

HARRODSBURG & THE FREEDOM MARCH OF 1964

By: Kandie Adkinson & Anna Armstrong, for the
Harrodsburg & Mercer County Oral History Committee

The year was 1964. Teenage girls were falling in love with a mop-top quartet from England who sang a song about holding hands while teenage boys were hearing "Welcome to Viet Nam."

At the same time, there was a struggle happening in the United States involving individuals with a desire that is inherent in all of us--the desire to be respected. Every night we watched fuzzy images on black and white television sets of our fellow Americans being dragged from lunch counters or being sprayed with fire hoses. Unless we had been denied the right to sit on any seat on a public bus, drink at any public drinking fountain or shop in any store on Main Street, most of us couldn't relate. Unless we were on the "receiving end" of heavy nightsticks and ferocious police dogs, most of us couldn't understand what was happening in faraway Selma and Montgomery and, closer to home, in Lexington and Louisville. But in reality, the struggle for respect affected our neighbors.

In September 1963 four little girls were killed by a bomb as they attended Sunday School at a black church in Birmingham, Alabama. Did you know a similar attack occurred at a black church that had bought property on Poplar Street in Harrodsburg in May 1917? During an interview conducted by the James Harrod Trust and Kentucky Oral History Commission in 2010, 105-year old Margaret Harris, probably the only person alive who had firsthand knowledge of the attack, told how the dynamite was placed near the pulpit on a Saturday night. She said "Thank God, no one was hurt." She also said she and others got up the next morning and went to church anyway. When asked why she thought the bombing had occurred, she said "I guess they just didn't want us there." You can hear the interview with Miss Margaret at the Mercer County Public Library or online at <http://passtheword.ky.gov/person/margaret-harris>.

On August 28, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., led over 100,000 individuals in a march on Washington, D.C. It was there that Dr. King presented his now famous "I have a dream" speech. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy three months later on November 22, 1963, could have been a turning point for Civil Rights in our country... but it wasn't. President Kennedy was an advocate for Civil Rights; his death could have resulted in delayed legislation or no legislation at all. Instead, President Lyndon B. Johnson assumed the mantle of responsibility and in February 1964 the U.S. House of Representatives approved the Civil Rights bill in an overwhelming vote. President Johnson declared the action of the House as "an historic step forward for the cause of dignity in America." No longer would skin color determine access to public accommodations.

At the same time, similar legislation endorsed by Governor Edward T. "Ned" Breathitt was pending in the Kentucky General Assembly. On February 11, 1964, thirty ministers from across the Commonwealth, led by Rev. Grayson L. Tucker of Louisville, placed a black wreath at the foot of Abraham Lincoln's statue in the Capitol Rotunda in Frankfort to express their support for a bill

introduced by State Representative Norbert Blume of Louisville that prohibited racial discrimination in all public accommodations. The House Bill was expected to be filibustered in the State Senate. On February 28, 1964, State Senator Shelby Kinkead introduced Civil Rights legislation that weakened the House version. The Senate bill excluded certain businesses, such as barber shops, from opening their doors to all races. Civil Rights advocates who preferred the House Bill were told "Half a loaf is better than none."

In March 1964 Governor Breathitt said he would support legislation prohibiting discrimination during the last fifteen days of the current Kentucky legislative session if Congress had not yet acted on the federal Civil Rights bill. In a speech in Indianapolis, Governor Breathitt said "Discrimination against individual citizens, or their exclusion from places of public accommodation, is a denial of basic human dignity." Earlier in February of that year he had announced his intention to strengthen the Human Rights Commission which was, at that time, a powerless advisory group.

As with all important legislation in the course of our history, it was time for the people to lift their voices in support or opposition. *Vox Populi, Vox Dei*. It was time for those blurry images on our television sets to become life size human beings. Freedom Marches, similar to the march in Washington, D.C., in 1963, provided an opportunity for supporters of the Kentucky Civil Rights Bill to be seen and heard.

On March 4, 1964, the Congress of Racial Equality led a march up Capitol Avenue in Frankfort to the Capitol Building. The march was organized by Bishop C. Eubank Tucker of Louisville; it was supported by the Kentucky Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. The 34 participants were concerned the larger march scheduled for the next day, March 5, would undermine the pending legislation if persons other than Kentucky residents participated.

That same day, March 4, a tornado killed two persons in Benton, Kentucky. Another 25 persons were seriously injured by storms that moved eastward. Flooding was widespread in the Commonwealth including Frankfort.

In spite of tragedy at home, hundreds of residents from Western Kentucky traveled to Frankfort on Thursday, March 5, 1964, to join Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., baseball player Jackie Robinson, and a crowd of more than 10,000 to participate in a Freedom March up Capitol Avenue to the Capitol Building to show their support of the Kentucky Civil Rights Bill. The assembly point was Second Street & Capitol Avenue near the Kentucky River Bridge. Twenty-four courtesy houses were located along the route; there were concession stands, portable restrooms, and ambulances in place.

Included in the crowd were nearly 100 representatives from Mercer County. A school bus had been contracted to carry students from the Harrodsburg school system to Frankfort. (For many who walked to school, it was their first ride on a public school bus.)

Five students who ranged in age from 13 to 17 in 1964 recently shared their memories of the march for a documentary being produced by Andy Reynolds. The individual interviews were conducted after the eighth annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., commemoration in Harrodsburg on Monday, January

20, 2014, at Harrodsburg High School by Anna Armstrong and Kandie Adkinson representing the Harrodsburg & Mercer County Oral History Committee. The Martin Luther King Day event was coordinated by the Mercer County Cooperative Extension Service.

Duke Dunn, Almetra Smith Taylor, Vanessa Stokes, Barbara Short Hudson, and Samuel Wheat III recalled the weather as being cold and rainy with occasional sleet, but the rain did not dampen their enthusiasm. They were anxious to participate in the march and see Dr. King, Jackie Robinson, and others who had traveled to Kentucky on their behalf. A talented musician, Sam Wheat was anxious to hear the folk trio, Peter, Paul and Mary. (They performed "Go Tell It on the Mountain" at the Frankfort march.) Wheat was also hoping to see and hear Harry Belafonte if the singer might be in attendance. Others such as Mahalia Jackson and comedian Dick Gregory were scheduled to participate but the weather prevented their appearance in Kentucky.

As she was one of the older students, Barbara Short Hudson was assigned the task of watching the younger participants from Harrodsburg. They stayed in a group and watched the program together. It didn't occur to them they could have met the dangers they saw on television face to face. They remembered seeing robed members of the Ku Klux Klan standing along Capital Avenue.

All five from the Harrodsburg delegation also remembered the various speakers calling for Governor Breathitt to come outside and join them on the platform. Although the governor's daughter, Mary Fran Breathitt (age 15), was among the marchers, the governor preferred to meet the leaders of the march inside his office.

Weather conditions at airports may have caused the delay in starting the march on March 5, 1964, but the crowd was patient. In fact, the Kentucky State Police commented on the peaceful nature of the participants. The delay created a glitch in the return trip to Harrodsburg. The bus was needed to transport students when school was dismissed but the program in Frankfort was not over. Most students, if not all, decided to stay in Frankfort and ride home with the adults who had driven their personal cars. In their minds, the day was too important to be cut short. No one wanted to miss a minute. They wanted to be in Frankfort on March 5.

During her interview, Almetra Smith Taylor shared a song that is still associated with the Freedom Marches of the 1960's including the march in Frankfort. Ms. Taylor beautifully sang "We Shall Overcome."

Dr. King is remembered for saying "I submit to you that if a man hasn't discovered something he will die for, he isn't fit to live." In the final days of the 1964 session of the Kentucky General Assembly, and less than two weeks after the Freedom March, thirty-two persons (18 blacks and 14 whites) ranging in age from 15 to 71 staged a five-day hunger strike in the House Gallery in Frankfort in an effort to resurrect the dying public accommodations bill. The hunger strike was led by Frank Stanley, Jr., a 27-year-old newspaper editor from Louisville. There were unity fasts across the Commonwealth.

Although their efforts did not bear fruit, seeds were planted that would result in a future harvest. Immediately after the 1964 legislative session, Governor Breathitt canceled an Executive Order

involving Civil Rights that had been signed by Governor Bert Combs. That order was involved in court litigation; the court decision could have affected any future laws regarding Civil Rights in Kentucky.

On July 2, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law. No special session was called in Kentucky to address the federal legislation. In all probability, Kentucky legislators may have spent the next eighteen months watching reaction to the federal law and any possible amendments as they garnered sufficient votes in support of a similar Civil Rights Act for the Commonwealth.

According to the "Journal of the House of Representatives," House Bill 2, entitled "An Act to prevent discrimination in employment and public accommodations within the Commonwealth of Kentucky" was introduced on the House Floor on January 5, 1966, by the following sponsors: Representatives John Y. Brown, Blume, Siemens, Warders, Ballenger, Smothers, Smith, John D. Miller, Ball, McIntyre, Caldwell, Harper, James E. Hunt, Brady, Allen, Pile, Martin, Chapman, Stuart, Eicher, Blythe, Hardin and Keene. On January 27, 1966, House Bill 2 was approved by the General Assembly and signed into law by Governor Edward T. "Ned" Breathitt. The legislation provided for the implementation of the Federal Civil Rights Act (as amended) in Kentucky. House Bill 2 was subsequently codified in Chapter 344 of the Kentucky Revised Statutes.

According to a press release by the Commission on Human Rights on December 3, 2013, "The Kentucky Civil Rights Act makes it illegal to discriminate against people in the areas of employment, financial transactions, housing and public accommodations. Discrimination is prohibited in all these areas based on race, color, religion, national origin, gender, and disability. In employment, discrimination is further prohibited on the basis of age (40 years and over) and on the basis of tobacco - smoking status. In housing, discrimination is further prohibited based on familial status, which protects people with children in the household under the age of 18-years-old, and it protects women who are pregnant. It is also a violation of the law to retaliate against a person who has made a discrimination complaint to the commission."

Fast forward to 2014. Fifty years have passed since Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., led a march in Frankfort in support of Kentucky's efforts to end discrimination. Fifty years have passed since Harrodsburg students loaded a school bus and went to Frankfort to participate.

On January 16, 2014, Rev. John D. Short III, pastor of the Centennial Baptist Church in Harrodsburg, received the Martin Luther King Citizenship Award at the annual Martin Luther King Day celebration in Frankfort. In his letter of nomination, Pastor Short's nephew, Russell Mays, a student at Eastern Kentucky University, said "When I think of someone close to Martin Luther King, Jr., I think of him. Whatever he stands for, he takes a stand in."

On Wednesday, March 5, 2014, the fiftieth anniversary of the 1964 Freedom March in Frankfort will be commemorated. The crowd will gather at the corner of 2nd Street and Capital Avenue at 9:30 a.m. then proceed to the State Capitol for a rally. According to the same press release from the Commission on Human Rights, "Everyone who is proud of Kentucky's historic role in helping to end segregation by becoming the first state south of the Mason-Dixon Line to have a state Civil Rights Act is

enthusiastically invited to participate." For more information, contact the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights at 1.800.292.5566 or visit their website at <http://www.kchr.ky.gov>.

Tiffany Yeast of Harrodsburg serves as chairman of the Martin Luther King, Jr., State Commission. Tressa Brown, a resident of Burgin, is the coordinator for the Kentucky African American Heritage Commission.