

Donna Bryson
REUTERS

ATLANTA – It’s almost at the edge of living memory: President Lyndon Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act in July 1964, urging Americans to “close the springs of racial poison.”

The legislation prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin at places serving the public – such as swimming pools and restaurants – as well as in education, hiring, promotion and firing and voting. And it gave the federal government powers to enforce those guarantees.

It was the beginning of the end of Jim Crow, the often brutally enforced web of racist laws and practices born in the South to subjugate Black Americans.

Members of the last generation to live under unabashed Jim Crow are among voters in a historic presidential election that has been roiled by racial and other divisions.

Both candidates have been touched by the legislation in their earlier lives.

Democratic candidate Kamala Harris was bused to school as a young girl in California, as part of efforts across the country to bring children from largely Black areas to schools in largely white neighborhoods and vice versa. In 1973, the federal government sued Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump’s family-owned Trump Management Co. for discriminating against Black tenants under legislation that expanded on the original act.

Asked for comment on the suit, Trump campaign spokesperson Janiyah Thomas said: “This case is over 50 years old and long-resolved.”

To mark the Civil Rights Act milestone, Reuters traveled across Mississippi, Tennessee and Georgia to interview nine Black Americans about their memories of that time – when a Black shopper could be beaten for trying on clothes, or a wrong turn could lead to violence for Black vacation goers – and their views of a historic election.

Church and politics

Paulyne Morgan White, 95, Atlanta, Georgia

White joined Atlanta’s Big Bethel AME Church in 1949 and was married there in 1960. A September Sunday found White in a pew, listening to a sermon that included exhortations to vote.

She had also been to her church for a discussion about Project 2025, a conservative group’s plans for the next Republican presidency that Democrats characterize as extreme.

White, who had a long career as a teacher and journalist, still writes a society column for The Atlanta Inquirer, a Black community newspaper. She’s followed the presidential race closely, watching the Democratic convention on television and discussing it with friends.

Though she uses a walker, White said she planned to vote in person, noting with a smile that because of her age she got special treatment at the polls.

“I’m going to vote on voting day,” she said. “I like the activity. And I don’t have to wait in line.”

The making of an activist

Rev. Gerald Durlley, 82, Atlanta, Georgia

Durlley, raised in segregated schools and neighborhoods in Colorado and California, went south in 1960 to attend Tennessee State University, a historically Black college in Nashville.

He ignored his basketball coach’s warnings not to go to downtown Nashville alone, visiting a department store where he tried on a hat before returning it to the shelf.

A manager exclaimed that no white customer would buy a hat worn, however briefly, by a Black shopper. The manager hit Durlley with the hat, grabbed money from his pocket and threw him out of the store.

That night, Durlley attended a meeting about plans for non-violent sit-ins at lunch counters.

He thought of the hat. “There’s always a motivating force,” Durlley said.

It was the beginning of decades of involvement in the civil rights movement. In 1963, Durlley was in the crowd



Paulyne Morgan White, 95, poses for a portrait at Big Bethel AME Church in Atlanta, Ga., on Sept. 29. Though she uses a walker, she said she planned to vote in person, noting with a smile that because of her age she got special treatment at the polls. “I’m going to vote on voting day,” she said. “I like the activity. And I don’t have to wait in line.”
PHOTOS BY KEVIN WURM/REUTERS

Black Americans share Jim Crow memories

Sixty years later, legislation still touches this year’s historic election



Vanessa Stanley, 70, places a ‘Harris For President’ campaign sign in her front yard in Atlanta, Ga., on Sept. 27.

when Martin Luther King Jr. made his celebrated “I have a dream” speech during the march on Washington.

In the late 1960s, Durlley joined the Black Panther Party.

He earned a doctorate in psychology and a master’s in divinity.

A retired pastor, Durlley remains active in causes and is working to raise awareness of the disproportionate impact of climate change on Black communities.



Reverend Gerald Durlley, 82, poses for a portrait in the Providence Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta, Ga., on Sept. 27.

you worked a job 12 months out of the year, you should be able to take a vacation,” Graham, 74, said.

During a rest stop in northern Florida in 1965, Graham and her sister went into a cafe without their father. A white man demanded the two to give him their seats.

“He said, ‘You ain’t hear me? I told you to get up so I can sit down!’” Graham recalled, mimicking the man’s derisive drawl.

They left, not telling their father why.

Once their group arrived in Miami, Graham said she saw the possibility of change. A white family cut ahead of their group – only to be directed to the back of the line by the maitre d.

Graham, a retired IT professional, dismisses Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan as a call to go back to when Black Americans were subjugated.

“It’s not ‘make America great again.’ It’s ‘make America white again,’” she said.

The public space

Nanella O’Neal Graham, 74, Atlanta, Georgia

Nanella O’Neal Graham’s father organized tour groups for Black vacationers at a time when whites were resisting desegregation.

Keeper of memory

Hermon Johnson Sr., 95, Mound Bayou, Mississippi

Hermon Johnson Sr. got his job at a Black-owned insurance company in 1954 because civil rights leader Medgar Evers had left it to become the NAACP’s first Mississippi field secretary

The all-Black town of Mound Bayou offered opportunities rare elsewhere in the South. But its residents knew white people could use violence to enforce Jim Crow elsewhere.

In 1955, Mamie Till-Mobley stayed in the town during breaks in the trial of two white men accused of torturing and killing her 14-year-old son Emmett Till.

Evers, civil rights activists, and Black journalists also took refuge in the town, 40 miles east of the Tallahatchie County Courthouse, gathering at the home of the insurance company owner.

Both white men were acquitted. Their confession to torturing and killing

the child appeared four months later in a national magazine.

The insurance firm’s owner, the target of death threats, closed the business. Johnson, Mound Bayou’s vice mayor from 1961 to 1992, took home the desk, typewriter, and chair he and Evers used.

In 1963, a white supremacist killed Evers in Jackson, Miss.

When Johnson’s sons opened a local history museum in 2021, he donated the Evers desk, typewriter and chair.

“The older I get, the more important history is to me,” he said.

The power of education

Brenda Luckett, 65, Clarksdale, Mississippi

Luckett said she was born to be a teacher.

Her mother was a teacher. Her father, who left school in the third grade to help raise his brothers and sisters, returned to earn the equivalent of a high school diploma when Brenda was in the third grade. He later worked as a railroad locomotive engineer, a job formerly reserved for white employees, his wife recording the materials he needed to qualify for the job on cassette tapes so he could listen over and over again.

“It was education all the time,” said Luckett, a retired special education teacher.

Around the time President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, Luckett’s parents sent her to a Freedom School.

Such schools were projects of civil rights activists during the Freedom Summer of 1964, a campaign to draw attention to the oppression of Black Mississippians and to register African American voters. Luckett said Freedom Summer instructors taught her to read. They skipped picture books and went straight to chapter books, making her feel they had confidence in her abilities.

Decades later she said it was a lesson she told her own students: “Please don’t let them tell you that you can’t learn something because they put a label on you.”

Hear the music

Lorenzo Washington, 81, Nashville, Tennessee

Lorenzo Washington got a job at a gas station as a teenager filling tanks and washing cars for 50 cents an hour, plus tips. But when his boss found out he was saving to buy a car, Washington said he cut his shifts.

“He didn’t want Black folks to have anything,” Washington said.

The boss also routinely hurled brutal racist slurs at Black workers and manhandled them when he thought they were slow to respond to customers.

One day, Washington said, he stood his ground, prepared for a physical confrontation that did not occur.

Washington managed to save \$85 the summer he was 15, enough to buy a 1949 Chevrolet on which he still looks back fondly. He loaned his car to friends old enough to drive who took him to the music clubs of Jefferson Street, then the commercial heart of north Nashville, a Black neighborhood. It was his introduction to the city’s music scene.

In the late 1960s, clubs and other Jefferson Street businesses were demolished to make way for a highway, a fate Black neighborhoods across the country endured.

Washington went on to work for himself, including as a music promoter and producer.

In 2010, he bought a building and opened a museum packed with memorabilia of Jefferson Street’s musical heyday.

“I chose to put my money in here and have something to offer the next generations,” he said.

Stark memories

Vanessa Stanley, 71, Atlanta, Georgia

Vanessa Stanley, then in elementary school, and another young Black girl were walking in the predominantly Black Atlanta neighborhood of Summerhill.

Her friend and a white girl accidentally jostled one another. Stanley and her friend continued their walk.

Later that day, the police came to her home, Stanley said.

The police, who said the white girl claimed she had been assaulted, were there with an ultimatum.

“Unless our parents whooped us, they were going to lock us up,” Stanley said. “So I got my butt whooped.”

“A white girl could say that ‘two Black girls assaulted me.’ Police would come,” she said. “That ain’t nothing but racism.”