

Clayborn Temple AME Church Memphis, Tennessee

Civil Rights Movement Timeline, 1958-1998

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I. Early Events, 1958-1960

July 1958

Vote-O-Rama, a drive led by J.F. Estes, a Memphis attorney, to attempt to get blacks registered to vote in Fayette and Haywood counties. It held a public meeting at Clayborn Temple “and unanimously approved questionnaires to be submitted to the gubernatorial candidates on their positions and support once elected.” “The Vote-O-Rama wants the Negro to know in advance who he is voting for and what benefit he will receive once the candidate is elected.” (*Chicago Defender*, July 26, 1958).

November 1959

Clayborn Temple hosts the 13th District of the AME Church Annual Conference. Expected over 2,000 to attend. Mayor-elect Henry Loeb addressed the conference. The church would often host this annual meeting of church leaders from across the region over the next 20 years. (*Tri-State Defender*, 11/21/1959)

March 1960

Church was holding voting rights and sit-in “mass meetings” (Lovett, 189)

II. Demonstration and Strategy Center, 1961-1968

August 5, 1961

Clayborn Temple was the starting point for a series of demonstration marches—called an “All Day March for Freedom”—to protest discrimination in downtown stores. Maxine Smith of the NAACP explained: “Picketing presents physical evidence of our distaste for second class service and discriminatory practices on the part of Main Street Merchants.”

The story announces that "a shift will leave Clayborn Temple A.M.E. Church every hour beginning at 9 a.m. on August 5." (*Tri-State Defender*, July 29, 1961)

December 1962

The AME conference again meets at Clayborn Temple, attracting thousands but at this meeting the speeches were more on civil rights, with Rev. Ernest L. Hickman of Detroit stating: "White ministers will have to develop enough faith in God to preach the truth from the pulpit before our racial problems are solved." (*Tri-State Defender*, 12/8/1962)

September 1963

Demonstrations to protest discriminatory practices at Memphis schools began at Clayborn Temple, with "a spirited meeting of prayer, hymnsinging and talks." The demonstrators began at Clayborn Temple. "Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr., pastor of Centenary Methodist church, told the cheering crowd "young people are learning that racial segregation is evil because it has never intended to help Negroes—it was intended to keep Negroes second class humans." He told the marchers to "march with joy—with a song in your heart knowing that every stride we take is a stride toward freedom." The newspaper noted "Preceding and during the march, uniformed police stood nearby the entire area. Squad cars circled the area." After the march, the demonstrators returned to Clayborn Temple where "they heard plans for the picketing of the five high schools, starting on Tuesday." Rev. Lawson said: "the school board will not have further cooperation from us, if it doesn't change its system." Rev. R. Norsworthy of Mt. Moriah Baptist Church added: "we are unalterably opposed to segregation because it destroys communication."
(*Tri-State Defender*, 9/7/1963)

November 1964

Rev. Malcolm Blackburn, a white Presbyterian minister from Canada, is appointed head of the Stewardship program of the AME Church. His base would be at Clayborn Temple. He would be the printer of the "I Am A Man" signs four years later (*Tri-State Defender*, 11/14/1964) (Honey, 212, 214)

March 1965

A Good Friday march "demanding black employment in downtown banks" began at Clayborn Temple (Honey, 44)

February 21, 1968

For the Sanitation strike, "a regular routine had been established": demonstration marches left from Clayborn Temple (Honey, 162, 224)

February 23, 1968

Memphis police mace and then attacked a group of demonstrators, including leading African American ministers, who were walking from Ellis Auditorium on Main Street. Rev. H. Ralph Jackson of Clayborn Temple announced on WDIA that the attack was to be protested, that "the labor struggle was now a test of civil rights" (Branch, III, 701) (Honey, 200, 213-214)

The result was the creation of Citizens on the Move for Equality (COME), which began daily marches from Clayborn Temple. Rev. James Lawson chaired the strategy committee for COME. (Green, 280) "Day after day, people gathered at Blackburn's Clayborn Temple to march 14 blocks, 1.3 miles, to protest at city hall." (Honey, 214)

February 26, 1968

Rev. James Lawson, Rev. Jackson, and Baxton Bryant at 11 am led 130 sanitation workers and supporters on march to city hall, leaving from Clayborn Temple. "They went west on Beale to Main Street and then north to city hall at Main and Adams. . . They went downtown without incident and then retraced their route back to the temple." (Honey, 224)

That evening, "a defiant, charged-up crowd of more than a thousand people filled Clayborn Temple." The union's Jerry Wurf proclaimed "with the solidarity of the men and the solidarity of the black community, we've got to win." Rev. Jackson "roared his support for the strike—waving his hands, pounding his fists...He exhorted the crowd not to rest until 'justice and jobs' prevailed for all African Americans. ...Jackson also widened the movement's agenda, saying that after the workers won their demands, the movement would campaign to end police brutality and improve housing, jobs, wages, and education across the city." (Honey, 243-244)

At the invitation of Rev. Blackburn of Clayborn Temple, John Burl Smith of the Invaders spoke: "We've got to do some fighting. We must fight the power structure whether it is Henry Loeb or Richard Nixon....You'd better get some guns...You're going to need them before this is over. You can't pray your way out." Rev. Starks said that Smith's words were not endorsed by the strategy committee but Rev. Blackburn "countered that the feelings of young people needed to be heard if the movement wanted their support." (Honey, 244)

February 27, 1968

300 gathered at Clayborn Temple and marched to City Hall. (Honey, 245)

February 28, 1968

About 100 black women, joined by 300 sanitation workers, picketed downtown. "The actions of black women were critical to the strike, but they did not get much press coverage. Black women seemed almost invisible in the media and the historical record." (Honey, 246)

February 29, 1968

"27 black and two white teenagers marched from Clayborn Temple in miserable, rainy weather to picket Goldsmith's and Lowenstein's Department Stores, singing "Don't buy from that store no more."" (Honey, 248)

March 1968

"According to Bill Lucy [of AFSCME], 'I Am a Man' was first used sometime in March, after he and a few community leaders brainstormed one night at Clayborn Temple, hoping to come up with a phrase to encapsulate workers' demands for respect and dignity." (Green, 282)

"Without a great deal of discussion, the ministers and the AFSCME leadership neatly divided their responsibilities to create a labor-civil rights alignment unparalleled in southern movement history." (Honey, 255)

March 4, 1968

300 sanitation workers marched from Clayborn to City Hall in the afternoon, led by Rev. Henry Starks, Jackson, and Blackburn. At least 150 white union workers also demonstrated but took a different route. (Honey, 255, 258)

March 5, 1968

Over 400 sanitation workers, led by Rev. Bell and Rev. Moon, marched from Clayborn Temple to City Hall. There they staged a sit-in, and later in the day another group, "comprised mostly of black students," arrived from Clayborn (Honey, 263). Police eventually arrested 121 people and jailed them. (Honey, 265)

At Clayborn Temple that evening, "militant young Negroes' ... held a boisterous rally at Clayborn Temple, where Reverend Ralph Jackson roused them with his fiery preaching and Lawson came fresh from jail to urge them to march on police headquarters the next day and get arrested." (Honey, 265) Members of the Invaders passed out a leaflet: "Afro-American Brotherhood Speaks: Black Thesis, Black Power." The pamphlet described Memphis as a "massive plantation." (Honey, 265) At the end of the meeting, the youth chanted "Black Power, Black Power." Lawson announced he had invited Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. to Memphis. (Honey, 266)

March 6, 1968

High school students gathered at Clayborn Temple to march and demonstrate at city hall. "Six young black men carried a coffin to symbolize the burying of freedom, and, surrounded by 200 singing students (one of them white), placed it on top of the city hall stairs." They then encircled City Hall and sang "We Shall Overcome." Rev. Malcomb Blackburn led this demonstration. (Honey, 270)

March 11, 1968

91 students leave Northside High School—the city's finest African American school—and walked 3 miles to Clayborn Temple, "upending garbage cans in what they called 'turn over day.'" After a rally at the church, 30 walked downtown and chanted "Black Power" and "Down with Loeb" (Honey, 273)

91 students walked three miles to Clayborn. (*New York Times*, March 12, 1968)

That afternoon Rev. Jackson led another group of 175 demonstrators, starting at Clayborn Temple, followed about 25 feet behind by a hundred of so black youth who yelled "down with Loeb". They marched four abreast—the police tried to force them to march single file. (*Commercial Appeal*, March 12, 1968).

March 13, 1968

150-170 marchers, mainly students, marched from Clayborn to city hall and then back. (Honey, 278)

March 15, 1968

The first of five consecutive days of marches from Clayborn Temple, mostly by student groups. ((Honey, 285) Youths shouted "Burn, Memphis, Burn" on their return walk to Clayborn Temple.

March 17, 1968

Announced at Sunday services at Clayborn that Dr. King would arrive Monday to support the strike. (Honey, 286)

March 18, 1968

King's speech at Mason Temple "mobilized black Memphis more than anything that had yet happened." (Honey, 309)

March 22, 1968

A large snow fall postpones King's planned march: about 20 marchers showed up at the church. "nearly a hundred strike supporters turned out for a strategy session at Clayborn Temple." (Honey, 324)

March 28, 1968

Crowd at Clayborn Temple estimated between six and twenty thousand, with a thousand striking sanitation workers. King, "locked arms between Abernathy and H. Ralph Jackson" was at the front. (Branch, III, 733). Honey says that CME Bishop Julian Smith, Abernathy, Bernard Lee, Lawson and King were at the front. (Honey, 343)

March left Clayborn on Hernando Street, turned left on Beale and then turned right on Main, heading to city hall. Unruly youth broke the march up by vandalizing businesses. "Lawson noticed several people breaking windows near police officers who made no move to stop them. It looked like a setup." Lawson orders King to leave and once King was removed, police officers moved in and "restored order." (Honey, 344-46) "Police actions, far from stopping violence, spread it." (Honey, 347)

Lawson and Rev. J. W. Williams helped to direct many marchers back to Clayborn Temple. (Honey, 349) "The interior of Clayborn Temple looked like the aftermath of a war. The church held 1,500 people, who filled every seat and space in the aisles, as ministers read the names of lost children and instructed people on how to get treated for tear gas. Reverend Blackburn, Clayborn Temple's pastor, found a man in the chapel beaten into a semiconscious state, a girl with asthma suffering terribly from tear gas, and, on the trunk of a car in the alley, a man that he feared had a broken back." (Honey, 353)

"When people tried to leave Clayborn Temple, police attacked them with mace and clubs." (Honey, 354) Reporter Kay Black thought "The battle of Clayborn Temple had started." (Memphis *Press Scimitar*, March 29, 1968). The siege would last about two hours until the police stopped firing tear gas and left.

Police ordered people to disperse from the front of the church, when they did not, the police fired tear gas onto the church steps and the gas permeated the building. As gas reached the sanctuary, "some people panicked and jumped out the windows" (Honey, 354) The Invaders gathered in the church chapel. (Honey, 395)

Tri-State Defender 's title story was "Cops Wage War on Black Community"

March 29, 1968

200-300 workers leave Clayborn Temple on their regular demonstration march. (Honey, 389)

March 30, 1968

Sanitation workers march again. (Honey, 390) "For the duration of the battle in Memphis, black workers and their allies continued to exercise a quiet leadership role on boycott and picket lines, in marches, and in mass meetings, ignoring intimidation of continuing their schedule." (Honey, 391)

April 1-2, 1968

450 marchers leave Clayborn for an afternoon demonstration (Honey, 394). "That day and the next, thousands of strikers and their supporters filed by Larry Payne's body, displayed in an open casket at Clayborn. His funeral was held at the church too. *New York Times* (April 2, 1968) stated that "hundreds of Negroes" viewed the body.

April 2, 1968

500 attend Payne's funeral. After it sanitation workers again marched downtown. National Guard leave Memphis.

Chicago Defender (April 3, 1968) stated that 600 attended the funeral. "Tear gas could still be detected in the church."

April 3, 1968

King speaks at mass meeting at Mason Temple

April 4, 1968

King assassinated. Sanitation workers had already gathered at Clayborn to march to Mason Temple and they heard the news at the church (Honey, 435)

April 6, 1968

Bayard Rustin writes column, "The Struggle in Memphis," for *New York Amsterdam News* (April 6, 1968) urging his readers to send donations to C.O.M.E. "care of Clayborn Temple, 280 Hernando, Memphis."

April 8, 1968

Massive memorial march begins at Clayborn Temple; Coretta Scott King joins the marchers in route. "Memphis's largest march ever attracted some 40,000 participants" (Green, 286) (Honey, 477-478)

"Bayard Rustin ... was the field general today. Her formed his marchers into tight ranks, eight abreast. Women and children were in the inner ranks. Men were on the flanks." (*Washington Post*, April 9, 1968)

The march left the church, down Hernando Street to Linden Street and then swung into Main Street (*New York Times*, April 9, 1968)

April 10, 1968

Sanitation workers resume daily marches from Clayborn Temple. (Honey, 485)

April 16, 1968

Negotiators present sanitation workers with proposed settlement at a meeting at Clayborn Temple. "Wild jubilation engulfed Clayborn Temple, where tear gas still stained the walls." On the podium, T.O. Jones, Ciampa, Lucy, Wurf, Paisley, Epps (AFSCME leaders), Revs. James Smith, Lawson, Starks Bell as well as Cornelia Crenshaw, O.Z. Evers, Maxine Smith "hugged, laughed, and cried." (Honey, 493)

Rev. Lawson said; "We know we have just begun. We want to get to the point where every poor family in this Shelby County can work together in an organization that will allow them to solve their own problems. The fact is that we were able to stand tall and true and together and we have won this glorious victory for you and for America" (*Memphis Press Scimitar*, April 17, 1968)

In a story about the end of the strike, the *Chicago Defender* April 20, 1968 called the church "a rallying point for many demonstrations during the lengthy dispute."

III. Reconciliation and Activism Center

Every April for years, the church would be the starting point for a memorial demonstration march and often the sanctuary would be used for a memorial service.

October 1968

AFSCME leads strikes against local hospitals. "Last week an estimated crowd of 3,500 marched from Clayborn Temple AME to City Hall." *Chicago Defender*, October 17, 1968.

Early November, 1969

In "Black Monday" protests against St. Joseph Hospital, Police break up demonstration led by Rev. Ralph Abernathy, arresting him and 75 others. A crowd of 600 demonstrators, who had started a protest march, attempted to move forward with it but was not allowed past Hernando Street. "Police remained in force outside the Gray Stone building, their helicopter hovering overhead." *Chicago Defender*, November 11, 1968

April 1973

Anniversary of King assassination mass meeting held at Clayborn Temple. Maxine Smith of NAACP addressed crowd of 1,000. Sanitation workers marched from the church to Lorraine Motel. (*Tri-State Defender*, April 14, 1973)

April 4, 1975

"Thousands of marchers" gathered at a location called "Holy City" near Clayborn Temple in memorial to Dr. King. From the church, the demonstrators marched to the Lorraine Motel.

April 4, 1976

Tri-State Defender announced that a memorial demonstration march would begin at Clayborn and end at the Lorraine Motel. (*Tri-State Defender*, April 3, 1976)

August 1977

Tri-State Defender has a story about a planned protest against police brutality, to begin at Clayborn Temple for 9/5/1977. Minister Suhkara Abdul Yahweh: "No longer will we tolerate our people being shot down like dogs." (*Tri-State Defender*, August 6, 1977.)

April 4, 1978

Tenth anniversary march, 1500 left Clayborn Temple to Lorraine Motel and ended at Orpheum Theater. (*Tri-State Defender*, April 8, 1978)

April 4, 1979

11th anniversary demonstration began at Clayborn and ended at Orpheum (*Tri-State Defender*, April 7, 1979)

October 1979

Tri-State Defender publishes "A Plea for Help," from the Clayborn Temple Restoration Coalition, which is first call for preservation of church as a historic site. "Because it is one of the oldest churches in the city, because it served as a meeting place, a refuge and a place where Black Memphians met to plan their strategies for marches against racial prejudice and injustice, during the Civil Rights movement of the 60's, shouldn't we as Black Memphians recognize Clayborn Temple's historic importance to our community? How long will we forget to honor and preserve their footprints in the sands of time?" (*Tri-State Defender*, October 20, 1979)

April 4, 1985

Clayborn Temple hosts memorial service that featured speeches from AFSCME officials and music from Albertina Walker. Earlier in the day it would be the starting place for a demonstration march from the church to the Lorraine Motel. (*Tri-State Defender*, April 3, 1985)

February 13, 1988

Clayborn Temple would host a mass meeting on police abuse (*Tri-State Defender*, February 10, 1988).

January 1989

In observation of King's birthday anniversary on January 16, Clayborn Temple would host a "Living the Dream" event. (*Tri-State Defender*, January 18, 1989)

November 1989

Clayborn Temple hosts a "Unity Rally", attracting hundreds. "Principal speakers representing a broad and diverse Black constituency that rarely shares a public stage broke tradition by joining forces to combat what is viewed by many as a racist conspiracy to destroy the core of Black leadership in Memphis." (*Tri-State Defender*, November 22, 1989)

May 1997

Clayborn Temple hosts memorial service for Queen Mother Moore of Brooklyn, a human rights activist who "visited Memphis in the 1970s and 1980s to speak about African cultural pride." (*Commercial Appeal*, May 6, 1997)

March 1998

A mock funeral of historic slave owner Willie Lynch took place at Clayborn Temple, organized by the Million Man March Action Committee. At the meeting, Rev. LaSimba Gray "called for an end to city funding of Confederate and Forrest parks. Gray wanted city funding to end but that "Confederate descendant organizations" could be afforded "the opportunity to buy the parks from the city." "As an alternative, Gray said the groups may propose construction of another monument near the Forrest statue to symbolize the plight of African-Americans during the time that slavery was legal." (*Commercial Appeal*, March 8, 1998)

April 1998

30th anniversary of King's assassination. Mass meeting held at Clayborn Temple with Rev. James Lawson as primary speaker. He spoke to a "nearly full sanctuary" with Mayor Willie Herenton on front row. Busloads of school children attended, as did "Revs. Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. D.C. Mayor Marion Barry was also there. (*Commercial Appeal*, April 4, 1998)

May 1998

Clayborn Temple hosts exhibit about the desegregation of the Memphis public libraries in 1960. (*Commercial Appeal*, March 20, 1998)

Sources in addition to newspapers:

Branch, Taylor. *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968* (New York, 2006)

Green, Laurie B. *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill, 2007).

Honey, Michael. *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York, 2007)