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James R. Mapp biographical sketch

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Recommended Citation

Forrester, Mikaela, "James R. Mapp biographical sketch". (2021) *Chattanooga Racial Justice Bibliographies*. <https://scholar.utc.edu/racial-justice-biographies/5>.

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James R. Mapp

Written by Mikaela Forrester.

On June 19, 2015, Chattanooga lost an illustrious and compassionate civil rights leader, James R. Mapp. Mapp, who had been born in 1927 in Mayfield, GA, moved to Chattanooga in 1937. From the ages of 12 to 20, Mapp maintained an impressive hardworking background in school and in the workforce, and in his work as an activist. He first began working at the age of 12, in 1939, at Virgil Clint's Grocery Store, then moved to work at Sol Kopkins Grocery store, where he worked during the school year, from 1939 to 1945. Then during the summers of 1944 to 1947, Mapp began working at the U.S. Pipe and Foundry. There he realized that "...racial discrimination determined your salary."¹

In addition to his work responsibilities, Mapp had also been active within the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and worked as the President of the Coordinated Youth Councils of Chattanooga from 1945 to 1947. During his time as President, he met a Mrs. Ruby Hurley, who he worked with until her retirement. He stated that because of Mrs. Hurley, he attended the first Southeast Region Youth Conference at Dillard University in New Orleans in 1946. Mapp compared Mrs. Hurley to prominent civil rights leaders, noting "It makes me wonder what the legacy of Dr. King would have been had there not been a forerunner like Mrs. Ruby Hurley."² Mapp's statement reflects that without Black leaders like Hurley, who came before Dr. King, who were already working towards Civil Rights there would not have been a path for Dr. King and his work. When he was not working or with Mrs. Hurley at the NAACP, Mapp and his sister Mary juggled their school responsibilities at Howard High School, where they were both recognized as honor students.

After finishing at Howard High School and graduating valedictorian in 1947, Mapp moved on to Tennessee A&I State College in Nashville, where he met his wife, Viola. "After our first date, I went to my dorm that night and wrote my mother, describing Vi in a most tender way," Mapp recalled in his autobiography, "I was hooked, and so was she, and after that we would always be seen together."³ Not long after falling deeply in love with Viola, the two married during their freshman year of college, September 6, 1948, after Viola became pregnant with their first of eight children (Brenda, Deborah, Michaellee, Jon, Angela, Toney, Alicia, and Ivy). "Many would probably say that ours was a marriage made in heaven, and I would have a hard time disputing that," Mapp stated, "The day of her arrival and the next forty-six years and four months were like a dream as I look back."⁴

Following early days in the NAACP, Mapp was elected as the branch secretary. He filled this position from 1953 until 1959 when he was elected as the branch president. Mapp was able to attend the NAACP National Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota, during his first term and while at the convention, Mapp began to realize how deeply racial separation affected him. At the convention, Mapp observed that Black people and White people mingled together socially. However, Mapp recalled, "...I was reluctant—or maybe I should say I was scared—to dance with white women although I was a thousand miles from

¹ James R. Mapp, *Chance or Circumstance?*

² James R. Mapp, *Chance or Circumstance?*

³ James R. Mapp, *Chance or Circumstance?*

⁴ James R. Mapp, *Chance or Circumstance?*

the Deep South.”⁵ Mapp felt this way because, in the rural South, a Black man dancing with a White woman was like signing a death certificate. His experiences in Minnesota, seeing Black people treated as equals in the society, and seeing the sacrifices they had to make, encouraged and strengthened Mapp’s resolve to make a change.

This resolve turned into action as Mapp became involved in a desegregation case against the Chattanooga Board of Education, James Jonathan Mapp et al. v. the Chattanooga Board of Education. In 1959, Mapp first proposed taking a desegregation case lawsuit against the Chattanooga Schoolboard to the NAACP. This lawsuit was initially rejected because the branch believed they would have to raise a substantial sum of money; however, at the previously mentioned National Convention in St. Paul, Mapp learned that this step was a simple process. The branch still rejected it because they did not believe it was possible. Nevertheless, Mapp pursued his goal and later stated that “The branch would later become a strong supporter of the desegregation suit.”⁶

Due to the branch’s initial rejection, Mapp, with Deborah and James, and a few other NAACP members (Josephine Derricks and her two children Pamela and Pless, the Reverend H. H. Kirnon, pastor of Cleages Chapel A.M.E. Zion Church, and his daughter Kathy) began making their own plans to seek a suit against the School Board. The parents and their children all drove up to Glenwood, an all-White school at the time, where they met with the principal seeking admission for their children. When they were denied admission, the members, led by James R Mapp, started on a path that would forever change the history of Chattanooga, TN.

After their denial, they contacted the NAACP office and sent a telegram to Dr. Letson, insisting that the school must desegregate within 24 hours. In the *Chattanooga News Free Press*, Mapp said that while immediate desegregation was their plan, “...if the school board should indicate that it will voluntarily start total integration within 10 days, we would wait that long,” and they also sent a request to the national NAACP office asking them to step in.⁷ The national office sent Attorney Constance Baker Motley in 1960 to help. She filed the suit along with a local Attorney, R.H. Craig.

Not too long after the case opened and began, Mapp lost the two other parents he was working with, Maxey and The Reverend, which left him the sole litigant. Mapp stated that “The case persisted at great cost to my family, and even today, it affects my quiet enjoyment and financial security.” While at trial, Mapp experiences Chattanooga residents’ resistance such as the judge making the school boards attorneys look better and placing a \$9,000 stipend on Mapp to pay his attorneys; however, this did not stop Mapp and his attorneys, and in the end, “...there was no other choice but to rule in our favor,” Mapp wrote, “We were persistent and sought plans that would forever erase the segregated way of life.”⁸ The court accepted the entire desegregation plan in 1973, but the schools continued to delay causing Mapp to petition to the court year after year; however, in 1987, the twenty-six-year desegregation suit was closed, and the *Chattanooga News Free Press* wrote that “Mr. Mapp said he

⁵ James R. Mapp, *Chance or Circumstance?*

⁶ James R. Mapp, *Chance or Circumstance?*

⁷ Springer Gibson, *Negroes Seek Admission to City White Schools Now*

⁸ James R. Mapp, *Chance or Circumstance?*

believes the civil rights movement will move from desegregation to jobs and the economic advancement of Black people.”⁹

James R. Mapp was a humble and empathetic man who made an incredible difference in Chattanooga. In his later years, Mapp maintained his position as an outspoken activist and spoke out on incarceration, stating “Prisons are filled disproportionately with black inmates whom are there for relatively minor crimes.”¹⁰ Mapp’s legacy is a final call to action from him to us. He sought to make a great change in Chattanooga Tennessee and, although he accomplished that, this last statement of his shows that he left this world believing there is more work to be done within the community to turn the tide towards antiracism and equality. In one of his last interviews, he left us with this powerful quote, “We must assess where we are, plot new courses, and keep the dream and the dreamer alive for people at the bottom who are being pushed down further. Can we amass enough believers in the dream to use nonviolent techniques and peaceful means to get back on track? This is the question.”¹¹

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Credit

This biography was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of HIST 3920R: History of White Rage taught by Professor Susan Eckelmann Berghel, Ph. D. in the Department of History at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga in Spring 2021.

⁹ *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, James Mapp Family Lauded for Desegregation Suit

¹⁰ Brown, *Mapp: Keep the Dream Alive*

¹¹ Brown, *Mapp: Keep the Dream Alive*