notes, other times searching the internet to validate his impromptu witness's assertions.

At the end of their clandestine, multi-day huddle, the two men emerged, mentally exhausted. After providing much-needed prayers for the now-wanted Holmes, Stephens shook his friend's hand and gave his word that he would dig deeper into the seemingly implausible allegations just revealed to him. Unfortunately, it was the last time he would speak with Marcus in person for the next several months. Only two weeks later, the Tennessee State Parole Board voted to rescind Holmes' parole status, thereby sending him to prison for the second time in his nearly fifty-year life. Stephens could do little in late September of 2015 as his friend was sentenced to yet another lengthy prison term, this time for the trivial violation of possessing only small amounts of cannabis.

As he concluded the painful reminiscence, and his thoughts returned to the present, Stephens again focused his eyes on the second-story balcony in front of room 306 at the former Lorraine Motel where Dr. King/MLK had been shot and killed. Perhaps there was more to Stephens' future than just a simple promise to look into Holmes' claims. Perhaps he was being led to achieve something far greater. Had the late MLK been robbed of the justice he, too, so obviously deserved?

Stephens knew little about the thirty-nine-year life of the famed civil rights leader or the cowardly act that cut it tragically short. His only real knowledge of MLK's murder was that James Earl Ray, the

accused shooter who proclaimed his innocence until dying in 1998, was the only person to be sentenced for the 1968 slaying. In addition, Stephens was even less familiar with the details surrounding the wide speculation that Ray was not the actual gunman but a mere patsy. The story of Dr. King's death at the hands of Ray was simply a topic that had never crossed Stephens' radar.

Yet, since his last meeting with Holmes, a glimmer of curiosity had been slowly stirring within Stephens' mind. If he followed the small breadcrumbs that had just been laid out before him, maybe he could somehow provide the much-needed justice Dr. King never received. And if Ray was nothing more than a scapegoat, as many believed, perhaps Stephens could posthumously vindicate him as well.

The glaring absurdity of the notion was immediately apparent, and Stephens quickly laughed at himself as he tried to push the delusions of grandeur from the forefront of his mind. Not only was he still reeling from a previous combat tour in Iraq, but Stephens was already engrossed in the management of his own struggling business. More to the point, he was acutely aware that he lacked the basic knowledge and research skills essential for taking on the monumental task. It was apparent that a number of other, more well-equipped investigators, lawyers, and authors had already trekked this path years before. What could he possibly add to the mountain of previously amassed information?

Despite his grave misgivings, Stephens' thoughts kept returning to the promise he recently made to Holmes. Even if he doubted his own abilities, Stephens could not escape his conscience nor the reality of his previous vow to the now incarcerated man. To backpedal at this point could signal the final death knell for the already demoralized prisoner. With a sigh of anticipatory angst, Stephens clenched the glossy gray railing in front of him. As if to shore up his resolve, he glanced up one final time at the second-story

balcony in front of room 306, gathered his emotional strength, turned around, and headed for home to finish the arduous process of sorting through Holmes' disorganized collection of physical documents and digital files.

After several days of reviewing, copying, and organizing the shocking material he was recently entrusted with, Stephens saved the data to portable hard drives and then hid the devices at separate undisclosed locations. His next step was to dive headfirst into the vast sea of public information already available on the case. Initially, he limited his scope of study to brief online articles and documentary films in order to grasp the fundamentals of Dr. King and the shooting. It was only later that Stephens delved into the countless books written on the tragic subject. After reading dozens of publications, it became clear that all of the titles fell into one of two categories; those that claimed Ray was an ardent racist and the lone assassin, and those that painted him as an innocent patsy unwittingly manipulated by a high-level government conspiracy.

Stephens was torn. He didn't completely buy the theory that Ray was the shooter. Nor was he convinced that Ray acted alone as a raving bigot. But he also couldn't swallow the notion that Ray was a blameless victim who suddenly found himself accused of a crime he knew nothing about. Could the reality possibly lie somewhere in the middle, hidden beneath the array of misinformation scattered between the oversimplified official story and wild conspiracy theories?

Before long, it became obvious to Stephens that he would not be able to cut corners by merely relying on what other authors had researched and published in the past. There were just too many inconsistencies tucked between the stacks of battling narratives. In order to get to the truth, and perhaps vet what had been previously written, he would have to begin his digging inside the various archives spread across the internet and the city of Memphis. Stephens ultimately decided that it was essential to base his entire

investigation on nothing less than hard documentation derived from original witnesses, law enforcement officials, government authorities, journalists, and the independent investigators who were in Memphis and at the Lorraine Motel at the time. He also made the decision to remain objective. Due to his lack of allegiance to Memphis, Shelby County, Somerville, Fayette County, and those involved in the case, it mattered little to Stephens who he exposed for wrongdoing, or whether Ray was guilty or not. He simply decided early on that the discovery of untarnished facts would be his only goal.

The learning curve was steep. But after several clumsy telephone calls, countless online searches, and numerous trips to the Bluff City's various archival institutions, the accidental investigator was soon unearthing Memphis Police Department/MPD reports, Federal Bureau of Investigation/FBI 302 reports, Shelby County court records, Department of Justice/DOJ interviews, House Select Committee on Assassination/HSCA transcripts, and all manner of news articles. By mid-October 2015, Stephens' digital collection had grown into a respectable database of government documents, newspaper clippings, Facebook photos, video archives, and previously recorded audio clips.

His next and certainly most difficult mountain to climb was the painstaking process of tracking down and interviewing the long list of witnesses who were still alive and willing to speak. And as Marcus Holmes had already learned through years of dedicated trial and error, it would take several long weeks before the first person on Stephens' list felt comfortable enough to begin revealing his well-guarded secrets regarding the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Part One

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

Chapter 1

A MAN NAMED McFERREN

MARCUS HOLMES REVERED the ninety-one-year-old John McFerren on an intensely profound level. In previous decades, Mr. McFerren had refused to speak to scores of unofficial investigators and self-absorbed writers whose only desire was to glean his dramatic testimony. But through the unpretentious gesture of long-term kindness and genuine friendship, a young Holmes was slowly granted the rare privilege of becoming McFerren's most-trusted student. Since the forging of the two men's bond in the early 1990s, Holmes had spent countless hours inside McFerren's gas and grocery business, hanging on every word the reclusive former civil rights leader uttered about his role as an unintended witness in the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Before his departure to one of Tennessee's numerous state correctional facilities, Holmes was adamant in his assertion that McFerren held the key to unlocking the 1968 assassination mystery and that, if Stephens was to learn additional details about Fayette County's involvement, it was imperative to earn McFerren's seldom-granted trust. But unlike Holmes, Stephens knew that he would be starting from square one with McFerren. While he had accompanied Holmes on a handful of visits to Mr. McFerren's business and was already a slightly familiar face, Stephens certainly had not invested in the type of relationship with the enigmatic black man that Holmes had. His only possible inroad to a potential rapport with McFerren was the topic of their mutual friend. Perhaps, he could build a foundation of trust with the grocer by regularly discussing Holmes' most recent legal calamity and current prison stay.

Forging a Friendship

It wasn't long before he found himself standing in front of the double doors of the McFerren Grocery and Oil Company. Located at the three-way intersection on Highway 195 just south of downtown Somerville in Fayette County, the orange-brick building's faded red trim was in dire need of fresh paint, and the four analog gas pumps that lined its face, obviously decades old, looked longingly toward the oblivious highway traffic just beyond. To Stephens' right, a pair of local African-American men sat on overturned pickle buckets near the station's outside northeast corner, loudly chuckling while drinking forty-ounce beers hidden in brown paper sacks. He pulled on the right-side door's stainless-steel handle, but the main entrance was locked.

As he peered through the dusty window, Stephens could see the gas station's proprietor sitting atop a stool behind a turquoise-colored service counter. Before the strange, pasty-faced visitor had the

opportunity to knock, a watchful John McFerren began his snail-like journey off the tall stool and around the counter to unlock the doors. The pace with which the elderly African-American man moved gave Stephens a discouraging glimpse into the long process ahead of him. Eventually, McFerren, hunched over, was standing before him on the other side of the glass, twisting and yanking on the door's lock.

His leathery, light-brown skin, which hung loosely over an antique frame, was immensely crevassed and dotted. His face, although clean-shaven, had been worn by the elements of time, weather, and most certainly deep-cutting pain. In addition to the pair of cloudy eyeglasses that sat atop his nose and in front of his piercing blue eyes, McFerren also wore a non-descript black baseball cap. Creeping out from beneath the edges of his dark head covering was a thick layer of salt-and-pepper hair. Rounding out his ensemble, McFerren also wore a long-sleeve, dark blue button-down shirt, black pants, a pair of equally ebony-colored suspenders, and two worn-out tennis shoes, each layered with strips of tattered duct tape. Stephens watched patiently, heard a metallic click, and then opened the unlocked door behind the now slowly retreating, still hunched-over McFerren.

Despite Tennessee's comfortable fall warmth, the station's indoor common area was stifling. As McFerren headed back behind the counter to his original perch, Stephens quickly looked around and spotted a familiar item. Resting on a shelf along the southern interior wall was the grease-smudged, tanned pith helmet he recently witnessed a much younger John McFerren wearing in the 1989 documentary film, *Inside Story: Who Killed Martin Luther King?* As the frail gas and grocery store owner once more took his seat, Stephens approached the service counter, stood across from McFerren, and began his well-rehearsed introduction.

"Hi, Mr. McFerren. I'm not sure if you remember me, but I'm a friend of Marcus Holmes."

Without making eye contact, the elderly black man replied with a straightforward and exceedingly drawn-out "Alright," devoid of any emotion or acknowledgment of who Holmes was. Due to either a lack of breath or an unwillingness to confirm information he believed to be private, it was clear the blue-eyed man was not going to make it easy on Stephens by elaborating.

The pale-skinned stranger continued undeterred, "Okay, well, he asked me to come by here and tell you that he's been sent back to prison."

In spite of McFerren's famously stoic nature in front of less-than-familiar faces, it was clear that he was both surprised and alarmed at the news. "Prison? Again? Wha–what he get hemmed up in this time?"

The sharp reaction was both a relief and a curse. While he was glad to hear an authentic, multi-word response from the notoriously guarded McFerren, Stephens also hated delivering news that caused such obvious distress.

As the out-of-place visitor went on to explain the recent circumstances surrounding Holmes' return to prison, McFerren exhibited only confusion, disbelief, and anger. After several minutes of repeating the same previously outlined details, Stephens concluded with an assurance that he would return in a few days to update McFerren about their mutual friend's plight. Despite his selfish desire to immediately begin questioning McFerren about the King case, Stephens recognized the distraught grocer's need to process the new development. In the eyes of the hesitant messenger, there was little more to say.

It was a minor victory, but a victory, nonetheless. Although it would take several more visits before McFerren let his guard down, Stephens had his foot in the door and was pleased with their initial meeting. He departed the southern outskirts of Somerville that day feeling cautiously optimistic that, as a future conduit between McFerren and Holmes, he could eventually earn the Fayette County man's confidence.

In the following days, Stephens quickly learned when it was okay to stop by the store to chat or when McFerren "had eyes watching him." He was also told who the local "snitchers" were and who was there simply to hang out at the building's northeast corner to get drunk. As Stephens would eventually discover, McFerren had long believed that specific area residents, all of whom were black, visited his gas station only to spy on him on behalf of Fayette County's racist white leadership. But Stephens would also come to learn that these suspicions weren't unfounded.

Week after monotonous week, Stephens made regular visits to McFerren's combination grocery and gas station to relay small bits of information about their friend's current and future prison status. As was typical, their conversations almost always centered on McFerren's continued worry about Holmes and what the rulers of Fayette County had done to destroy him yet again. The guarded civil rights leader even sometimes suspiciously questioned Stephens himself as if he was a possible contributor to Holmes' recent demise. As much as Stephens tried to assure the man that he had been sent there by their imprisoned friend, McFerren remained stubbornly leery of the newcomer.

Stephens soon realized that he would need to up his game if he was going to glean the vital information he was looking for. After a few weeks of simply lingering around the Fayette County business, discussing the same topic over and over again, he started bringing his young daughter around on evenings and weekends. Her presence seemed to lighten the mood, and McFerren clearly enjoyed her giggly company, often calling her "little lady." In front of McFerren, Stephens also made it a point of describing to his daughter the elderly man's past achievements as a World War II combat veteran, civil rights leader, and iconic hero of Fayette County. Admittedly, however, these appeals to McFerren's ego did little to coax him into additional discussions, and Stephens started to harbor feelings of guilt for his shameless attempts at manipulation, especially since he had begun to grow genuinely fond of the man.

Eventually, he changed tactics. During subsequent visits, Stephens began to tote a number of MLK books, each one outlining various versions of McFerren's role as a witness in the shooting conspiracy. Astonishingly, McFerren had little inkling he had been written about. As Stephens recited the different sections, it became clear that a number of titles were highly inaccurate in the mind of the aging eyewitness. Yet, despite his frustrated assertions regarding the mistakes in each narrative, McFerren was still unwilling to correct either the narrator or the authors themselves by offering up accurate details. Most often, his only response was, "That ain't right!", a simple denial of what had just been uttered.

It became clear to Stephens that he wasn't going to get anywhere as long as Holmes was absent from the meetings. If the two of them were free to work as a pair, then maybe McFerren would open up. But as long as Holmes was behind bars, Stephens was on his own. It was time to focus some of his efforts elsewhere. While continuing his regular trips to McFerren's Fayette County business, the accidental investigator returned to his recently obtained archival documents, focusing first on the area's dark history, John McFerren's background, and the same civil rights leader's often contentious relationship with the county's white establishment.

Fayette's Founding Fathers

Made up of thick tracts of hickory, walnut, poplar, cypress, and oak woodland initially belonging to Shelby County in the west and Hardeman County just to the east, Fayette County was founded on September 29, 1824. Just like the other six Fayette Counties established throughout the mushrooming United States before it, Tennessee's newest jurisdiction was named in honor of Marquis de LaFayette, a French general and statesman who had been an ally of the American colonists during the Revolutionary War. Before the ink had a chance

to dry on the articles establishing Fayette County that September, local and state officials were also choosing a name for its future seat of government. By the next month, the state legislature had passed an act declaring that the county's new capital be named in honor of a U.S. military officer who had fallen in the 1814 Battle of Horseshoe Bend.

Also known as the Battle of Tohopeka, the brutal past offensive was led by Tennessee attorney and Major General Andrew Jackson in March of 1814 against a faction of the Creek Indian tribe known as the Red Sticks. Opposed to the white man's expansion into their centuries-old, southern-held territory, the Red Sticks fought bravely against Gen. Jackson's Tennessee militia in what is now the State of Alabama. After their overwhelming defeat on the 27th of that month, the Red Sticks' 800 native corpses, now scattered across the battlefield, were pillaged by Jackson's soldiers. The Tennessee militia fashioned bridle reins from thin strips of the Red Sticks' skin, conducted body counts by slicing off the tips of their noses, and shipped the natives' blood-soaked clothing back to the "ladies of Tennessee" as souvenirs. On October 16, 1824, a little more than ten years after the violent clash, Fayette County's new seat of power was officially named in honor of Lieutenant Robert Somerville, one of the officers killed in the horrific assault against the butchered Red Sticks.

Settled soon after by more than forty Scotch-Irish families intent on clearing the land and becoming wealthy slave and cotton plantation owners, the 704 square mile county ballooned rapidly from a population of just 265 white residents in 1826 to more than 5300 by 1830. Using pre-surveyed gridlines, dirt paths, rocky creeks, and the winding banks of the Loosahatchie and Wolf Rivers as boundaries, state and local officials sectioned off and granted vast blankets of rich uncultivated earth to white homesteaders who had either staked an original claim or paid other land speculators for rightful ownership.

One of Fayette County's original homesteaders was a Scotch-Irish Methodist minister named William Meek McFerrin. By 1836, the

young Reverend McFerrin and his new wife had settled in Somerville. Under the direction of West Tennessee's Methodist leadership, William Meek quickly began his ministry within the local "Somerville African Mission." As a circuit rider assigned to this specific field of service, McFerrin spent the next several years traveling the dirt trails of the area, calling on neighboring farms and large plantations, and preaching to Fayette County's exploding population of spiritually downtrodden African-American slaves.

In contrast to his noble Christian work with members of the county's subjugated black community, Rev. McFerrin was a slaveholder himself. But after President Lincoln's Union troops defeated the Southern Confederacy in 1865, the family members of the pious Methodist minister were forced to free their African-American captives. These formerly enslaved men, women, and children had, by that point, adopted their white owner's moniker and went on to pass down the misspelled derivative of the "McFerren" family name to numerous generations in the future. Historical documents indicate that one of John McFerren's paternal forefathers, a former slave, was once the property of the Rev. William Meek McFerrin.

Today, oral history also suggests that a young Native-American girl settled in Fayette County after fleeing the Trail of Tears procession that snaked through Somerville in the winter of 1838. Local legend held that, upon her escape from John Bell's parade of native captives, the frightened girl hid in the dense brush along the dirt roadside of what is today Highway 64. Now wandering the area aimlessly and alone, the cold and hungry American aborigine was taken in by a nearby family of empathetic African-American slaves who lovingly raised her as their own. Many years after the woman's marriage to another Fayette County slave, the interracial couple's children and grandchildren, sometimes referred to by historians as "Black Indians," went on to become additional members of John McFerren's subjugated lineage.

Making of a Man

Eugene and Estella McFerren were an impoverished, albeit hardworking, African-American married couple who lived on their own farm near the rural outskirts of Somerville. But despite their economic hardships, the two happily gave birth to a baby boy named John on October 28, 1924. The McFerrens' new progeny eventually earned a reputation amongst his siblings and childhood peers for being an intelligent, industrious, and wholeheartedly honest young man. It was said that, from the first moments following his birth, John McFerren's piercing blue gaze never lost sight of his admired father, Eugene. The young boy spent his formative years watching the elder McFerren intently, studying every move the wise patriarch made. It was through this close relationship with his father that John quickly learned the vital importance of a relentless work ethic, financial independence, and accurate record keeping.

At some point in John's childhood, a local white physician named Dr. John W. Morris, with rusty kerosene lantern in hand, appeared unexpectedly on the McFerren family's wooden doorstep late one night. As an angry Dr. Morris demanded to be financially compensated for a costly horse saddle Eugene had previously purchased, Mr. McFerren hurriedly found and then brandished a handwritten bill of sale, supplying proof that he had already finished paying for the item in question. It was widely whispered by members of the area's black community at the time that Dr. Morris, a prominent Somerville citizen, wealthy business owner, and landholder, was the furtive leader of the Fayette County klavern, a nearby branch of the Tennessee Ku Klux Klan. According to the local rumor mill, it was also claimed that the good doctor had seized control of the county's top KKK position several years prior by way of a deadly gun duel with an opposing Klan member.

In spite of Dr. Morris's obvious embarrassment and damaged white pride that evening, a brave Eugene watched calmly as the

Fayette County physician handed back the piece of paper and then silently departed the McFerren homestead in peace. Mr. McFerren used the heart-stopping, potentially fatal encounter with the notoriously greedy and racist doctor to teach John a valuable lesson; never eat from the white man's trough, always keep a written record of your agreements with people, and always remain loyal to the truth.

After sustaining a severe injury while working as a part-time carpenter, Eugene McFerren became permanently disabled and ultimately unable to maintain the family's farm. At the age of thirteen, a selfless John McFerren dropped out of school to begin supporting his ailing father, mother, and the married couple's other young children. In addition to working in the nearby cotton fields, John also tinkered with rusty farm equipment and discarded engines, becoming a bit of an expert welder and mechanic.

He also earned extra money by selling wild quail. His daddy had raised him up to be a stealthy shot, and John regularly used the family's 22-caliber rifle to harvest the brown and white spotted fowl. After filling his satchel with their warm bodies, the young McFerren would make the day-long horseback ride into downtown Memphis and then sell his feathered bounty to the kitchen staff at the famous Peabody Hotel. Once delivered, the plump birds were hand-plucked, gutted, artfully roasted to a glistening golden brown, garnished with vibrant delectables, and then served under a steaming air of pomp and circumstance to the hotel's discerning guests.

The Burton Dodson Affair

There had been countless white-on-black slayings in Fayette County before. Typically, after the local lynching, the victim's grotesquely disfigured body would be tossed into the back of a

horse-drawn wagon or pick-up truck bed, hauled to the southern fringes of neighboring Haywood County, and then unceremoniously dumped to rot away in the stench and muck of "Hatchie Bottom," the dark, snake-infested swamps located on the edges of the Hatchie River. The phrase "I'll take you up to Hatchie Bottom if you ain't careful!" was commonly used by Fayette County's white tormenters when threatening members of the rarely defiant black community. That's why, when a local sixty-year-old African-American man was being hunted down by an angry white mob on the still-darkened morning of Saturday, March 23, 1940, the elderly fugitive knew what his ultimate fate would be if caught.

Intent on capturing Burton Dodson, a black man accused of assaulting a white resident from the area, dozens of newly deputized white men led by Fayette County Sheriff W. H. Cocke surrounded the Dodson family's rural cabin, ordering Mr. Dodson to come outside. But when he refused to surrender and tried to flee the scene, several gunshots were fired, and in the moonlit melee, a forty-six-year-old Fayette County Sheriff's deputy named Olin B. Burrow was struck and killed by a stray bullet. Miraculously, Mr. Dodson fled the area on foot, escaped to the North, and lived in East St. Louis, Illinois, under an assumed name for the next eighteen years. What no one could have possibly predicted at the time was the impact the Burton Dodson affair would have on the future life of John McFerren and the area's race relations.

Local Leader

During World War II, John McFerren braved the blood-soaked trenches of France as a drafted service member in the United States Army. Throughout his combat tour in Western Europe, Mr. McFerren and his fellow segregated African-American soldiers were regularly ordered to hand-deliver heavy ammunition cans

to their white counterparts, who were themselves fighting on the frontlines against Adolf Hitler's racist Nazi regime. But the often life-threatening and undeniably arduous work eventually took its toll on John's small frame. In the spring of 1945, he was shipped back to the United States, where he recovered from a war-related back injury. Following an honorable discharge from the military, John returned to his rural birthplace, and in 1950, married a Fayette County high school senior named Viola Harris. For the next eight years, the McFerrens kept their heads down, attended church, and worked diligently on the family's meager eight-acre farm to support themselves.

But in the late summer of 1958, a dark chapter in Fayette County's long and divisively racist history resurfaced, ultimately sparking something profound within the lives of John, his young wife, and those residing in the local black community. On September 3, 1958, a seventy-eight-year-old black man by the name of Charlie "Unk" Taylor was apprehended in East St. Louis by special agents of the Illinois FBI. After a routine fingerprint check, it was soon determined that Mr. Taylor was, in reality, Burton Dodson, the same fugitive now wanted in Fayette County for the murder of Deputy Olin B. Burrow eighteen years before.

As time would tell, this was to be one of the first in a long series of future collaborations between J. Edgar Hoover's powerful G-Men and Fayette County's corrupt law enforcement officials. From the moment of his extradition back to Tennessee on September 25, 1958, through his indictment on November 24, until the start of his Fayette County murder trial in early April 1959, Mr. Dodson remained behind bars while his attorney, a Memphis African-American man named James F. Estes, prepared for his defense.

Before his participation in the liberation of Europe in 1944, and just by coincidence, John McFerren had already met and befriended James Estes while the two soldiers were stationed together in the

midwestern United States. As a teen growing up in the tightly-knit Tennessee county, John had also heard the amazing legend of Dodson's heroic 1940 escape from the sheriff's white lynch mob and pursuing bloodhounds. So when Attorney Estes, a former Army buddy of John's, arrived unexpectedly at the Fayette County Courthouse in downtown Somerville to represent Dodson, the inquisitive thirty-four-year-old McFerren could not be kept away from the hometown proceedings. Due to the Jim Crow laws of the day and the white-only seating, the standing-room area at the back of the dust-filled courtroom was packed with local African-American onlookers, among them, John McFerren and his neighboring friend and brother-in-law, Harpman Jameson.

Since being a registered voter within Fayette County was an official prerequisite for sitting on the twelve-man jury, and only a handful of African Americans in the county were registered to vote, Attorney Estes was forced to defend his client in the black-on-white murder trial in front of an all-white jury. Despite Estes's fiercely noble and equally brilliant rhetoric in the courtroom as the area's first black defense attorney, and the eyewitness accounts indicating that Deputy Burrow had not been shot by Dodson in 1940 but was instead the victim of friendly fire, the accused seventy-eight-year-old man was found guilty of second-degree murder on Thursday night, April 2, 1959, and then sentenced the following week to twenty years in prison. But the heartbreaking courtroom drama had a more enduring, conversely positive, effect on the area's black population.

Estes used Dodson's unjust, racially motivated conviction to highlight the need for African Americans to serve as future jury members, and therefore privately pushed McFerren to encourage other black Fayette County residents to become registered voters. By that summer, James Estes, John McFerren, and Harpman Jameson had unknowingly taken up their personal crosses as leaders in the South's new civil rights movement.

The Blacklist and Tent City

Following the South's overwhelming defeat at the end of the Civil War in 1865, millions of recently freed slaves were faced with a difficult decision; travel hundreds of miles with nothing in hand to the unfamiliar yet progressive North, only to start from scratch, or stay in the South and work on familiar farms, alongside familiar black neighbors, under the direction of familiar white families, who lived in familiar small towns. For many, the prospect of leaving the only source of food, shelter, and community they had ever known was too daunting a task to even consider. As a result, thousands of freed slaves remained in Fayette County and continued to work for their former slave owners, not as free labor, but this time as underpaid tenant farmers, sharecroppers, housekeepers, butlers, cooks, and nannies. By 1959, more than 16,900 African Americans lived in Fayette County. In comparison to its white residents, black families comprised almost seventy percent of the county's total populace. Consequently, when this long-disenfranchised majority began to organize that year under the leadership of John McFerren, the potential shift in racial power terrified the white minority.

As the founders of the county's new social justice organization, the Fayette County Civic & Welfare League/FCCWL, James Estes, the McFerrens, the Jamesons, and other black leaders from the area launched a voter registration drive on behalf of Fayette's African-American community. The results were immediate. They arrived by foot in worn-out shoe leather, packed inside dented cars, and loaded into the backs of rusted pick-up truck beds. They suffered under Tennessee's unrelenting heat and humidity, only to then endure bureaucratic stonewalling, verbal harassment, and physical assaults. In the months following the Dodson trial in April, hundreds of brave African-American men and women lined up, one by one and reticently proud, on the outdoor steps of the Fayette County Courthouse in

downtown Somerville to register as official voters in the region's upcoming elections. But the new League's push to upend the white community's ruthlessly racist stranglehold on local politics quickly caught the fearful attention of government officials in Somerville, the Fayette County Sheriff's Department, and the area's wealthy white business and agricultural establishment.

Unified under the gleaming robe of the county's White Citizens Council, dozens of upper and middle-class landowners, merchants, politicians, judges, and law enforcement officials met in secret, strategized, and ultimately implemented a scheme to thwart the black voting efforts. First, West Tennessee Democratic Party leaders and Fayette County election officials audaciously, and in violation of constitutional law, barred hundreds of already registered African Americans from entering the polls during the local primary on August 1, 1959. In a letter distributed to precinct officials by representatives of the local Democratic Party, it was stated, "If any Negroes should ask to vote in your district, they are to be informed that this is a White Democratic Primary and not a general election." In turn, Attorney Estes, McFerren, and the FCCWL submitted an official complaint to the DOJ's Civil Rights Division, and on November 16, 1959, a federal lawsuit was filed against Fayette County's Democratic Executive Committee.

It was immediately clear to the local white leadership that a more devious method for eliminating the county's black voter base was needed. As a means of quietly circumventing the recent legal action taken by the federal government while also forcing the black registrants to move out of Fayette County en masse, the White Citizens Council next initiated an economic embargo. After a list of names of Fayette County's black voters was compiled, this new "blacklist" was copied and then quietly distributed to each of the area's commercial and industrial establishments. By the spring of 1960, dozens of white business owners, including physicians,

insurance agents, grocers, bankers, auto mechanics, and gasoline distributors, had joined the embargo, secretly agreeing to deny much-needed products and services to the county's African-American voters. Then, when that wasn't enough to push them out of the area, the county's white cabal dealt yet another, even more, devastating blow.

As 1960 drew to a close and the bone-chilling months of winter set in, the blacklist was once again used for nefarious purposes, this time to evict numerous families from the only homes they had ever known. Many of Fayette County's black citizens were tenant farmers at the time. As such, these families, in exchange for working on white-owned farms, lived rent-free in barely inhabitable shanties located on the same white farm owner's property. As part of this repugnant tenant-farming and sharecropping system, it was also necessary for the black families to take out crop loans from their white landlords in order to pay for the initial supplies required for a profitable future harvest. But as the individual tenant farmers and sharecroppers became registered voters, and the blacklist was circulated amongst their white Fayette County landlords, early repayment of these crop loans was angrily demanded in full, and numerous men, women, and children were thrown out of their tenant-farming homes.

In response to the crisis, a black farmer and landowner named Shepard Towles permitted dozens of now homeless families to live in canvas tents on his open field south of Somerville. The encampment, ultimately led by respected civil rights leader and Towles' friend John McFerren, quickly earned the nickname "Tent City." John and other industrious black leaders from the area quickly provided the Tent City residents with kerosene lighting, heat from oil and wood-burning stoves, and solid flooring made of wooden pallets and layered sheets of cardboard. Many of the tenants were happily overwhelmed by the new tents. When compared to the drafty shacks they had suffered in for generations, the canvas accommodations were a vast improvement

in keeping out the weather. Despite the harsh winters and drenching rains, a lack of proper bathroom, laundry, and cooking facilities, drive-by-shootings at the hands of local white teens and Klansmen, and the continued pressure of the economic embargo, scores of African American residents from Fayette County remained in Tent City for the next three years.

The McFerren Grocery and Oil Company

Robert McFerren, John's more educated sibling, had long been the owner and manager of the McFerren Grocery and Oil Company. The rural enterprise, located on the west side of Highway 195, looked out over the three-way merging of Highways 195, 76, and Lagrange Road about a mile and a half south of the Somerville town square. It was a small and simple structure, built from drab cinder blocks, topped with sheets of corrugated metal, and painted all in white. Serving as its primary signage, propped up just above the business's main entrance and crumbling wooden canopy, a five-tiered, pyramid-like facade had been constructed of shiplap and was hand-painted with the words "McFERREN GRO." In the gravel parking lot in front of the building, two bulbous gas pumps stood attentively like wet nurses from the antebellum past, waiting obediently for a thirsty visitor in need of nurturing and feeding. Due to the business's popular locale near Somerville's black community and the three-way intersection's frequent in-and-out-of-town traffic, Robert McFerren consistently earned a respectable annual income.

But just months after the Dodson trial in 1959, all hell broke loose. At first, the area's white leadership believed that it was Robert who was stirring up all the trouble. After all, they wondered, how could an illiterate, uneducated black farmer like John McFerren start a voter registration drive that large? It didn't seem possible. Consequently, it was the other McFerren, the more successful and academically trained

Robert, who was mistakenly blamed for instigating the county's racial upheaval. In the months that followed, Robert's entrepreneurial endeavor became one of the many targets of the white merchants' embargo. It began with only small items. First, the local Coca-Cola bottler refused to stock Robert's cold storage with soft drinks. Next, the nearby dairy stopped delivering milk, butter, cheese, and ice cream.

Eventually, a wealthy Fayette County farmer, banker, and Somerville Gulf Oil distributor dealt the most damaging blow. A nearby white man by the name of Reuben "Rube" Scott Rhea Sr. began halting large shipments of fuel to Robert's gas station. Adding insult to injury, Mr. Rhea, who legally owned the underground tanks and fuel pumps at Robert's business, later ordered that the equipment be physically removed from the property to ensure that Robert never sold gasoline again. In quickstep, large earth-moving equipment under the direction of Rhea arrived at the three-way gas station and dug up Robert's fuel tanks. With a rapidly dwindling supply of goods to offer to his neighboring black customers, Robert, now defeated and demoralized, eventually threw up his hands, closed the business, and moved away.

The fallout weighed heavily on John's shoulders. In truth, he had been the catalyst of Robert's undoing. And although he was desperate to make it up to his brother, there were additional factors that contributed to John's final decision. In the weeks following Robert's forfeiture of the business, John was encouraged by other black leaders from the area to reopen the establishment as a way of supplying the goods and services the white embargo had since denied to the black community. By 1960, John and Viola McFerren had gone into business for themselves and were renting Robert's old building from him for $50.00 a month. But because of the continued embargo, John was forced to make day-long trips into Memphis to buy the essential supplies he could then sell at his store.

It was a rough haul, and he often had to flag down delivery trucks along the side of the road or secretly approach them in back alleyways in order to purchase crucial items such as bread, milk, and beef. During his starlit trips back into Fayette County, he was often confronted by large motorcades of patrolling Klansmen. But the crafty driver was several steps ahead of the notorious lynch mobs. Predicting their future efforts to stop him at every corner, John routinely slipped in and out of town by navigating Macon Road and the other bumpy backroads of Fayette County. He also re-equipped his clunky, 1955 black Ford Fairlane with a high-powered Thunderbird engine, a pair of four-barreled carburetors, and a custom-designed suspension system that allowed him to make high-speed turns when being chased. Much like the local moonshiners of the day, and the Southern stock car racers they eventually spawned, John became an ace at modifying his getaway car and outrunning the enemy.

The next, much larger hurdle to overcome was the issue of the business's lack of fuel tanks, fuel pumps, and the unavailability of local fuel shipments. Undeterred by the seemingly insurmountable challenges before him, John spent most of the McFerren couple's savings on two new tanks and pumps to replace the ones that had been taken from Robert. Then, on cue, the White Citizens Council reared its ugly head yet again. When John finally got the two 6000-gallon tanks buried underground and then ordered the first fuel shipment to be delivered from Memphis, a local Fayette County Sheriff's deputy named Thomas Edward "Ted" Davis stopped the out-of-town fuel tanker as it entered the county. According to past reports, Davis pulled out his gun and threatened the truck driver with bodily harm, ultimately forcing the man to turn the tanker around. It was only after secret negotiations with the NAACP, the DOJ, and a distant fuel refinery several months later that John and Viola finally acquired the gasoline needed to fill their new tanks.

Encouraged by their business's hard-fought success from early 1960 through 1961, the married entrepreneurs ultimately set out to construct a larger, more modern building that would serve as a combination gas station, grocery, café, maintenance garage, and laundromat. Faced with FCCWL infighting, frivolous lawsuits meant to disrupt their personal financial standing, and the denial of local financing, the McFerrens finally secured a large business loan from Dr. James A. Dombrowski, a liberal social activist and Executive Director of the Southern Conference Educational Fund in New Orleans. In 1963, and much to the chagrin of the area's white coveters, John completed construction of the new McFerren Grocery and Oil Company next door to Robert's former building. Sometime later, the couple obtained another loan through the Small Business Administration which they used to pay back Dr. Dombrowski's organization. Still, the McFerrens and their new building were the continued targets of frequent drive-by shootings, harassing telephone calls, and various threats at the hands of the local KKK.

In spite of the constant pressures, the McFerren Grocery and Oil Company remained at the epicenter of the civil rights movement in Fayette County for the next decade. From the moment they took over Robert's old building, John and Viola's business became the local black community's primary meeting place. It was there that area residents traveled to contact the leadership of the FCCWL (later, the Original FCCWL) when in dire need of assistance. Quickly, the grocery and gas station also established itself as the main drop point for donated clothing and food distributions to those living in Tent City. It was also used as a staging area for the 1.6-mile civil rights marches the McFerrens regularly led from southern Somerville, north along Highway 76, and onto the steps of the Fayette County Courthouse. And finally, the destination was a safe haven where area activists frequently held secret strategy meetings and quietly exchanged sensitive local information.

Attention and Assistance

They journeyed day and night to reach their destinations. They drove without rest to the urban meccas of the more progressive North, determined to convey their message to those who might listen. They left their frightened wives and children behind for days at a time. They pounded the concrete sidewalks of Washington, D.C., Chicago, Newark, and New York City in search of sympathetic ears, media attention, and hopefully legal and financial assistance. Throughout their struggle to gain racial equality and individual freedom, Attorney James F. Estes, John McFerren, Harpman Jameson, and other West Tennessee African Americans traveled hundreds of miles to meet with some of the most influential government and social leaders of the era.

In January 1960, the brave black leaders made the lengthy trip to the nation's capital to attend the Volunteer Civil Rights Commission hearings hosted by a number of organizations including Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference/SCLC. In a deeply emotional question and answer session led by the Rev. James Lawson, John McFerren spoke candidly at the hearings about the plight of Fayette County's black community.

During his lengthy comments, John outlined the violence his mother had recently suffered at the hands of a local white dairy truck driver. It was his contention to the Rev. Lawson that Mrs. Estella McFerren, while standing in her own front yard, was run down by a delivery driver who worked for the nearby Cedar Hill Farms dairy. It was also McFerren's claim that the accident was most likely intentional. Worse yet, when the Tennessee Highway Patrol reached the scene of the incident at Mrs. McFerren's home just south of Somerville, no charges were filed against the dairy truck driver.

Not long after his return home from the January hearings in D.C., John encountered the same patrolman who investigated the prior calamity. After being pulled over by Tennessee Highway Patrolman Jerry

Simmons near the McFerrens' business, John was interrogated about his recent comments in Washington and then threatened by Patrolman Simmons. According to a February 17, 1960 article in the *Memphis World* (a now-defunct locally-owned African-American newspaper), Simmons told McFerren:

> The reason nothing was done is because that is the way I saw it. You talk too much. What you need is a good head-whipping, that would shut your mouth up. What you need is for me to catch you out one night and give you a good head-beating.

While local and state newspapers such as *The Commercial Appeal*, *Tri-State Defender*, *Memphis World*, *The Jackson Sun*, and *The Nashville Tennessean* published regular pieces on the Fayette County conflict in 1959, it wasn't until the summer of the following year that the national press picked up the story. In August of 1960, African-American journalist Ted Poston wrote a series of hard-hitting editorials for the *New York Post* focusing on the social kettle that was boiling over in Somerville. Not long afterward, numerous other publications raced to cover the salacious saga, including *TIME*, *Jet*, and *Ebony* magazines. In the case of *Ebony*, a full six-page spread was dedicated to the issue in its September 1960 edition. In the article entitled "Cold War in Fayette County," numerous black-and-white photographs, including one of Winfrey Bottom, Somerville's detestable black ghetto, accompanied a photostatic copy of the infamous blacklist. In the *Ebony* article, John McFerren himself was quoted as saying:

> I was born and raised in Fayette County. It was 18 years before I was taken into the army and before I even knowed I had a country. I came back here and made a home. I think it is as important for me to fight a war here as it is for me to go over there and fight. This war is just as important as World War II.

As a result of the national news coverage, a wave of both private and federal assistance poured into Fayette County. Over the course of the next several years, throngs of civic-minded college students from the North made the annual pilgrimage to volunteer at Tent City. High-profile civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and Dr. King's SCLC donated money and provided free legal assistance to the FCCWL. Well-known black civil rights leaders and attorneys from Memphis, such as the Rev. James Lawson, Dr. Benjamin Hooks, Russell Sugarmon, and A.W. Willis, risked their lives to bail out jailed activists in Somerville. The Invaders, a now-disbanded black militant group from Memphis, occasionally provided aid.

Jimmy Hoffa's International Brotherhood of Teamsters (Local 97 in Newark, New Jersey) gladly gave much-needed food and clothing. Even a Memphis-based sect of the Nation of Islam and communist groups linked to the Soviet Union approached the McFerrens to offer assistance. Luckily, the patriotic and freedom-loving John and Viola were wise enough to recognize, at least most of the time, the dark political strings that were attached to some of these more radical organizations, and therefore declined their help.

But most important to the McFerrens, Jamesons, FCCWL, and the members of Fayette's black community was the powerful support granted by the White House and the Department of Justice. During his first filmed press conference on January 25, 1961, a newly sworn-in President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was asked by African-American reporter Alice Dunnigan:

> Does your administration plan to take any steps to solve the problem in Fayette…uh Fayette County, Tennessee, where tenant…tenant farmers have been evicted from their homes because they voted last November, and must now live in tents?

President Kennedy then responded:

> We are uh…the Congress, of course, enacted legislation which placed very clear responsibility on the executive branch, to protect the right of voting. I am extreme…I supported that legislation. I am extremely interested in making sure that every American is given the right to cast his vote without prejudice to his rights as a citizen. And therefore I can, uh state that this administration will, pursue uh, the problem of providing that protection, uh…with all vigor.

Even before America's version of Camelot seized control of Washington's gilded reins, James F. Estes, the McFerrens, and the FCCWL were in constant communication with the DOJ's Civil Rights Division under the Eisenhower administration. But it was only after President Kennedy's inauguration that the U.S. government supercharged its efforts to extinguish the racial firestorm that had engulfed Fayette County. At the new President's direction, a large stockpile of federally-funded food was sent to Tent City in the summer of 1961. The President's younger brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, also directed U.S. Assistant Attorney General John Michael Doar to double his efforts in resolving the issue of the economic embargo and exiled tenant farmers. With the assistance of fellow Civil Rights Division Attorney J. Harold "Nick" Flannery Jr., Doar ultimately settled the federal lawsuits in a Cincinnati, Ohio courtroom in 1962. The federal court's consent decree included a stern warning to Fayette County's white merchants and landowners never to harass the McFerrens and other black residents again.

Desegregation and the DOJ

As the old segregationist adage goes, they were "separate but equal." Yes, it was true; public schools in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

were separated by race, little white boys and girls over here, little black boys and girls over there. But in reality, the education offered to African Americans living in the alleged separate-but-equal Jim Crow South was repugnant, to say the least. Unlike their white counterparts, the school year for black children was not dedicated to providing them with an adequate education, but instead scheduled around the cotton planting and harvesting seasons. When they weren't toiling under the blistering sun, chopping cotton alongside their tenant-farming parents, hundreds of youngsters were stuffed into overcrowded ramshackle school houses barely fit for livestock. They lacked desks and school books, and what materials they were afforded were worn-out hand-me-downs donated by neighboring white schools.

In Viola Harris's hometown of Michigan City, Mississippi, a small community less than a mile from the Tennessee border, there wasn't even a school for African-American teenagers to attend. Hungry to learn, she walked five miles every day across the state line into Fayette County just to catch a bus in LaGrange, Tennessee. From there, she and her fellow passengers were driven several additional miles to the Fayette County Training School in Somerville. Even after her marriage to John McFerren in 1950, the determined young wife and eventual mother continued to look toward the horizon by attending Jackson State Community College and Memphis State University, a school known today as the University of Memphis. Clearly, the attainment of a proper education was extremely important to Mrs. Viola Harris McFerren.

Consequently, when she and John became parents, it was paramount to Viola that her own children be provided with suitable academic opportunities. In 1965, the McFerrens sought the help of the DOJ's Civil Rights Division once again. In yet another effort to end the area's despotic segregationist traditions, John, Viola, and numerous other African-American parents filed a federal desegregation lawsuit in June of that year against the Fayette County school board. Cited as "*McFerren v. County Board of Education of Fayette County, Tennessee*," the federal

action was named in honor of one of the lawsuit's many plaintiffs, John and Viola's first son, John McFerren Jr.

Although school integration in Fayette County was eventually achieved, the challenges facing the newly integrated black students were almost unbearable. School bus rides were torture. Pennies were pelted at the heads of the black boys and girls, and they were repeatedly called the "N-word" by opposing white students. Fights broke out in school hallways, and local white administrators, teachers, and other staff members regarded the African-American children with utter contempt. Due to their previous school environment, most were behind academically and struggled to catch up to their white peers. But unlike the underprivileged white children who were also integrated into the new public education system, Fayette County's more affluent and middle-class white families found an avenue for avoiding the fiery issue altogether.

Immediately following the July 1965 submission and recognition of the new desegregation plan, an all-white private school called Fayette Academy was established in the heart of the county. Along with the sudden blossoming of other private schools in West Tennessee that year, Fayette Academy's enrollment quickly swelled. Funding the school's development was not a problem, and much-needed start-up cash flowed in through private tuition payments and the financial backing of numerous white landowners, businessmen, bankers, and government officials in Somerville. Unquestionably, Fayette Academy, while claiming it provided a private "Christian Education," was created solely to prevent impoverished African-American children from attending the costly institution, thereby allowing white parents and their own children to evade the impending federal school desegregation judgments.

In 1966, just a year after its inception, the new all-white school was provided with a large tract of land located on the south side of Highway 64 just west of downtown Somerville. Eager to assist Fayette Academy

and its future growth, wealthy landowner, banker, and businessman, Reuben “Rube” Scott Rhea Sr. sold thirty-three acres of agricultural real estate to the private institution’s school board. In the end, Fayette Academy became an exclusive haven for Fayette County’s middle and upper-class white community. During a hearing held in Nashville on April 6, 1971, Federal District Court Judge Robert N. McRae staunchly asserted that Fayette Academy was a “beautiful building sitting on top of a hill as a monument against the black people.”

But while the U.S. court system and other federal agencies, specifically the DOJ’s Civil Rights Division, were professed allies of the African Americans who called Fayette County home in the 1960s, another subsidiary of the DOJ was, at the exact same time, diametrically opposed to the McFerrens and their unrelenting civil rights endeavors.