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“We knew it was coming.”

A Chronicle of The Civil Rights Movement in Thomasville,
Georgia, 1898 – 1975



Leaders of Thomasville’s Civil Rights Movement march on West Jackson Street circa 1966. On left, Rev. I.L. Mullins and Curtis Thomas. (Courtesy Jack Hadley Black History Museum)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report chronicles the arc of the Civil Rights Movement as it unfolded in Thomasville, Georgia, offering a detailed look into how a small Southern community navigated decades of racial segregation, social resistance, and eventual transformation. Centered around the pivotal role of First Missionary Baptist Church and its long-serving pastor, Rev. Isaac L. Mullins, the narrative traces the city's journey from the Jim Crow era to the victories of local Black leaders in politics and education.

Historic Context:

Thomasville's Civil Rights story is rooted in its post-Reconstruction history, where segregation laws tightly controlled Black life, restricting access to education, voting, and economic opportunity. Despite the progressive influence of wealthy Northern seasonal residents, racial discrimination persisted, often violently enforced.

Regional Distinctions:

The presence of Northern "plantation Yankees" introduced a layer of paternalism that, while not eliminating racism, fostered a more tolerant environment than in many Deep South communities. This relative progressiveness allowed for early Black middle-class development and some interracial dialogue.

Emergence of Protest:

Resistance to injustice was sporadic but persistent throughout the early 20th century, with First Missionary Baptist Church frequently at the center. Boycotts, public protests opposing lynching, and civic engagement began shaping the community's quiet but steady push for rights.

The Era of Agency and Change:

Following national milestones like *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, local leaders—including Rev. Mullins and activist Curtis Thomas—galvanized Thomasville's Black population. Organizations such as the NAACP, the Business and Civic League, and the Inter-racial Committee pushed for employment rights, school integration, and political representation.

Post-King Movement:

After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Thomasville's Civil Rights Movement continued. Peaceful protests, legal challenges to discriminatory voting practices, and civic activism led to real gains. Landmark victories included the 1983 election of Black representatives to the Thomas County Board of Commissioner after a hard-fought lawsuit overturned the at-large voting system.

Legacy:

Thomasville's Civil Rights struggle, though often below the national radar, reflects a determined, grassroots pursuit of justice characterized by resilience, local leadership, and strategic engagement. It highlights the critical role of churches, civic organizations, and community solidarity in effecting change in the American South.

HISTORIC CONTEXT

The Civil Right Movement in the United States was a widespread campaign by African Americans to improve their rights, freedoms, and economic mobility. Much of this campaign took place in the American South where state and local laws, euphemistically known as “Jim Crow,” limited almost every facet of African American life. Prior to the movement, voting for Black Americans in these states was often difficult and dangerous. Educational opportunities were limited, and high paying jobs were few. Any failure to abide by the unspoken social codes of the community, no matter how trivial, was subject to punishment, often violently delivered. The Civil Right Movement transpired in the middle decades of the 20th century, between 1954 and 1968, but the struggle by African Americans for equality and justice began long before and continues to this day.

While the marquee names and events of this era are familiar, how the movement unfolded in smaller communities, below the radar of the national press, is often unknown or forgotten. This paper chronicles those events in one small Southern city, Thomasville, Georgia. It explores the historic and social context preceding the movement, the early stirrings of protest within the community and the key events and leaders which ultimately brought about change.

At the center of this narrative is the role played by the community’s oldest Black congregation and most significant social institution, First Missionary Baptist Church. From its origins in 1866 to its participation in a landmark voting rights case in 1975, First Missionary Baptist was the spiritual and political center of The Civil Rights Movement in Thomasville. Rev. Issac L. Mullins, who led the church for over 40 years, recalled in a 1993 interview, “we were wanting to bring about a peaceful transition. We knew it was coming.”¹

REGIONAL HISTORY

Thomasville, Georgia is located 220 miles south of Atlanta, approximately 22 miles north of the Florida border. Founded in 1826, the city of Thomasville and surrounding Thomas County grew with the rise of cotton cultivation, enslaved labor, and the arrival of the railroad in 1861. Located at the nexus of the fertile Black belt to the north and wiregrass region to the east, the “Red Hills” benefited from rich soil, vast stands of short and long leaf pine and a lengthy growing season. In the wake of The Civil War and the end of enslaved labor, Thomasville was economically depressed, but improved roads and an expanding rail network aided its recovery.² By the mid-1880s, the rail lines were bringing wealthy tourists,

¹ Mullins, Rev. I.L., Thomasville African American Oral History Project, interviewed by Nancy Tinker, (1993), Digital file held by City of Thomasville, File#2, part 1.

² Rogers, W. W. (2004). Thomasville. In *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. Retrieved Jul 5, 2022, from <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/counties-cities-neighborhoods/thomasville/>

many from Cleveland, Ohio, to Thomasville as a winter haven from their industrialized Northern homes. A robust hotel industry developed to serve this genteel clientele. While this Resort Era faded by the dawn of the 20th century, some of the wealthiest Northern visitors stayed and purchased the once grand plantations surrounding Thomasville. Their presence would have a lasting effect.

NORTHERN INFLUENCE

Dubbed “winter cottages,” these former plantations became hunting retreats and country estates. While many of these “plantation Yankees” were seasonal residents, their influence on the local socio-economic landscape endured. In “How the Rose City Rose,” historian Jena Noel Pope suggests this Northern influence helped develop a reputation for the community as an exceptional place where northern progressive ideals, what Pope labels paternalism “produced a Black middle class and acted as a safeguard against Jim Crow or Civil Rights-era violence and oppression.”³

This “safeguard” in Thomasville was not absolute. As detailed below, violence and intimidation did not vanish, but the influence of Northern progressivism did create a foundation for tolerance and dialogue that made the community unique. When a 23-year-old Andrew Young, future diplomat, and civil rights leader, arrived in Thomasville in 1955 to serve as pastor of Bethany Congregational Church, he recalled the community “had a lot of Northern presence, in big plantations.”⁴

Some of these former plantations, now estates, retained large African American work forces that resided on the property in favorable conditions compared to the more widespread tenant farmers and sharecroppers of the area.⁵ Additionally, the conversion of the plantations into winter retreats created jobs, developed master craftsmen, and fed revenue into the community which enhanced a nascent Black middle class. In 1917, according to The Thomasville City Directory, there were 99 Black owned businesses including four insurance agents, five insurance companies, two physicians, one dentist, 26 clergy, 13 restaurants, six barbers and 14 groceries.⁶

The influx of northerners also infused the local episcopalian and congregationalist churches with elements of the pre-Civil War Abolitionist sensibilities and a related sense of civic duty. The construction of The Allen Normal School (1887) and The Church of the Good

³ Pope, Jena Noel, “How the Rose City Rose to Power” (2017), 17.

⁴ Young, Andrew, 1974 - Interview number A-0080 in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007) at The Southern Historical Collection, The Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

⁵ Greene, Princetta Hadley, Thomasville African American Oral History Project, interviewed by Nancy Tinker, (1993), Digital file held by City of Thomasville, File#3, part 1.

⁶ Thomasville City Directory, Chas. S. Gardiner, pub., (1917) – non-circulating resource: Georgia Archives

Shepherd (1894) both of which served the African American population, were the result of white, Northern philanthropy. The Allen Normal School, originally known as The Connecticut Industrial School, had relocated to Thomasville after its original building in nearby Quitman had been burned.⁷

The city's oldest Black church, originally called First Baptist (Colored) then First African Baptist was also a beneficiary, to a lesser degree, of northern largess. A wealthy, Thomasville landowner with Northern roots, Simeon Alexander Smith, had donated the land for their first house of worship which was constructed 1866. The congregation grew steadily from its original 129 member to nearly 800 by the mid-1880s when work began on a second church.⁸ Completed in 1901, the "new and credible"⁹ house of worship was erected at the corner of Madison and Calhoun Streets, also on a piece of land donated by S.A. Smith. In W.E.B. DuBois' *The Negro Church: A Social Study* (1903), the chapter entitled "A Black Belt Country, Georgia" lists First African Baptist as the largest congregation with the greatest value (\$12,000) of the 33 Black churches evaluated in Thomas County.¹⁰ Even across a broader swath of Southwest Georgia, First African Baptist was the largest, most influential congregation. Forty different Baptist congregations from four nearby counties were known collectively as the "Thomasville Association."¹¹

JIM CROW IN THOMASVILLE

The Northern influence prevalent in Thomasville may have soften but did not eliminate the strong segregationist ideals of the region or state. Rigid racial codes emerged in the American South after the collapse of Reconstruction in the late 1870s. A resurgent white political class nicknamed "Redeemers" reasserted control over Northern Republican policies by degrading African Americans rights and privileges which had blossomed during the years of Reconstruction. Southern historian C. Van Woodward, writing as the Civil Right Era began in 1955, made the case that Jim Crow laws implemented a greater degree of racial separation than had existed during enslavement.¹² In *The Way it Was in The South*, author Daniel Grant elaborates by noting that during the enslavement era, "the social distance between master and slave was so great that customs and laws to keep Blacks physically

⁷ Contente, Stella, The Allen Normal & Industrial School, Document Reader 7; 1922 Commencement Program

⁸ Thomasville Baptist Church Congregation History, (1921), Georgia Baptist Church Records, Georgia Baptist History Depository, Special Collections, Jack Tarver Library, Mercer University, Macon, GA, Reel 777.

⁹ *The Thomasville (Ga) Times*, November 19, 1887, 3.

¹⁰ DuBois, WEB, *The Negro Church: A Social Study*, Chp: 15, A Black Belt County, (1903), 63.

¹¹ Georgia Baptist Church Records, Georgia Baptist History Depository, Special Collections, Jack Tarver Library, Mercer University, Macon, GA, Reel 779/ 11. 15.

¹² Woodward, C. Van, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, (1955) 11.

apart were not needed,” but when Blacks began to “their long march to equality” whites felt compelled to institute laws that kept Blacks down and distant.¹³

The 1896 Supreme Court decision in *Plessey v. Ferguson* upheld the legality of this state-imposed discrimination and empowered local communities to create a variety of statutes designed to control African American access to community services, facilities, and opportunities. For almost 70 years, it was very effective.

In Thomasville, legal discrimination took many forms. A 1902 city ordinance stipulated segregated graveyards.¹⁴ A 1903 vagrancy law targeted “able bodied negroes who loaf” in an area then known as Sandy Bottom which was the center of the Black business community.¹⁵ In 1906, authorities prohibited African Americans from attending a holiday presentation at the annual street carnival.¹⁷ Perhaps the most contemptuous or trivial ordinance targeting African Americans was implemented during the prelude to World War One, when food shortages and an absence of the male workforce due to the early effects of The Great Migration, put the community, particularly the agricultural sector, in stress. Local authorities became convinced there were vast numbers of “men in idleness,” primarily African American males, who were avoiding work and living off leftovers brought home by their wives and mothers who worked as maids and cooks in the homes of white families. Passed by the city council in September of 1916, the “Anti-pan Toting” ordinance was designed to fine “any servant who secretly totes a pan of victuals home when she leaves her place of employment.”¹⁸

The most damaging or impactful forms of discrimination in the Jim Crow era, for the Black population, were the limited public funds for African American education and the 1908 Fedler-Williams Bill, in the Georgia State Legislature, which broadly disenfranchised most Black Georgians.¹⁹

For school age children, educational opportunities were limited. The first publicly funded school in Thomasville for African Americans was opened in 1902 and a larger facility, known as the Dewey City Public School (later renamed Douglass) was added 20 years later. Additional school buildings were added over the years, and some integration was

¹³ Grant, D. L., & Grant, J. (2001). *The way it was in the south: The Black experience in Georgia*, 212.

¹⁴ Ibid, 221.

¹⁵ *The Thomasville (Ga) Times-Enterprise*, May 16, 1903, 3.

¹⁶ *The Thomasville (Ga,) Times-Enterprise*, September 5, 1903, 7.

¹⁷ Grant, D. L., & Grant, J. (2001). *The way it was in the south: The Black experience in Georgia*, 219.

¹⁸ *The Thomasville (Ga,) Times-Enterprise*, June 16, 1915, 2.

¹⁹ Burton, Orville V., & Eisenstadt, Peter, *Voting Rights in Georgia: a Short History*, *Southern Cultures Magazine*, Vol. 30, No. 1. (spring 2024) www.southerncultures.org/article/voting-rights-in-georgia/

implemented but until 1970, there were functionally two separate school systems in Thomasville.^{20 21}

The state-imposed laws governing voting were the most corrosive restriction of the Jim Crow Era. Property requirements, literacy tests, “the understanding clause” and the poll tax all served to functionally eliminate most Black voters from the rolls while giving poor white voters a variety of exclusions and loopholes. The poll tax was abolished in Georgia in 1943 during a short-lived era of progressive leadership under Governor Ellis Arnall, but other requirements, like the Citizenship test, remained in place and would continue until the passage of federal legislation in the mid-1960s²²

A snapshot from the middle of the Jim Crow Era provides evidence of how effective this strategy was in marginalizing Black voters in Thomasville. The 1930 US Census lists 11,755 residents in the City of Thomasville of which approximately 3,700 were African Americans of legal voting age.²³ That same year, a roll of registered voters published in *The Thomasville Times-Enterprise* lists just 93 African Americans by name registered to vote in city.²⁴ Eight years later, in 1938, the number dropped to 83. This contrasts sharply with the number of registered black voters after passage of the Federal Voting Rights Act in 1965. That year, field agents working on behalf of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) reported there were 2,500 African Americans registered to vote in Thomasville.²⁵

In addition to these written laws, a de facto social code was embedded in Southern society which dictated how the races should interact. This touched every aspect of society. When First African Baptist hosted performances or speakers during this era, their newspaper announcements always welcomed white guests but advertised in double sized bold text, “special seats for white patronage.”²⁶ This accommodation reflects the code of conduct both whites and Black expected in society.

Violations of this code by African Americans was often met with swift punishment which was deemed “justice” by the vigilantes who dispensed it. The fate of young Emmett

²⁰ History of Douglas High School, Jack Hadley Black History Museum, <https://jackhadleyblackhistorymuseum.com/about/the-history-of-douglass-high-school-thomasville-georgia/#:~:text=The%20first%20public%20school%20for,classrooms%20and%20a%20large%20auditorium>

²¹ Harold Henry Spangle, *The History of the Black Community of Thomas County, Georgia From 1827 To 1909* (Thomasville, Ga.), 29.

²² Koslowsky, R. (2008). Poll tax. In *Encyclopedia of U.S. campaigns, elections, and electoral behavior* (pp. 539-539). SAGE Publications, Inc., <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963886.n281>

²³ Report: General Characteristics Georgia, Color by sex, for the State, urban and rural: 1930 to 1950., p. 11-62, Table 33, (<https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1950/population-volume-2/37779083v2p11ch3.pdf>)

²⁴ *Thomasville (Ga.) Times-Enterprise*, November 15, 1930, 4.

²⁵ SNCC Papers, SOWEGA Field Report, Fall 1965, 3.

²⁶ *The Thomasville (Ga.) Times-Enterprise*, March 11, 1922, 6.

Till, a 14-year-old visiting Mississippi from Chicago in 1955, is one well know example of how this “justice” was delivered but there were hundreds, if not thousands, of others across the South who suffered punishment for their “crimes.”

In contrast to neighboring Brooks and Early County, with 20 and 24 lynchings respectively between 1877 and 1950, Thomas County did experience less racial violence in the decades preceding the Civil Rights Era. Eight African Americans were murdered in the County by vigilantes in that time span.²⁷²⁸ The last recorded killing was 20-year-old Willie Kirkland who, in September of 1930, was snatched from a police escort, taken to Magnolia Park, executed, then dragged through town behind a car. His alleged crime was molesting a 9-year-old white girl even though his crew boss had stated Mr. Kirkland had been on the job site the entire day of the crime.²⁹ His corpse was put on display in front of the courthouse on Madison Street, just four blocks from First African Baptist.³⁰ Annie Grace Hill was a young child walking to School that day and, in her 2005 oral history interview for The Thomasville History Center, recalled seeing Mr. Kirkland’s body dragged up Madison Street behind a car. She also recalled from that era the fate of one of her young playmates, Ruth Hall, who was accused of stealing from a store on Broad Street. “This white man said she stole the candy. He tied her by her two little hands and hung her up with a big string coming down.”³¹

Some harassment, particularly in the rural part of the county, was delivered by “whitecaps” – a self-appointed posse who used threats and violence to force African Americans from their land. In March of 1903, three black households near Barwick in the eastern part of Thomas County were attacked on a single night. Charles Clemmons and his son were beaten and given 48 hours to leave Georgia. Another black farmer, Lee Wright, avoided detection that night by hiding out in a nearby swamp but Scott Wilson’s “young boy was fatally wounded” when the riders opened fire on his home before fleeing. The account notes “All the victims are said to be respectable negroes, and no reason is known for the whitecaps’ action.”³²

As the indignities and discriminations of Jim Crow became more entrenched, historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes in his 2019 work, *The Black Church*, African Americans “were left to make their own way in a segregated world. In their darkest hour, they retreated

²⁷ Tolnay, S. E. & Beck, E. M. (2007). Lynching. In *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. Retrieved Aug 12, 2020, from <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/lynching/>

²⁸ Equal Justice Initiative, (<https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/explore/georgia>)

²⁹ McAleer, S. (2003). Great Indignation: A Study of Racial Violence in Thomas County, Georgia, 1930. *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 87(1), 48–87.

³⁰ *Thomasville Times Enterprise*, September 20, 1930, 4.

³¹ Hall, Annie Grace, Thomasville History Center Oral History Project, interviewed by Lee Willis and Julia Brock, June 18, 2005, Location: “Car trip from Tallahassee to Thomasville”

³² *Thomasville Times-Enterprise*, March 14, 1903, 1.

to the safe space that had always helped them survive oppression: the church.”³³ US Senator and Baptist preacher Raphael Warnock asserts that the church became a focal point for their Black community. They served a multifaceted role as a bastion of hope during hardship, as a community center, a school, a mutual aid society during homelessness and hunger and as political hall and community theater for religious and secular programs.³⁴

One secular program hosted by First African Baptist Church was the annual Emancipation Celebration. Traditionally held in Thomasville on January 1 with a springtime picnic frequently on May 20, the January celebration began at noon with a parade along Broad or Madison Streets that included floats, a marching band and displays. Commemoration wrapped up at First African Baptist Church, in the afternoon and evening, with speeches, performances and a dinner.³⁵ In 1915, the celebration also included a livestock show in the church basement.³⁶ As the decades passed, however, perhaps due to the fading experience of legal enslavement, the celebration appears to have lessen based on newspaper coverage. In some years, the only mention of emancipation in The *Times-Enterprise* was notice of the picnic held on May 20.

STIRRINGS OF PROTEST AND RESISTANCE

The Civil Rights Movement is often characterized in history texts as transpiring between 1954 and 1968, but voices of protest from Thomasville’s black community predate that era by decades. Pastor Emmanuel K. Love, for example, the leader of First African Baptist in the early 1880s and later the leader of the influential Baptist congregation in Savannah, Ga, published a series of sermons calling for improved rights and treatment for the Negro community.³⁷

In 1898, two years after the *Plessy* decision, as the congregation’s new building neared completion, Rev. Jeremiah B. Davis, in conjunction with the neighboring St. Thomas A.M.E. Church, publicly condemned the shooting of a 16-year-old African American boy by a railroad security guard. Noting it was the third unprovoked attack by this guard on a Black member of the community, Rev. Davis “prayerfully ask that the city authorities use their

³³ Gates Jr., Henry Louis. *The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song*. Penguin, (2022), 95.

³⁴ Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness*. NYU Press (2020), 123.

³⁵ The Weekly Times-Enterprise (Thomasville, Ga). January 4, 1907, 4.

³⁶ The Semi-Weekly Times-Enterprise (Thomasville, Ga), January 5, 1915, 4.

³⁷ Love, E. K., First African Baptist Church & Daniel Murray Pamphlet Collection. (1882) *The Seasons*. Augusta, Ga.: Georgia Baptist Book and Job Print. [Pdf] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/91898128/>.

strong arm in seeing to it that the humblest citizen, regardless of race or color, receive justice and the full protection of the laws.”³⁸

In 1904, S.S. Broadnax, a recent pastor of First African Baptist and then next-door neighbor as operator of an adjacent grocery store, endorsed a statement issued by the Southern Baptist Association denouncing the existence of “Before Day Clubs.” This public proclamation was in response to hysteria in the white community concerning alleged bands of African American men terrorizing rural whites in adjacent Leon County, Florida and Southern Thomas County. Broadnax’s statement calmly but firmly urged “the white citizens and the officers to see to it that these rumors are not circulated to our injury as colored citizens.”³⁹ A fear of retribution in the form of lynching was likely the motivation for this public statement. It is interesting to note, and perhaps indicative of Thomasville’s progressive tendencies that the local newspaper, *The Daily Times-Enterprise*, questioned the veracity of these allegations about marauding Black gangs in their coverage, “the story sounds pretty straightforward but in the light of common sense it bears the markings of a fable.”⁴⁰

When city authorities prohibited African Americans from visiting a holiday celebration in Thomasville at the street carnival in March of 1906, the Black community boycotted the entire celebration, a form of protest which foreshadowed by some 50 years Rosa Park and the protest in Montgomery, Alabama.⁴¹

In 1916, the African American community of Thomasville made a strong statement protesting the rising tide of lynchings in the region. Attributed to an unnamed “brave man,” and published in the *Chicago Defender*, a leading national African American newspaper of the time, the statement said in part “We are going to stop lynching, if we have to die to the man. Unless we fight and defend our homes we will be murdered one by one by a lawless rabble that is a disgrace to the South. Fully realizing these truths, we are prepared to fight and fight to the bitter end. Our lives are unsafe and those of our families while race-hating murderers are allowed immunity from punishment under a Jim Crow government. We are going to fight, and we want the world to know it. ‘Liberty or death’ is the slogan.”⁴²

A year later, as the Thomasville City Council passed the “Anti-pan toting” ordinance, Pastor W. M. Barron directly addressed the flight of African Americans from the region in a public letter to the editors of the newspaper. He urged the “employing class to get together and devise some common-sense plans to keep the negro here in the South where he wants

³⁸ *The Thomasville (Ga) Times Enterprise*, September 13, 1898, 3.

³⁹ *The Valdosta (GA) Times*, October 29, 1904, 8.

⁴⁰ *The Thomasville (GA) Times-Enterprise*, September 9, 1904, 1.

⁴¹ Grant, D.L., & Grant, J., (2001) *The Way it Was in The South*, 219.

⁴² *The Chicago Defender*, January 15, 1916, 1,

to live.”⁴³ His advice appears to have been ignored as the city opted instead to intensify its pressure on the perceived “idleness” of the Black community by passing a “work or fight” law. These laws were common in the South during the labor shortage of World War I and criminalized an individual’s refusal to work. For men, forced conscription (in the army) was the consequence but for women the punishment was enforced service as domestics for white households. A July 1918 news item indicates Thomasville Police Chief Milton had examined fifty men on a recent Saturday and found “every one of them had his card and has worked regularly during the week.”⁴⁴ No record has yet been found indicating how this law impacted women in the black community.

As World War I ended, the “New Negro” movement arose on the national stage. Fueled in part by the Great Migration to the urban centers, this period marked a rise in racial pride, political activism and self-expression.⁴⁵ In 1918, a local chapter for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was established in Thomasville. The NAACP was a national organization founded 10 years earlier dedicated to fighting for equality through court challenges, legislative lobbying and community organizing. The Thomasville chapter was one of 20 established in Georgia in the early decades of the 20th century. Headed by Alfred B. Johnson, a mail carrier, the organization was unexpectedly closed a little over a year later when Mr. Johnson’s life was threatened, and he was fired from his job. By 1921, the NAACP chapter in Thomasville was disbanded. Efforts to revive it four years later by a Black physician, Percy S. Richardson proved unsuccessful.⁴⁶ Nearly thirty years would pass before the chapter returned to vitality under the leadership of a determined Civil Right crusader, Curtis Thomas, a Korean War veteran from nearby Pavo, Georgia.⁴⁷

One organization established in the 1920s that would endure and represents an early example of a more pro-active approach to race relations, at least in part, was the city’s Inter-racial Committee. Created in March of 1925 so “the two races could have representatives to discuss jointly their problems,” the council was endorsed by the Editor of the *Thomasville Times-Enterprise*, E. M. Jerger, who noted one benefit would be to influence “intelligent men and women of the negro race” “to more definite ambitions along the line of sanitation, health, education, etc.” Jerger also noted that it would be “operated as a forum in which problems of the races may be discussed amicably.”⁴⁸ The community’s only Black dentist at

⁴³ The Thomasville (Ga) Daily Times-Enterprise, May 17, 1917, 9

⁴⁴ Thomasville (Ga) Daily Times Enterprise, July 8, 1918, 4.

⁴⁵ Grant, *The Way it was in The South*, 309.

⁴⁶ Grant, D.L., & Grant, J., (2001) *The Way it Was in The South*, 313.

⁴⁷ Rolinson, M. G., *Grassroots Garveyism: The Universal Negro Improvement Association in the Rural South, 1920-1927*. Univ of North Carolina Press, (2012). 171.

⁴⁸ *The Thomasville Daily Times-Enterprise*, March 24, 1925, 2.

the time, Dr. M. L. Walton, was named chairman of the Black contingent and one of the appointed members was Rev. S.S. Broadnax of First African Baptist.⁴⁹ Records of the committee's work are sparse but over the years, its membership would swell to 35 by 1975.

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During the late 1920s and 30s, record of protest by the African American community in Thomasville is limited. This is likely due to an absence of local press coverage. In 1938, the Grand Exalted Ruler of the *Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks of the World*, the African American version of the national ELKS organization, addressed the congregation at First African Baptist. J Finely Wilson and Atlanta based John Wesley Dobbs, at that time significant figures in the national Black community, were on a multi-city tour of Georgia as part of their voter registration initiative. The press account indicates the auditorium was "comfortably filled" as Finley and Dobs urged the audience to pay up their poll tax.⁵¹

While the Ku Klux Klan was visible in Thomasville during these year⁵², the tone for perpetuating segregation at the State level was set by four term Georgia Governor Eugene Talmadge who vocally opposed African American rights. For his final campaign in the mid-1940s, which he won but died before taking office, he explicitly ran on a white supremacy platform. His son, Herman, continued his father's segregationists' position when he became governor between 1948-1954.

While support for segregation was intensifying in many Southern communities, in Thomasville, city leaders took the progressive step by hiring two black patrolmen for the city police force in 1954. Thomasville was not the first city in Georgia to do so as Atlanta and Savannah had added African American police in the late 1940s, but other cities, like Albany, would not do so for another decade.⁵³ In Thomasville, the idea was proposed by City Commissioner Dude Harvard, a well-known local businessman. The commission rapidly approved the proposal, and the applicants were vetted by an eight person African American committee headed by the principal of Douglass High School, W.J. Varner.⁵⁴ Patrolmen Augustus Flowers and Willie Cook began work on September 1, 1954.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ *The Thomasville (Ga) Times-Enterprise*, April 2, 1925, 5.

⁵⁰ *The Thomasville (Ga) Times-Enterprise*, April 2, 1975, 5.

⁵¹ *The Atlanta Daily World*, March 23, 1938, 2

⁵² Advertisement for lecture hosted by KKK at Courthouse, Feb. 18, 1925. Collection, Thomasville History Center

⁵³ Dulaney, W. Marvin. *Black police in America*. Indiana University Press, 1996. Appendix B: Table 8, 119.

⁵⁴ *Thomasville (Ga) Times-Enterprise*, June 22, 1954, 5.

⁵⁵ *Thomasville (Ga) Times-Enterprise*, August 24, 1954. 1.

This was a landmark hiring for a South Georgia community, but historic evidence suggests there may have been a black detective working in Thomasville some fifty years before. In a front-page story in *The Weekly Times-Enterprise and Southern Georgia Progress* on October 27, 1905, a “colored detective” by the name of Andrew Mosteller was instrumental in breaking a case concerning the attempted murder of a Mrs. Belle H. Parker.⁵⁶ Few details were provided in the news account and no other mention of Mr. Mosteller has been located in other Thomasville records. Nevertheless, the prospects of a black investigator working in South Georgia in the early 1900s is a fascinating story worthy of additional research.

THE ERA OF RESISTANCE AND CHANGE

As the Civil Right Movement gained national prominence following the *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Topeka* decision (1954) and the Montgomery bus boycott (1956), white resistance appeared in the local newspaper. A March 30, 1956 editorial by *Thomasville Time-Enterprise* Editor Jerger argued that “Many Southerners are convinced the plan of keeping the White and Negroes separated as far as practicable in public matters is wise and they are not anxious to create any differences which are normal and natural to such conditions as we have experienced for many years.”⁵⁷ Subsequent newspaper editorials and opinion pieces in the months and years to follow also expressed anxiety and resentment at the influence of the “ultra liberals” and their campaign to “destroy the heritages and traditions of the people of the South.”⁵⁸

More surprising is the resistance that came from within the Black community. In the fall of 1957, First African Baptist’s Rev. Albert Walker hosted a visiting African dignitary, Prince Madarikan Deniyi who vocally opposed Black efforts for equality. “*African Praises Southern Whites, Raps Negro Leaders*” was the headline for a page two article that described the “supreme potentate of Nigeria, West Africa” as strongly criticizing “so called Negro leaders for talking too much” who he claimed were disparaging “all the good white people in the South —people who are trying to help poor and needy Negroes.”⁵⁹

Given resistance to integration in Thomasville, it is revealing that the first show down between the new federal laws and local ordinances passed uneventfully. During the spring and summer of 1961, dozens of young activists, both white and Black, had fanned out on Trailways and Greyhound buses across the South to challenge the lack of enforcement of federal rulings banning segregation on interstate travel. Known as the Freedom Rides, many

⁵⁶ *Weekly Times Enterprise and South Georgia Progress*, October 27, 1905, 1.

⁵⁷ *The Thomasville (Ga.) Times-Enterprise*, March 30 1956, 4

⁵⁸ *The Thomasville (Ga.) Times-Enterprise*, July 9, 1960 , 4

⁵⁹ *The Thomasville (Ga.) Times-Enterprise*, February 21, 1957, 2

of these ended in violence and jailings for the participants. As national press coverage grew, the Kennedy Administration and Attorney General Robert Kennedy, unsuccessful at making the riders stop their protests, eventually ordered federal enforcement of all interstate travel laws under the authority of the Interstate Commerce Commission. To assess this renewed promise of enforcement, the organizers of the Freedom Riders, The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), sent another group of travelers to a host of smaller Southern cities and towns in the final months of 1961. Thomasville was one of those cities and the reception the riders received was noteworthy. Nothing happened. The Freedom Riders were not forced into segregated areas. There were no beatings, no arrests, no protests. The federal law was observed, and the riders boarded the next bus and moved on. Future research might reveal who deserves credit for this restrained local response.⁶⁰

Several months after the Freedom Riders passed through Thomasville, the pastorate of First African Baptist Church passed to a 31-year-old from Chattanooga, Tennessee. A graduate of Morehouse College, a veteran of the US Air Force and the Korean War, and an ordained minister, Isaac Lovell Mullins' assumption of leadership at First African coincided with the intensification of the Civil Rights Movement on the national stage. He would prove a strong champion and leader of the cause in Thomasville for the next four decades.

A [timeline](#) of events in the early 1960s shows the national breadth of this movement. All over the segregated South, authorities at every level were trying to curtail or delay the implementation of various federal rulings triggered by the *Brown* decision. Tensions were high, activists were being beaten and killed and a policy of "Massive Resistance", first articulated by U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd Sr. from Virginia, had formed a hard wall of opposition in many communities.⁶¹

As Rev. Mullins took over First African Baptist, a yearlong confrontation was ending in Albany, Georgia, 60 miles to the north of Thomasville. Over a thousand protesters had been arrested and charged, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. but many of the city's race policies remained unchanged. One of the national organizations that had been central to the Albany Movement, The *Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee* (SNCC), expanded their efforts after Albany to register voters in Southwest Georgia. The records of this effort provide a revealing snapshot of Thomasville in the early 1960s.

Eddie Brown and Graham Wiggins were field agents for SNCC. They travelled throughout Southwest Georgia meeting people and evaluating communities. Although their

⁶⁰ Hatfield, E. A. (2008). Freedom Rides. In *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. Retrieved Aug 14, 2020, from <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/freedom-rides/>

⁶¹ Austin, Curis J., Mississippi History Now. *On Violence and Nonviolence: Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi*, Feb. 2002,

assessment of Thomasville mislabeled the community as “Thomas City,” many of their observations were specific and revealing. They described the community as “fairly liberal” and noted that the city manager, George Atkins, was from Chicago and had worked in city government in San Antonio, Texas. Their evaluation also stated that the “negro leadership revolves around Rev. Mullins, pastor of The First African Baptist Church.” They noted that “Rev. Mullins has regular attendance of 500-600 and membership of 800 plus.” Their notes on Thomasville went on to describe four city-wide African American organizations pushing for civil rights. There was the long-established Business and Civic League, the largest African American organization in town whose director, Washington Virgil “had influence and is economically pretty well off.” There was the more elite Progressive Club, which was composed of members of the city’s Black professional class. There was a re-invigorated chapter of the NAACP with its new leader, Curtis Thomas, and perhaps most remarkably, there was an Inter-racial Committee whose members were appointed by the mayor.⁶²

In many ways, this range of civic organizations marks Thomasville as unique among Southern cities because it suggests there was a prominent level of engagement in the Black community, with some communication across the racial divide. It is also indicative of his significant role throughout the Civil Rights Era that Rev. Mullins was a member of each of these organizations.⁶³

In the summer of 1963, a young white law student from Berkely, California, Dennis Roberts, came to Thomasville and observed a meeting of its Inter-Racial Committee.⁶⁴ Roberts was working for the summer as a legal assistant to Chevene Bowers King (no relation to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.) who was the first African American to open a law practice in southwest Georgia (1952). For many years, C.B. King was the only attorney south of Atlanta who would accept civil rights cases. On one occasion he was assaulted and beaten by a sheriff for visiting his civil right client in jail.⁶⁵ King would later be the first to run for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives from Georgia since Reconstruction (1964), and the first to run for Governor (1969). Although he did not win either race, his campaigns were instrumental in laying the groundwork for later Black candidates for both local and regional offices.⁶⁶

⁶² SNCC Papers, SOWEGA Field Report, Summer 1963, 3.

⁶³ <https://newspaperarchive.com/thomasville-times-enterprise-dec-02-1971-p-3/>

⁶⁴ <https://www.crmvet.org/nars/drjour63.htm>

⁶⁵ Lawson, Mary. "C. B. King." New Georgia Encyclopedia, last modified Mar 28, 2021. <https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/c-b-king-1923-1988/>

⁶⁶ C.B. King, profile, *Roots & Branch* (Nov. 2019) <https://cltroots.org/hall-of-fame/c-b-king>

Dennis Robert's description of his visit to Thomasville on Monday, July 29, 1963, bears quoting in length. It is likely that Rev. Mullins and possibly Curtis Thomas were in the room that evening.

"CB was invited to speak at a biracial council. He brought me along because he thought the change would do me some good. Not that Thomasville is any marvelous place, but it is simply one of the many smaller towns around Albany that are scared to death of having "an Albany" of their own- they are looking to the future and see the possibility of new industry by-passing their town as it has avoided Albany in the last few years. Thomasville has about 25,000 population; it has two Negro policemen (a rarity in the South) and opened a few petty city jobs to Negroes. Though the Council hasn't really accomplished much, it is a very necessary structure to have in existence' as the only way the Negro is going to get any place is to take to the streets, but you will then need some sort of forum where things can be worked out, so it is easier if this exists already. It was a really beautiful thing to walk into this very modern building and see six negroes and six whites sitting around a conference table. Black and white sitting together is something one rarely sees around here (other than in the SNCC office or at mass meetings) and my initial reaction was almost one of shock. As I said, they aren't accomplishing a hell of a lot; the whites expect constant reassurance and approval that they are doing a marvelous and magnanimous act, and the Negroes have the impossible job of trying to convince them that their people aren't satisfied with a whole lot of talk and two desegregated drinking fountains, but at least the forum is provided."⁶⁷

Although the Inter-Racial Committee was well established and struck an outsider like Mr. Roberts as unique, Curtis Thomas would later characterize it as the "keep quiet, do nothing" committee and eventually left the group in frustration.⁶⁸ Ben Hatcher recalls the group differently. Hatcher eventually served as a Thomasville City Councilor for 16 years and was owner/operator of Hatcher-Peoples Funeral Home. He remembers "The group in Thomasville worked together to get integration going in a peaceful manner." Remembering local leaders like Curtis Thomas, Rev. I.L. Mullins, Bill Morris, Elijah Hill and Rudolph Elsy. "They were in the heat of it then," working to bring about peaceful integration.⁶⁹

The objective may have been a peaceful transition, but tension and harassment remained. In the summer of 1964, three SNCC field representative, George Bess, Ernie MacMillian and Hiram Thompson working on voter registration for the CB King campaign

⁶⁷ Roberts, Dennis, SW Georgia- Daily Journal, Summer 1963, p3 (www.crmvet.org/nars/dr_63_journal.pdf)

⁶⁸ Thomas, Curtis; Thomasville African American Oral History Project, Interviewed conducted by Nancy Tinker, (1993), File#2, part 2

⁶⁹ *The Moultrie (Ga.) Observer*, February 4, 2018 "Civil Rights Legacy Meet next Generation of Black Leaders" <https://moultrieobserver.com/2018/02/04/civil-rights-legacy-meet-next-generation-of-Black-leaders/>

were arrested in Thomasville on charges of violating the leaflet ordinance. The men were promptly released but fined \$75.⁷⁰

Earlier that summer, the day after the federal Civil Rights Act was signed into law by President Johnson in Washington D.C., the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) sent field workers into a variety of businesses throughout southwest Georgia to confirm if the newly enacted federal law was being observed. Rutgers University graduate Don Harris reported that three businesses in Thomasville, the Plaza Café at 115 South Broad Street, The Rose Theater, and one drive-in “were tested and desegregated.” While Harris’ experience in Thomasville was non-violent, at the same time in Americus, Georgia, 100 miles north of Thomasville, SNCC workers were attacked by a violent mob while testing a local restaurant, The Hasty House. One of the victims recalled the local police just watched and did not nothing.⁷¹

One of the central events of the Civil Rights Movement was the March on Washington held in the summer of 1963. It was a peaceful gathering of an estimated 250,000 participants at the Lincoln Memorial. Rev. Mullins was in the audience that day. He had made the journey alone but came back inspired, determined to “try to make things better.”⁷² Joined by a growing number of local citizens, Mullins helped organize the first Civil Rights march in Thomasville in May of 1965. (Note; An earlier march to celebrate the US Supreme Court’s decision in *Heart of Atlanta Motel, Inc. v. United States* which addressed public accommodations and the Civil Rights Act may have transpired in Thomasville in July of 1964, but no evidence of it has yet been located in the historic record.)

Dubbed “Freedom Sunday” in recognition of the 100 years of freedom for Black Americans since the end of the Civil War, and in a return to the once regular practice of an Emancipation Celebration, the May 1965 march was the public expression of efforts by the Black community to bring about change. Organizers urged city and county officials to use their influence to “request heads of local businesses and merchants to seek, hire and upgrade qualified Negro employees” and to “utilize the working abilities of local high school and vocational school graduates.”⁷³ The march began at 3pm at First African Baptist Church and concluded at the ballpark with a ceremony. “This is entirely a local affair – there will be no ‘outside agitators’ and no outside speakers,” said Rev. Mullins in a news account published two days before the event.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ SNCC Archives: Watts Line Report, August 16, 1964., 2. (www.crmvet.org/docs/wats/wats64-0816_sncc.pdf)

⁷¹ SNCC Archives: Watts Line Report, July 2, 1964, (www.crmvet.org/docs/wats/wats64-0702_sncc)

⁷² Mullins, Rev. I.L, Thomasville Oral History Interviews, Interviewed by Lee Willis, October 10, 2005, 12.

⁷³ *The Thomasville (Ga) Times-Enterprise*, May 11, 1965, 1.

⁷⁴ *The Thomasville (Ga.) Times-Enterprise*, May 14, 1965, 4.

The focus of this march, to improve economic opportunities for the Black community, is an early illustration of how the Civil Rights leaders in Thomasville targeted very local, achievable objectives. Whether it became the construction of a new YMCA serving the Black community, the integration of the schools, improved municipal services or the long legal challenge ahead against the “at-large” system of representation, Thomasville’s Civil Rights leaders consistently plotted a campaign of incremental victories with meaningful benefits.

These leaders came from a broad group of local organizations working toward change: The Inter-Denominational Ministerial Alliance, the NAACP, The Business and Civic League, the Choirs Union, The Progressive Club, The Committee on Public Assistance and The Beauty Culture League. That last organization was directed by Mrs. Gertrude Horne, an NAACP member and long-time leader in the community’s efforts “fighting for our whole freedoms.”⁷⁵

Some of these groups had loudly protested a decision in May of 1964 by The Thomas County Board of Commissioners to end the county’s participation in a federal food surplus program. Business and Civic League President Washington Virgil issued a public statement reminding the commissioners that the program was low cost and benefited a “huge number of persons receiving surplus food without any other assistance.”⁷⁶ The program was officially terminated on July 12 despite a second effort by concerned African Americans.⁷⁷

That Thomasville had so many African American organizations suggests a cohesive, highly educated community willing to push for change. Mullins recalled First Missionary was a central rallying point. “First Missionary Baptist was a staging place for gathering to prepare to march. It was a staging place where people would come on Thursday nights and listen to the progress that had been made and what we were going to do next. At times we had thousands of people marching with us.”⁷⁸

Curtis Thomas recalled that his organization, the local chapter of the NAACP, were seen as “troublemakers” by members of both the white and Black communities.⁷⁹ Representatives of SNCC characterized Thomasville, just a year and a half after their first assessment in 1963; as too conservative and unwilling to “rock the boat.” That judgement came from SNCC District leader, Isaac Simpkins, who had returned to the city in late 1965 to gauge the Black community’s willingness for more aggressive change. “Feels like it would

⁷⁵ The *Thomasville (Ga.) Progress News*, June 10, 1967, 9.

⁷⁶ The *Thomasville (Ga) Times-Enterprise*, May 4, 1965, 8

⁷⁷ The *Thomasville Times-Enterprise*. August 9, 1965, 1.

⁷⁸ Mullins, Rev. I.L., Thomasville History Center Oral History Project, interviewed by Lee Willis, October 10, 2005, 3.

⁷⁹ Thomas, Curtis., Thomasville Landmarks African American Oral History Project, Interviewed by Nancy Tinker, (1993), File#2, part 2

be a waste of time to go back,” he reported. “The Black leadership is firmly NAACP and we can’t get through it. Both Negroes and whites think it’s the most liberal city in Georgia.”⁸⁰

Disagreement and opposition between the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, at the national level, is a well-documented part of the historic record. That a representative from SNCC, for example, would characterize a local NAACP chapter as “unreachable” illustrates the point. In his doctoral dissertation, *Settling Down For The Long Haul: The Black Freedom Movement in Southwest Georgia, 1945-1995*, James Bowers Wall notes that “the Black community was by no means monolithic. In fact, many African Americans chose not to get involved in these activist-minded civic organizations.”⁸¹ In *Waging a Good War: A Military History of the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1968*, Thomas Ricks points out that both the tactics and objectives of the Movement were in constant dispute. “There had always been a tension in the Movement about aims. The overarching goal, of course, was to be treated as equal citizens. In some places, this led to efforts at integration—equal access to schools, public transportation, motels, and restaurants. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 appeared to address much of this agenda, although enforcement would remain an issue. In other places, the emphasis had been more on voting rights—that is, access to the ballot box.”⁸² Mullins recalls his own allegiances evolved as the movement evolved. “I was just a member of the NAACP. I was in SNCC for a while but I soon backed off of SNCC because their ideas on some things were a little contrary to what King had in mind for a better way of life, so I backed off of SNCC.”⁸³

As The Civil Rights Movement matured, First African Baptist, now officially rechristened First Missionary Baptist, was an unwavering citadel with Rev. Mullins at the head. The church hosted the monthly NAACP meetings⁸⁴ and provided a welcoming venue to visiting luminaries and politicians that included, over the years, Maynard Jackson, Shirley Chisholm, John Lewis, Hosea Williams, Dr. Martin Luther King Sr. and Jesse Jackson. Rev. Mullins lent his support to a sit-in at a restaurant in Valdosta, and a march in nearby Pavo. He was repeatedly approached by the local press for a comment on MLK, or the most recent outbreak of white resistance or the war in Vietnam which was evolving into a component of the Civil Rights discussion.⁸⁵ The toll of that war had a poignant local connection when Marine Corps PFC Othel (Pat) Thomas, age 22, a native of nearby Ochlocknee, died from

⁸⁰ Southwest Georgia SNCC Field Report, 22 November 1965, (based on tape recordings of staff meeting, 31 Oct. 1965) (www.crmvet.org/lets/651122_sncc_swga.pdf)

⁸¹ Wall, James Bowers, and Cindy Hahamovitch. “Settling down for the Long Haul”: *The Black Freedom Movement in Southwest Georgia, 1945-1995*. University of Georgia, 2018, 16.

⁸² Ricks, Thomas E., *Waging a Good War: A Military History of the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1968*, 249.

⁸³ Mullins, Rev. I.L., Thomasville African American Oral History Project, Interviewed by Nancy Tinker, (1993), File#2, part 1

⁸⁴ *The Thomasville Times-Enterprise*, November 23, 1966, 6.

⁸⁵ *The Thomasville Times-Enterprise*, August 25, 1966, 5.

combat wounds in 1967. Rev. Mullins officiated the young man's funeral at First Missionary in April of 1967.⁸⁶

Throughout this period, both Rev. Mullins and Curtis Thomas experienced a steady stream of death threats and intimidation. Mullins recalled one occasion where an anonymous caller promised to blow up the church or parsonage if "I didn't shut up." When he reported it to the church's Board of Deacon, one of the older members urged him to back down but the majority said, according to Mullins, "Let him be. If they bomb the place, we'll be all right cause we need another church anyway. Just so he's not in it and none of us. That was the end of it. I wasn't afraid of calls."⁸⁷ Curtis Thomas had a different experience. In an opinion column published in July of 1967, he recounted a traffic stop on Pavo Road, Rt. 122, where a local patrolman, without cause, berated him. "Don't you know how to say, 'Yes Sir' to white people?" The incident ended without further insult, but Thomas asked his readers, "How long will we allow ourselves to be humiliated and insulted in this manner?"⁸⁸

Thomas's account of his traffic-stop ran in the community's first Black-owned newspaper, *The Thomasville News*. Owned and operated by D.L. Inman, the paper was published under the motto "To Seek Out the Truth and Print it without Fear or Favor." It began publication in 1967 by which time Inman had already spent years in the struggle for equal rights having marched alongside Dr. King, Hosea Williams, Andrew Young, and Julian Bond. Reporting on issues and concerns important to the Black community was the focus of Inman's paper.⁸⁹ One of his first editorials, posted on page one under his banner "Look This Way," acknowledged the strides federal laws had made in improving the rights of Blacks, but lamented the problem of employment in Thomas County. He encouraged his readers to "stop looking at the problems we are facing through rose colored glasses."⁹⁰

One of the most important problems for the Black community in Thomasville, and the most contentious issue for whites, was the federal order to integrate the public schools. The Supreme Court's instructions in the *Brown* decision of "with all deliberate speed" had not produced rapid change. Although Thomasville had responded comparatively quickly in 1963 by integrating 51 Black students in formerly all-white schools, two of whom were Curtis Thomas's children, this represented just 2% of the Black student body attending segregated facilities. A "Freedom of Choice" program was introduced the following year, but most

⁸⁶ *The Thomasville Times-Enterprise*, April 29, 1967, 3.

⁸⁷ Mullins, Rev. I.L., Thomasville History Center Oral History Project, (October 10, 2005) conducted by Lee Willis.

⁸⁸ *The Thomasville Times-Enterprise*, July 6, 1967, 4.

⁸⁹ *The Thomasville Times-Enterprise*, January 13, 2025, (<https://timesenterprise.com/2025/01/13/local-civil-rights-advocate-publisher-dies-at-87/>)

⁹⁰ *The Thomasville News*, July 6, 1967, 1

families opted to continue sending their children to the segregated classrooms.⁹¹ For Black families, this was an understandable decision. Their high school, Douglass, provided a well-regarded education, regularly placing graduates at many prestigious colleges and universities, particularly the HBCU's around Atlanta. Many of the teachers at Douglas were themselves graduates of these same universities.⁹²

The most vocal public opponent of integration in Thomasville was the local chapter of The Citizens Council. The national organization had formed the same year as the *Brown* decision (1954) and grew to a nationwide membership of 60,000, largely in Southern communities.⁹³ Rallying around the Council's slogan of "States' Rights, Racial Integrity," the Thomasville chapter hosted visiting speakers and ran regular calls for new members in the local press.⁹⁴

As plans continued to evolve for city-wide school desegregation, Curtis Thomas focused on elevating the needs of the Black community in local government. He and Elijah Hill pressed County Commissioners to improve road paving and street lighting in several Black neighborhoods.⁹⁵ He spoke out against a 1930s era welfare law that imposed antiquated eligibility requirements, and he advised residents on how to file employment complaints with the US Department of Labor. If the early accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement had led to wholesale changes in national law, Curtis Thomas's work in Thomasville reflected a retail approach grounded in local issues and concerns.

Thomas's branch of the NAACP honored the contributions of Rev. Mullins and First Missionary Baptist Church to the community with a special ceremony and gift on November 13, 1967.⁹⁶

The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, sent a shock wave across the nation and the Civil Rights Movement. Whitney Young Jr., leader of the National Urban League, wrote in his syndicated column published in the *Thomasville News* a week after King's death that "(King) will not have died in vain if his tragic death moves Americans from seeing race relations as a spectator sport to becoming involved in the fight for justice."⁹⁷ King's death was followed by violence in cities around the nation including nearby Albany, GA and Tallahassee, FL, but Thomasville remained calm. There is no record of how the

⁹¹ Tinker, Nancy, Contextual History, Thomasville Landmarks, (1994), 25.

⁹² Minnie Gardner Smith, Minnie & Smith, Edward, Thomasville Landmarks African American Oral History Interviews, (1993) conducted by Nancy Tinker

⁹³ Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, *Citizens' Councils* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Citizens%27_Councils)

⁹⁴ Collections, Thomasville History Center, various newspaper announcements

⁹⁵ *The Thomasville Times-Enterprise*, June 15, 1966, 3.

⁹⁶ *The Thomasville (Ga.) News*, November 16-18, 1967, 1.

⁹⁷ *The Thomasville Times-Enterprise*, April 12, 1968, 2.

assassination impacted Curtis Thomas or Rev. Mullins. Mullins had met Dr. King many times and worked with him during the Albany Movement. A little over a month after Dr. King's death, in May, the NAACP celebrated the 15th anniversary of the Brown ruling at First Missionary Baptist with speeches.

THE MOVEMENT AFTER DR. KING

The death of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 is often marked as the chronological end of the Civil Rights Era but this is misleading. Work at the local level continued for another decade in Thomasville and undoubtedly in many other Southern communities. In May of 1969, First Missionary Baptist again served as the kick-off point for a large protest march. A list of complaints printed several days earlier in Inman's *Thomasville News* noted a range of very specific and very local issues. "Rights denied in this "progressive city" included "Unfair Employment Practices, Unfair practices in paving in areas where negroes live, inequities in sewage distribution, unfair division of voting precincts and discriminatory pay practices in the county school system."⁹⁸ Not listed as a reason for the protest but noted by the press was a recent affront to the Black community at the Thomasville Rose Festival, the city's largest event each year that had just concluded." One of community's Civil Rights leaders, Elijah Hill, had been prohibited from playing in the golf tournament at Glen Arven because he was Black. Additionally, parents whose daughters had participated in the Miss Thomas County Pageant at the Rose Festival believed racial discrimination was behind them being denied access to the viewing stand.⁹⁹

The 400-person march of May 1969 ended at Paradise Park with no violence or arrests. Curtis Thomas later attributed that to a tone established early by the city's mayor, Roy Lilly. Thomas recalled in a 1993 interview that Lilly "gave the order that there wouldn't be any trouble, so the police followed but did not intervene. He wasn't a flag waver for civil rights, but he'd sit down and talk. You could negotiate with him."¹⁰⁰

Credit for this tolerance also rightly sits with the City Commissioner R.C. Balfour, III, who, several years before, had been instrumental in crafting the city's position on the federal Civil Rights Act just passed in Washington D.C. Aided by Mayor Lilly, the City's statement was published under the headline of "New Law & Your City." It urged "restraint, understanding and good faith between all the citizens of this community in observing the provision of the act."¹⁰¹ That the city felt the need to make this statement and prominently

⁹⁸ *The Thomasville (Ga) News*, May 15, 1969, 1

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, May 8, 1969, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas, Curtis., Thomasville Landmarks African American Oral History Project, Interviewed by Nancy Tinker, (1993), File#2, part 2

¹⁰¹ *The Thomasville (Ga) Times-Enterprise*, July 3, 1964, 1.

place it on page one of the local newspaper is another example of Thomasville's progressive tendencies.

City and County schools were integrated in Thomasville on August 31, 1970. The school day was uneventful, but the night before, a cross had been burned on the high school campus. Cross burning was the notorious calling card of the KKK and white supremacists but on this occasion, Thomasville's Inter-racial Council urged the local press to overlook the story and the incident went unreported.¹⁰²

Two weeks after the newly integrated school opened, it was 150 African American students themselves who initiated a protest. The list of demands submitted to the school's principal, Tom Strealdorf, called for better recognition of their former school, Douglass High, from which they had been removed. They asked that the football team uniforms be changed to incorporate one of the Douglass colors, that a new mascot be considered and that games should begin with the singing of a new school anthem as was the practice at Douglass. They also asked, in typical adolescent self-interest, to make the start of the school day later than 8:05 am and to do away with afternoon detention halls. These latter two issues were probably not related to the quest for racial equality and respect.¹⁰³

One of the final protest marches in Thomasville during the Civil Rights Era was orchestrated by a high school senior for a group called The Malcolm X Liberation Front. In early January 1972, Ira Flowers and several dozen fellow students from Thomasville High marched on a service station owned by Alpha Chaney on West Jackson Street which they accused of being discriminatory. As the size of the student crowd grew to approximately 200, and marchers started threatening a patron of the business, "Police Chief Alley asked Flowers and two adult Blacks, on hand to keep the demonstration orderly, to call off the demonstration." The two adults "on hand" were none other than Curtis Thomas and Rev. Mullins.¹⁰⁴

In the Spring of 1972, Thomas initiated an eight week voter registration drive in Thomas County by inviting a good friend and national Civil Rights figure, John Lewis, to the kick-off event at Providence Missionary Baptist Church in Thomasville.¹⁰⁵ As noted in coverage of the drive by *The New York Amsterdam News*, "in many rural areas of the South, like Thomas County, Georgia, 50 black votes can be a powerful weapon of change." The registration drive ultimately added more than 70 new black voters to the county rolls.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Tinker, Nancy, *Contextual History, Thomasville Landmarks*, (1994), 27.

¹⁰³ *The Thomasville Times-Enterprise*, September 15, 1970, 1

¹⁰⁴ *The Thomasville Times Enterprise*, January 27, 1972, 1.

¹⁰⁵ *The Thomasville Times Enterprise*, April 6, 1972, 1.

¹⁰⁶ *The New York Amsterdam News*, July 15, 1972, 5.

The year after the schools were integrated, Rev. Mullins enter the political arena by running for Post 6 in the School Board election. His bid was unsuccessful as was another Black candidate, James Killens, but it bought to light a fundamental challenge facing the Black community in Thomas County: how to win seats in local and county elections in an “at-large” system which effectively diluted their votes.

The “at-large” system used at both the city and county level, dated the 1890s. It permitted candidates to win positions in the community, specifically on the school board and county commission, with a plurality of votes across all the districts. That meant a candidate did not need to garner the most votes in a specific district, but rather, just across all the districts. This system effectively undermined the ability of Black candidates, representing a Black constituency, to win office in a predominantly white community.

The School Board was ordered to change its use, pending appeals, of the “at-large” approach in 1972. The Civil Rights Division of the US Attorney’s Office wrote that the results of elections in Thomasville “which you furnished in connection with the submissions would seem to confirm the existence of the dilution of Black voting strength.”¹⁰⁷ The following year, a redistricting plan was enacted for the December municipal elections. The results of the new system were immediate. James Killens became the first African American elected to the Thomasville Board of Education.¹⁰⁸

At the county level, the “at-large” system remained in place. In 1975, the Thomasville chapter of the NAACP, now headed by Ellis Fann, filed a class action suit on behalf of six of its members. The suit was “instituted to invalidate as unconstitutional the county-wide, at large system used by Thomas County, Georgia in primary and general elections to positions on the Board of Commissioners.”¹⁰⁹ The claimants were dubbed “The Thomasville Six” but were already well known in the community: Rev. Mullins, Curtis Thomas, Elijah Hill, William Morris, Clarice A. Hobbs and Helen Clark. Further research is warranted on the last two individuals because women are unrepresented in the chronicle of Civil Rights in Thomasville.

The case took three years to work its way to the US Court of Appeals Fifth District in New Orleans. The claimants argued that the existing “at-large” method “dilute the votes of Blacks in the county (who constitute 35.4% of the voting population) in violation of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments to the Constitution,” and “that the subdistricts within the county, from which the commission candidates are required to run, are of excessively

¹⁰⁷ Letter from David Norman to Thomasville City Clerk Arisil, August 24, 1972 (www.justice.gov/GA-1190)

¹⁰⁸ *The Thomasville Times Enterprise*, December 21, 1973, 3.

¹⁰⁹ *The Thomasville Times-Enterprise*, August 20, 1975, 1. /

disparate populations in violation of these same constitutional and statutory provisions.”¹¹⁰ The court’s ruling cited violations of section 2 of the Federal Voting Rights Act and overturned the earlier decisions clearing the way for a new system. Arriving at that new system, however, took almost eight years. Only a consent order issued by Federal Judge J. Robert Elliot finally produced a special election on May 3, 1983. The results were again immediate. William “Bill” Morris and Elijah Hill were elected to the Thomas County Board of County Commissioners.

EPILOGUE

The Civil Rights Movement in Thomasville, Georgia was a long, determined, community-wide journey — one that unfolded far from the national spotlight but carried profound meaning for those who lived it. From the late 19th century into the 1980s, Black residents emerged from the brutal indignities of Jim Crow, finding strength in their churches, schools, and community organizations.

In a town where Northern influence softened the harshness of Southern segregation, a Black middle class took root earlier than in many neighboring areas. Yet discrimination, violence, and exclusion remained stubborn forces. Against this backdrop, First Missionary Baptist Church emerged as the heartbeat of the movement, led by the resolute Rev. Isaac L. Mullins.

The battles fought in Thomasville were often incremental but deeply significant. Protest marches, public testimony, courtroom challenges, and quiet acts of defiance slowly chipped away at segregation’s foundations. The city integrated its schools, Black citizens secured greater political representation, and discriminatory voting systems were dismantled after years of struggle and litigation.

While Thomasville’s movement was marked more by persistence than by dramatic confrontation, its achievements reflect the very essence of the broader Civil Rights story: change born of local leadership, community solidarity, and the unwavering belief in a better future. Their work reminds us that history is not only made in moments of great national drama but also, enduringly, in the steady courage of everyday people who refused to be denied their rights.

Today, the legacy of Rev. Mullins and Curtis Thomas and a dozen other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement in Thomasville lives on—in the institutions they built, the barriers they broke, and the generations they inspired.

¹¹⁰ THOMASVILLE BRANCH OF the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR the ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE et al., v. THOMAS COUNTY, GEORGIA, et al., No. 77-1196, United States Court of Appeals Fifth Circuit, March 29, 1978.

THEMATIC SUMMARY

The document “*We Knew It Was Coming*” captures the interplay between systemic racism, local resistance, and grassroots activism in a Southern town shaped by both Southern traditions and Northern influences. Here’s a thematic summary through the lens of the broader Civil Rights Movement and patterns of white resistance to change:

1. Historical Roots of Injustice

From the post-Reconstruction period onward, Thomasville reflected classic elements of Southern white supremacy: Jim Crow laws, disenfranchisement, segregated education, and economic marginalization. Like much of the South, local laws and unspoken social codes enforced a strict racial hierarchy—where any perceived breach could lead to violent reprisals, including lynchings and public displays of dominance.

2. A Uniquely Complex Environment

Unlike many Deep South towns, however, Thomasville was influenced by wealthy Northern seasonal residents—“plantation Yankees”—who brought progressive, albeit paternalistic, ideals. This dual identity created a paradox: a racially segregated system that simultaneously allowed for early Black middle-class development and intermittent interracial cooperation, especially in religious and civic life.

3. Early Resistance and Retaliation

Long before the 1960s, local Black leaders used church pulpits, boycotts, public letters, and civic petitions to protest discrimination and violence. However, white backlash remained potent, and efforts like the founding of an NAACP chapter in 1918 were stifled through economic coercion and threats. Fear of retribution kept resistance often subdued, underscoring how white power structures operated through both legal and extralegal means to silence dissent.

4. The Church as Command Center

First Missionary Baptist Church, led by the indomitable Rev. Isaac L. Mullins, became the epicenter of Thomasville’s Civil Rights activism. As elsewhere in the South, the church provided a rare space for Black leadership, strategy, and community mobilization. Mullins’ dual role as spiritual guide and political organizer mirrored national figures like Dr. King and highlights how faith institutions served as sanctuaries and springboards for civil disobedience.

5. Internal Tensions and Evolving Strategies

Thomasville's Black leadership included moderates and militants, mirroring national divisions between groups like the NAACP and SNCC. Curtis Thomas and Mullins exemplified a measured, community-centered approach, while some SNCC activists criticized Thomasville as too cautious. This friction reveals how white resistance didn't always come with firehoses and dogs—it often relied on the more insidious tactic of branding moderates as “acceptable” while marginalizing more radical demands as coming from “outside agitators”.

6. White Resistance: Legal, Cultural, and Institutional

Resistance in Thomasville was more institutional and psychological than overtly violent. Local white leaders, including the Citizens Council, pushed "States' Rights" rhetoric and slow-walked integration, particularly in schools. The “Freedom of Choice” school plans and maintenance of at-large voting systems were designed to maintain white control without inciting national scrutiny, an increasingly common tactic as federal oversight increased.

7. Victories Through Persistence

Despite resistance, Thomasville's Civil Rights Movement saw tangible successes: peaceful desegregation of public accommodations, school integration in 1970, and, ultimately, a successful federal lawsuit that dismantled the at-large voting system, culminating in the election of Black County commissioners in 1983. These victories came not from flashpoints, but through relentless, quiet, legal and civic advocacy.

8. Lessons in Local Power

The Thomasville case reminds us that the Civil Rights Movement was not just a story of national marches and speeches—but of neighborhood meetings, strategic legal filings, voter registration, and culturally grounded leadership. It also shows how white resistance adapted, shifting from outright violence to more sophisticated forms of delay and containment.

ROSTER OF THOMASVILLE CIVIL RIGHTS LEADERS

The Civil Rights Movement in Thomasville was a sustained effort supported by many members of the community. While Rev. I.L. Mullins and Curtis Thomas are the focus of this report, research shows there were many other individuals whose contributions warrant further study. A list of some is provided below.

- Agnes Woodruff – Teacher and longtime NAACP member.
- Alfred B. Johnson – Early NAACP leader forced to resign under threat.
- Annie Grace Hill – Oral history participant; witnessed racial violence in childhood.
- Augustus Flowers & Willie Cook – First Black police officers in Thomasville.
- Benjamin Corbett – NAACP member and local restaurant owner.
- C.B. King – Civil rights attorney and political candidate from Albany; mentor to local organizers.
- Clarice A. Hobbs – Activist and Thomasville 6 claimant who was disparaged by the county's legal counsel during litigation.
- D.L. Inman – Publisher of *The Thomasville News*; civil rights marcher and commentator.
- Don Harris – SNCC worker who tested local business compliance with civil rights laws.
- Dr. M.L. Walton – Dentist and early member of the Inter-racial Committee.
- Dude Harvard – City Commissioner who pushed to hire the city's first Black police officers.
- Elijah Hill Jr. – Longtime activist and builder; excluded from a local golf tournament due to race.
- George Bess, Ernie MacMillian, Hiram Thompson – SNCC activists arrested during voter registration efforts.
- Gertrude Horne – Activist and director of the Beauty Culture League.
- Helen Clark – Community member and co-plaintiff in the Thomasville Six suit.
- Ira Flowers – High school senior who led a 1972 protest with the Malcolm X Liberation Front.
- Isaac Simpkins – SNCC leader who criticized Thomasville's cautious civil rights approach.

- James Killens – School board candidate; later won election under new district rules.
- Mr. & Mrs. Willie Johnson – Represented Thomasville in regional welfare meetings.
- Percy S. Richardson – Black physician who attempted to revive the local NAACP in the 1920s.
- R.C. Balfour III – City Commissioner supportive of civil rights compliance.
- Rev. Ellis Fann – Ran for school board; led NAACP after Curtis Thomas.
- Rev. Emmanuel K. Love – 1880s pastor who spoke out against racial injustice.
- Rev. Jeremiah B. Davis – Pastor who publicly protested racist violence in 1898.
- Rev. S.S. Broadnax – Clergyman and businessman who advocated against racial scapegoating.
- Roy Lilly – Mayor who promoted peaceful civil rights responses and dialogue.
- Rudolph Elzy – Former athlete and activist; president of the NAACP in the 1970s.
- W.J. Varner – Principal who helped vet the city’s first Black police officers.
- Washington Virgil – Leader of the Business and Civic League; advocated for community needs like food assistance.
- William A. “Bill” Morris – School principal; later elected to the County Commission.

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