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Albert Turner is dead at 64; strove for civil rights in South

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Date: Apr. 15, 2000

From: The New York Times

Publisher: The New York Times Company

Document Type: Obituary

Length: 622 words

Full Text:

Albert Turner, a civil rights leader and adviser to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., died on Thursday in Selma, Ala. He was 64.

Mr. Turner's heart stopped while he was being prepared for an operation to stop abdominal bleeding, said his brother, Robert.

Mr. Turner helped lead the voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery, on March 7, 1965. Stick-wielding state troopers turned the peaceful protesters back on the Edmund Pettus Bridge over the Alabama River in a confrontation that became known as Bloody Sunday. Protesters were beaten, chased and tear-gassed. Mr. Turner, wearing a cap, can be seen in contemporary photographs of the front lines of marchers.

Describing the events of that day, Mr. Turner said in an interview: "I fell down and ran. Then I fell down again and ran some more."

J. L. Chestnut, a Selma lawyer and longtime friend, said, "Whenever there was something of unusual danger, and nobody wanted to, you could count on the fact that Albert and John Lewis would lead it." Mr. Lewis later went on to become a Democratic Congressman from Georgia.

Mr. Turner, who was Alabama field secretary for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference at the height of the civil rights movement, was chosen three years after the march to lead the mule wagon that carried the body of Dr. King at his funeral.

The son of a sharecropper, Mr. Turner was born on Feb. 29, 1936, in a four-room shack outside of Marion, Ala. He was the fourth of 12 children. He studied bricklaying and later graduated from Alabama A & M. In July 1963, with the help of a federal injunction, Mr. Turner and about 40 others registered to vote at the county courthouse in Marion. Lawsuits surrounding these efforts to register formed a model for President Lyndon B. Johnson's voting-rights bill.

"I really do not know of a single individual in Alabama who has given more to the political progress of African-Americans in this state than Albert," Mr. Chestnut said. "Albert would hide the fact that he would have a college degree because he was trying to reach always those people at the bottom. Martin understood that, and that's what endeared Albert to Martin, and why Albert was the point man in Alabama."

With his wife, Evelyn, Mr. Turner was cleared of voter fraud in the 1980's, when prosecutors charged them with altering absentee ballots collected from rural blacks.

After the not guilty verdict, President Ronald Reagan nominated Mr. Turner's prosecutor, Jefferson B. Sessions, to the Federal District Court in Alabama. The nomination died in the Senate Judicial Committee after concerns were raised about the voter fraud prosecutions.

"The indictments come because blacks have gotten too well organized for political empowerment in the Black Belt of Alabama," Mr. Turner said at the time he was acquitted. "They didn't spend a million dollars because they think a few old folks' ballots were changed."

In recent years, Mr. Turner, an insurance salesman, served on the Perry County Commission, where he was active in preserving adequate health care in the county, where many hospitals serving rural communities are closing. He was also on the search committee to find a new police chief for Marion, the county seat.

"He was very smart and knowledgeable about politics in this area of Alabama," said another commissioner, Charles LeCroy. "He supported everything Dr. King advocated, and he brought his people up socially, economically and politically during his time in office."

He'll be missed by people here in Perry County."

Mr. Turner is survived by his wife; three sons, Barrett of Indianapolis, Eric of Birmingham, and Albert Jr. of Marion; a daughter, Eldra Marcus of Tuskegee, Ala.; and nine brothers and sisters, and five grandchildren.

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Source Citation (MLA 9th Edition)

Kelley, Tina. "Albert Turner is dead at 64; strove for civil rights in South." *New York Times*, 15 Apr. 2000, p. A2. *Gale OneFile: Business*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A61543053/ITBC?u=avl_auburnu&sid=bookmark-ITBC&xid=3cb6a9f1. Accessed 26 Aug. 2021.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A61543053