



Emma Spencer Gooch (outside photos) and her brother, Oscar Spencer, shown seated at lower left in the center photograph, were among the Yalobusha County residents who worked to expand Black voter registration during the civil rights era. Documents preserved by Mrs. Gooch, along with photographs and other materials, form the basis of the Emma Spencer Gooch Collection that will be displayed at Bozarts Gallery Sept. 18-19.

Two -Day Exhibit Will Honor Yalobusha Voting Rights Pioneers

In the fall of 2023 my Davidson High School classmate, Emma Faye Gooch, agreed to donate a box of her grandmother's belongings to be archived, and at the time, I promised to make sure the contents would be shared with the folks in Yalobusha County. I am so happy to fulfill that promise when an exhibit from The Emma Spencer Gooch Collection - Mississippi Voter Registration Education League goes on view September 18-19 at the Bozart Gallery. The main event will be held on Saturday the 19th featuring the Gooch Family, representatives of the activists, various guest speakers and possibly voter registration.

The exhibit is drawn from the Gooch collection that opened in August 2024 at the University of Mississippi's Archives and Special Collections in the J.D. Williams Library.

The collection contains a wealth of information about the fight for black voting rights in Yalobusha County: membership lists, Yalobusha County voter registration cards for the Mississippi Democratic Party, minutes of the meetings held at black churches throughout the county, correspondence related to African American voter registration in the 1960s and the creation of the racially integrated Mississippi Democratic Party in the 1970s including a letter from Aaron Henry, who was the chairman of the party.

All of these items are available because Mrs. Gooch preserved them and passed them down to her namesake to keep. Now it is time to share. In the midst of re-districting and the looming fall elections, what better time to be reminded of the hard work, blood, sweat and tears our elders endured to obtain and protect the right to vote for black folks in Yalobusha County and beyond.

Mrs. Gooch was the secretary for The Voters League of Yalobusha County, and Mrs. Annie Hervey also took on some of the administrative duties. The General Laws of the Voters League Committee, which are among the items, show the key players. Robert Spencer, Mrs. Gooch's brother,

was the Acting Chair of the Committee. Additional members were Leroy Davidson, Loyd Caldwell, Stephen Brown and Annie Kelly Montgomery as the Acting Secretary.

According to the minutes, the committee held meetings from September 1968 to June 1970 at 11 black churches in Yalobusha County, specifically in Water Valley, Coffeeville, Oakland, and smaller communities like Tillatoba and Scobey: Miles Memorial Methodist, Sanders Chapel Baptist, Massey Groves, Spring Hill Missionary Baptist, Carrier's Chapel, Preston Church, Persimmon Hill, Philadelphia, Robinson Chapel, Everdale Baptist and Smith Chapel.

Only half of these churches remain.

The minutes of the Voters League meetings cover attendance and monies and dues collected to pay the churches for use of their facilities, travel to state NAACP meetings and general expenses.

The collection contains approximately 150 membership cards for registered voters in Water Valley, Oakland, Coffeeville, Tillatoba and Scobey precincts. I recognize many of the names, and I knew several individuals personally. The majority, if not all, of these heroes and heroines are gone. But these cards and the 25-cent dues the members paid (\$2.40 today), show us not only how they cherished the opportunity to register but also their commitment to protecting our right to vote and the sacrifices they willingly made.

The membership cards were triplicates, thus you may see two cards for your loved one. You can see their signatures and names on the handwritten rolls. I get emotional when I look at each name, imagining these citizens' fear when they attended meetings, registered to vote, and had to drive home in the dark. By this time, Yalobusha County had earned a reputation as dangerous and racist - so much so that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was advised to avoid Yalobusha when he took up the march for James Meredith, who was shot when en

route from Memphis to Jackson.

Time has brought changes, but we can neither forget nor ignore that we are facing and dealing with setbacks - efforts to take away important rights and to bury this history - a history that must be preserved.

Mark your calendars now for September 19th for the grand opening of the exhibition at the Bozart Gallery. Join me to honor Mrs. Emma Spencer Good, the Gooch Family and our loved ones who fought for our rights - our freedom - our future.

About The Author



Dottie Chapman Reed is a Water Valley native and a 1970 graduate of Davidson High School. A 1974 graduate of the University of Mississippi, she is the author of *Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County: Their Stories and Their Contributions to a Mississippi Community*, a book that grew out of her award-winning *North Mississippi Herald* column published from 2018 through 2020. Her research documenting the lives of black women and families in Yalobusha County led to collaborations with the University of Mississippi's Center for the Study of Southern Culture and the creation of archival collections and oral history projects preserving this important local history. She lives in the Atlanta area and continues to research, write and advocate for the preservation of Yalobusha County's African American heritage.

www.blackwomenofyalobusha.com

Reed is seeking photographs of others who were involved in voter registration efforts in Yalobusha County during the 1960s and 1970s. Anyone with photographs or information is encouraged to contact her at (678) 525-5408 or by email at info@blackwomenofyalobusha.com.

CHURCH NEWS

Chapel Hill Missionary Baptist Church invites the community to its annual Youth Day program on Sunday, July 19, at 2:30 p.m.

Minister Xavier Edwards of Concord Missionary Baptist Church in Batesville will be the guest speaker. Churches with youth who would like to participate in the program are encouraged to contact the church. Additional participants are welcome.

Zion Grove M.B. Church, 2441 County Road 471, Coffeeville, will hold revival services July 20-22 at 7 p.m. nightly. Guest speakers will be Pastor T.K. Townsend of Pleasant Grove M.B. Church on Monday, Pastor Eugene Love of Oak Hill M.B. Church on Tuesday and Pastor Grady McKinney of Parrish Grove M.B. Church on Wednesday. The public is invited to attend.

Carnival Race Adds New Purpose

**By Jessie Gurner
Herald Contributor**

WATER VALLEY – For nearly four decades, the BankFirst Watermelon 3K Race has been one of the signature traditions of Watermelon Carnival weekend, bringing together competitive runners, casual walkers, families, children and friends for an early morning celebration of community.

This year, participants will have an opportunity to support another tradition that celebrates the spirit of Water Valley.

For the first time, the race will help raise money for the Zandra Walker Heart of Water Valley Scholarship, established by the Water Valley Area Chamber of Commerce to honor the longtime chamber director whose kindness and service touched generations of residents.

The race will be held Saturday, Aug. 1. Registration begins at 6:30 a.m., with the race starting at 7:30 a.m.

As in previous years, there is no registration fee. Instead, organizers will have a donation jar available for anyone wishing to contribute to the scholarship fund. Donations may be made by participants, family members, spectators or anyone who wishes to honor Walker's memory.

The Chamber established the \$2,500 scholarship to recognize a graduating Water Valley High School senior who reflects the qualities Walker demonstrated throughout her life.

As chamber director, Walker became one of the familiar faces of both the Chamber of Commerce and the Watermelon Carnival. Friends and coworkers remember her not only for organizing community events, but for quietly helping others, encouraging volunteers and making everyone feel welcome.

The scholarship recognizes a student of strong character who demonstrates kindness, dependability, respect and a willingness to serve others without seeking recognition.

"It is often the small, everyday actions that matter most," Chamber board member Tonya Eubanks said. "This scholarship is meant to recognize someone who understands that and lives it out in the way they car-

ry themselves and care for others."

BankFirst Water Valley President Tyler Hill said the bank is pleased to continue sponsoring a race that has become a Carnival tradition while helping launch the scholarship.

"We are excited to continue this fun Carnival tradition of the 3K walk/run race, a tradition that has been around for 38 years," Hill said. "This is always a fun event where our bank employees enjoy welcoming our community, customers, friends and visitors to get moving early Saturday morning to work off some of the calories from the Carnival food we enjoyed the day before."

Hill said BankFirst has kept both race registration and T-shirts free since becoming the sponsor in 2009.

"This year we are inviting everyone to bring a contribution for the Zandra Walker Heart of Water Valley Scholarship," he said. "Zandra truly embodied the spirit of our town, and we believe supporting the Chamber of Commerce in this fundraising effort is a wonderful way to honor her legacy."

The race attracts everyone from competitive runners to families pushing strollers and groups of friends who return each year as part of their Watermelon Carnival tradition. Finishers will receive a commemorative T-shirt while supplies last, six participants will win cash door prizes, and free water and watermelon will be available after the race.

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The route begins near Railroad Park, travels along Railroad and Central streets past City Park and Davidson Elementary School, loops at Jones Street and returns to the starting point.

Whether participants choose to run, walk, cheer from the sidelines or simply enjoy the morning with neighbors, this year's race offers an opportunity to celebrate one of Water Valley's favorite traditions while supporting a scholarship that honors a woman whose quiet acts of kindness continue to inspire the community.

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