

HUD Black History Showcase Series

Medgar Evers
1925-1963

Civil rights activist, born in Decatur, Mississippi. Evers grew up on a Mississippi farm and joined the Army in 1943, serving in combat in France and Germany during World War II. Following discharge, he enrolled in Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College in Mississippi. Upon graduation in 1952, he moved to Philadelphia, Mississippi where he sold insurance. He and his older brother Charles, also worked on behalf of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), organizing local affiliates in Philadelphia.

In 1954, Medgar sought but was denied admission to the University of Mississippi Law School. His denial attracted the attention of the NAACP national office. Later in 1954, he moved to the state capital of Jackson and became the first field secretary of the NAACP in Mississippi.

As field secretary, he recruited members, organized voter registration efforts, demonstrations, and economic boycotts of white-owned companies. He also investigated crimes against blacks, including the lynching of Emmett Till, an African-American teenager who had allegedly been killed for talking to a white woman.

As early as 1955, Evers' activism made him the most visible civil rights leader in Mississippi. As a result, he and his family were subjected to numerous threats and violent actions over the years, including a firebombing of their home in May, 1963. In June of that year, Evers was shot in the back in the driveway of his home in Jackson and died later at a nearby hospital.

He was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery, and the NAACP posthumously awarded him their 1963 Springarn Medal. The national outrage over Evers' murder enhanced support for legislation that would become the civil rights act of 1964. Following Evers' death, the NAACP appointed his brother Charles to his position. Charles Evers went on to become a major political figure in the state; in 1969 he was elected Mayor of Fayette, Mississippi, becoming the first African-American mayor of a racially mixed southern town since reconstruction.

A police and FBI investigation of Evers' murder revealed a prime suspect – Byron De La Beckwith, a white segregationist and founding member of Mississippi's White Citizens Council. Despite mounting evidence against him – a rifle found near the crime scene was registered to Beckwith and had his fingerprints on the scope, Beckwith denied shooting Evers. After a trial in 1964, Beckwith was freed after two all-white juries deadlocked. In 1989, the question of Beckwith's guilt was again raised with emergence of new witnesses, including several individuals who would eventually testify that Beckwith had bragged to them about the murder.

In December, 1990, Beckwith was again indicted for the murder of Medgar Evers. In February 1994, Beckwith was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. He died in 2001 at the age of 80.