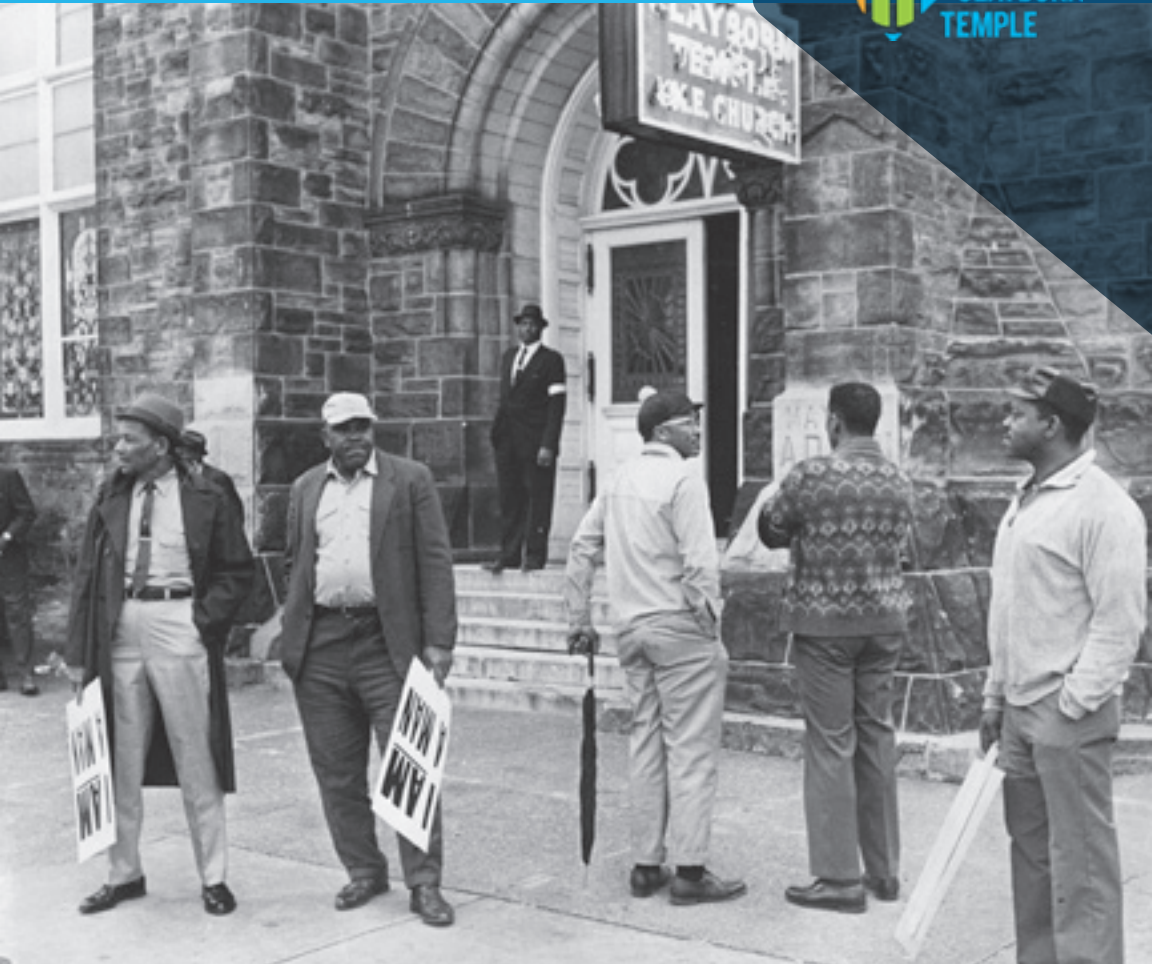


# I AM:

The Story of Historic Clayborn Temple &  
The Sanitation Workers' Strike of 1968









*Sanitation workers strike in Downtown Memphis in February of 1968.*

*© Jim Shearnin- The Commercial Appeal.*

# ▶ Memphis: The Center of PLANTATION CAPITALISM



“

*The Mississippi Delta begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg. — David Cohn, 1935*

”

When the Sanitation Workers' Strike erupted in 1968, the Civil War had been over for more than 100 years. Memphis, however, still reflected a plantation-like economy and a widespread mentality of white supremacy.

Memphis, founded in 1819, owed its prosperity to its location on the 2,300-mile-long Mississippi River, the largest river in the United States. Surrounded by cotton plantations, Memphis quickly became a major transportation center. Its economy was based on the labor of enslaved African Americans in the vast surrounding countryside. Hardwood and cotton were planted and harvested by enslaved Black people and led to massive wealth for white Memphis factories and distributors.

At the conclusion of the Civil War, African Americans found that this new phase of life looked a lot like the old – what historians have called “slavery by another name.” White planters attempted to keep African Americans tied to the land through a system of debt known as sharecropping. Routine and barbaric violence was a constant threat, as more than 4,400 African Americans were lynched between 1877

and 1945 – often in public events with a carnival like atmosphere. In this context, thousands of African Americans arrived in Memphis as part of the Great Migration from rural towns in the South to Southern urban areas. Millions more migrated out of the South completely. In Memphis, Jim Crow was both law and custom. It was enforced by extralegal, vigilante violence. African Americans who defied Jim Crow, like the crusading anti-lynching journalist Ida B. Wells, were killed, fired, or run out of town. Whites tightly controlled all aspects of political and civic life in Memphis, instituting new laws designed to enforce segregation and suppress Black voting. Whites relied on violence and lynchings to ensure Black subjugation.

By the mid-1960s, Memphis functioned as two cities. Whites controlled core elements of the city's economy and benefited from public schools and public services. African Americans came together through associational life to start businesses, establish churches, and build their own civic institutions. Through it all, Jim Crow laws and policies – including the exclusion of African Americans from the ranks of many unions – made economic advancement and civil rights a constant struggle for Black Memphians.



*Aerial view of central downtown Memphis in 1968 looking South. Commercial Appeal photograph collection, Special Collections Department, University of Memphis.*



*William Carlos Handy "Father of the Blues. The Memphis Press-Scimitar newspaper morgue, Special Collections Department, University of Memphis.*



## Singing the Blues

*The Blues make a joyful noise out of lamentation and mourning. It is a way of making poetic and rhythmic sense out of life, and it grows directly out of the Mississippi Delta. — Luther Brown, Mississippi Delta – The Place, the Mindset*

African Americans arriving from the Mississippi Delta brought a distinct musical form known as the "Blues." In Memphis, the music flourished in an area of downtown known as Beale Street. For more than 50 years, African Americans enjoyed the clubs that lined the street, listening to musicians and singers including W.C. Handy, Muddy Waters, Memphis Minnie and B.B. King. By the early 1960s, many businesses and clubs had closed, but Beale Street would soon be the center of the fight for equality in the Sanitation Workers' Strike of 1968.



*T.O. Jones, President of AFSCME Local 1733, speaks to a crowd at Clayborn Temple. © photo by Richard L. Copley.*

## ▶ Clayborn Temple and the Memphis Sanitation **WORKERS' STRIKE OF 1968**





“

In Memphis, you had something you could do. Not only could you support the strike...you could boycott the stores downtown and you could support the relief effort of the strikers. You could go to mass meetings. You could get on the marches. In other words, there were things you could get people to line up behind. —Rev. James Lawson

”

Memphis' sanitation workers, under the leadership of T.O. Jones, had attempted to secure better pay and working conditions through a union since 1959. In 1965, sanitation workers established a charter for Local Chapter 1733, through the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). They elected representatives, but the City of Memphis refused to formally recognize the union and its leadership. In 1966, a Memphis chancery court issued an injunction that deterred workers from picketing at work sites as they took direct action to form their union. The City of Memphis had refused, for decades, to make meaningful improvements to working conditions and pay, and they remained opposed to the workers forming a union in 1968. When two Black workers were crushed to death by a garbage truck compactor on February 1, 1968 – Echol Cole and Robert Walker – the preventable deaths of these two workers steeled the courage of Black Memphians to challenge the City of Memphis through a strike.

The 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike was the result of a unique alliance between labor unions, the NAACP, faith-based organizations and congregations, women, and youth. The Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr., a seasoned non-violent campaign organizer, was the key link between the Black Ministerial Alliance with the AFSCME union. Collaboration was difficult throughout the strike. It required daily meetings and constant negotiation, but it led to the formation of the ad-hoc Community on the Move for Equality (COME), which Rev. Lawson chaired.

Opposing the strike – and declaring a union to be illegal for city workers – were Mayor Henry Loeb, the majority of Memphis City Council and white-owned media.

Clayborn Temple was the central gathering point for the strike, serving as the starting point for marches to City Hall, as the site for strike strategy sessions, and the location for community gatherings. Signs carried by strikers declaring "I AM A MAN" were printed by Clayborn's pastor in the church basement.

The march for justice was underway by February 12, drawing support from national organizations and leaders including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in what turned out to be his last campaign.



*Memphis sanitation workers inspect a garbage truck similar to the one in which two workers were killed. Memphis Press-Scimitar newspaper morgue, Special Collections Department, University of Memphis.*

## THE STRIKERS' DEMANDS

- Union recognition
- Written contract
- Wage increase
- Dues checkoff
- Formal grievance procedure
- Opportunity for promotion
- Pensions
- Benefits



*On March 29, 1968, signs held by Ted Brown and Reverend Theodore Hibbler signify the fight was about more than working conditions, it was about dignity. © photo by Richard L. Copley.*

## The Job of a Memphis Sanitation Worker in 1968

In 1968, Memphis' African American sanitation workers endured an endless cycle of hauling heavy, often rain-filled, fly-infested garbage cans, picking up garbage and dead animals on city streets and cutting and hauling fallen trees. Often, they were forced to use malfunctioning trucks. Workers had nowhere to take a lunch break and showers were not provided, leaving the men to return home in filthy, stinky clothing.

For this back-breaking work, the men and their families lived in poverty, with no job benefits and pay only slightly above the minimum wage (\$1.60 per hour). Pay was for an 8-hour day, but it often took 10 or 12 hours to complete a route. There was no job security – workers could be sent home without pay in bad weather and could be fired at any time without cause.



*A meeting of some 1,500 strikers and supporters at Clayborn Temple on February 26, 1968. © James R. Reid- The Commercial Appeal.*

# ▶ Clayborn Temple: HEART OF THE COMMUNITY



“

*The Negro church touches almost every ramification of the life of the Negro. — Carter G. Woodson, The Negro Church, An All-Comprehending Institution, 1939.*

”

Built for a white congregation and dedicated as Second Presbyterian Church on January 1, 1893, the beautiful Romanesque Revival church features monumental stained-glass windows and a huge pipe organ. At the time, it was the largest church in the United States South of the Ohio River. The white congregation actively supported mission work, providing job training for underprivileged youth, hosting a rescue mission and supporting a national prohibition of alcohol.

In 1949, the church was sold to an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) congregation. The name was changed to Clayborn Temple in honor of local AME bishop J.M. Clayborn. Clayborn Temple was located in the heart of the African American community at the edge of Beale Street and near other African American churches.

Clayborn Temple's congregation was determined to fight for equality. The church hosted a Vote-a-Rama to register African Americans to vote in nearby rural counties and submitted questionnaires to candidates for governor in 1958, joining a Black struggle for freedom that was in full bloom. By the early 1960s, Clayborn was the site for sit-in meetings and the starting point for demonstration marches against discriminatory practices in downtown stores and public schools.

Clayborn's long tradition of demanding equality and social justice positioned the church at the center of the 1968 Sanitation Workers' Strike. Most importantly, it was a 1.3-mile march to Memphis City Hall, a path that would be well-worn during the 1968 Sanitation Workers' Strike.



*Strikers and supporters gather at Clayborn Temple on March 28, 1968,  
© The Commercial Appeal.*



*A group of sanitation workers outside Clayborn Temple on March 28, 1968  
Memphis Press-Scimitar newspaper morgue, Special Collections  
Department, University of Memphis.*



## March for Freedom

August 5, 1961 marked an “All Day March for Freedom.” A news story announced that “a shift will leave Clayborn Temple AME Church every hour beginning at 9 a.m.” to protest discrimination in downtown stores. Maxine Smith, executive director of the Memphis branch of the NAACP, explained: “Picketing presents physical evidence of our distaste for second-class service and discriminatory practices on the part of Main Street merchants.”

*Overhead view of Clayborn  
Temple in 1968. The Commercial  
Appeal newspaper morgue,  
Special Collections Department,  
University of Memphis.*





*On March 28, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led more than 5,000 sanitation workers and their supporters on a march down Beale Street.*

*© photo by Richard L. Copley.*

## I am a Man: The Sanitation **WORKERS' STRIKE**





“

*The signs we were carrying said, 'I am a Man.' And we were going to demand to have the same dignity and the same courtesy any other citizen of Memphis has.—*

*James Douglas, Sanitation Worker*

”

Sanitation workers in Memphis were almost exclusively African American, and they endured horrific working conditions. Day after day, they ventured out into all kinds of weather lifting heavy, stinky tubs of garbage over their heads and into trucks. Wages were so low, many qualified for government assistance. They were required to enter homes from the back to remain in compliance with Jim Crow custom, and the workers routinely cited faulty equipment on the job - specifically the garbage collection trucks they used. On February 1, 1968, workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker were crushed to death by a malfunctioning trash compactor as they sought shelter from the rain in the back of their truck. The city gave each family one month's pay and \$500 for burial expenses, but the families were left destitute as their primary wage earners were now gone.

T.O. Jones, a native Memphian and a veteran of the U.S. armed forces, joined a union while working in naval shipyards on the west coast. He began work with the Memphis Public Works Department in December of 1959 and worked to organize a union for the sanitation workers throughout the 1960s. He called the death of Echol Cole and Robert Walker "a disgrace and a sin," and made sure the two men's deaths were not in vain. He convinced 1,300 sanitation workers to go on strike on February 12, 1968, and their action led to a coalition of local civil rights leaders and labor activists demanding that the city increase worker pay and formally recognize American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 1733 as the sanitation workers union.

For the next two months, Clayborn Temple was the starting point for daily marches and evening

gatherings. The strikers were supported by groups including the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the AFL-CIO and the United Rubber Workers (labor unions), the NAACP, the Interracial Memphis Ministers Association, the Black Ministerial Alliance, the Tennessee Labor Council, and many high school and college students.



*"It was all us labor got together and we was going to quit work till we got a raise...and could get justice on the job from the way they're treating us."*

— Ed Gillis, Sanitation Worker

## I AM A MAN

The I AM A MAN signs carried by striking workers became the strike's defining symbol. Signs were printed in the basement of Clayborn Temple by Rev. Malcolm Blackburn, the church's white minister. It is believed African American Joe Warren, founding member of AFSCME Local 1733, collaborated with Rev. Blackburn to develop the slogan, I AM A MAN.

I AM A MAN has become a universal symbol for human rights and human dignity.



*Sanitation workers marching down Main Street in March 1968.  
© The Commercial Appeal.*

*Thousands gather at  
Clayborn Temple before the  
march on March 28, 1968.  
© The Commercial Appeal.*





*Community on the Move for Equality meets at Clayborn Temple. The Memphis Search for Meaning Committee records, Special Collections Department, University of Memphis.*



## The Church in the Struggle: The Rev. James Lawson & **THE POWER OF NONVIOLENCE**



*The main role of the church is to try to develop the kinds of moments that will help reconciliation to take place, and this doesn't take place by pretending problems aren't there. Reconciliation takes place in confrontation, and of course, I think very clearly non-violent confrontation...I take this very seriously from the prophetic tradition. The word doesn't precede the demonstrations, the word follows the demonstrations.*

*—James M. Lawson, Jr. Interview by David Yellin and Joan Turner Beifuss, September 24, 1969, container 22, folder 137 p. 32*

Long before the sanitation worker's strike, African American churches preached the message that Black people were beloved children of God. Despite the dehumanizing conditions brought on by Jim Crow, this message of faith built and sustained the courage to engage in the critical work of ending Jim Crow. Churches also afforded the resources, physical space, and enterprise tools required to challenge a rigidly and violently segregated society. Together, the gospel message of divine worth, love in action through community organizing, and the nonviolent witness of Jesus created a powerful platform for nonviolent movements.

But within the African American community, there was not agreement about the strategy of nonviolent direct action. Stokely Carmichael's call for "Black Power" in Greenwood, Mississippi in 1966 emboldened many young people to criticize the method of nonviolent direct action. Stokely Carmichael and others did believe in nonviolence, but they did not support absolute moral pacifism or respectability politics, to make one appear presentable to the white mainstream. Absolute moral pacifism is the belief that violence should never be conducted, even in self-defense. Carmichael argued that an individual holds the right to defend themselves against a violent assailant. "This is the twenty-seventh time that I've been arrested," Carmichael famously told supporters. "I ain't going to jail no more," he argued, saying "all we've been doing is begging the federal government" and now "the only thing we can do is take over." Carmichael meant that



Black people, particularly in majority Black counties in the rural South, should have the electoral power to take rightful control over elected offices. But his comment inspired a wider movement as a generation of youth undertook a different, more aggressive approach to civil rights. In Memphis, a local group of youth called 'the Invaders' challenged the moral pacifism of minister Lawson to get in touch with "the temper of the times." The Invaders played a key role in organizing middle and high school youth for daily nonviolent marches, mobilizing hundreds of young people a day during the strike. But Invaders Coby Smith and Charles Cabbage also consistently challenged the philosophy of absolute moral pacifism heralded by Lawson and King.

*Protesters in front of Clayborn Temple during the Memphis sanitation workers' strike in March 1968. Memphis Press-Scimitar newspaper morgue, Special Collections Department, University of Memphis.*

*"Violent revolution is always counterfeit...a violent revolution is always a short-cut to complex problems... you can easily destroy with violence, but you cannot do the replacing with violence. Replacing or rebuilding requires a non-violent temperament and spirit."  
Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr. (1961 SCLC Address, Lawson papers, Vanderbilt U.)*

*"I communicated with the City Council as in the spirit of (the prophet) Jeremiah, who in his day told the kings that they had no sensitivity for the alien, the widowed, the hungry and the oppressed."—Rev. Richard Moon*



*Community on the Move for Equality (COME) leader Reverend James Lawson leads a march on February 26, 1968. The sign reading “King Henry” refers to then Mayor Henry Loeb. Memphis Press-Scimitar newspaper morgue, Special Collections Department, University of Memphis.*



## Strategic Nonviolence

While nonviolent direct action as a strategy for civil rights advocacy faced fierce criticism in the late 1960s from advocates of Black Power, the Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr. convinced the strikers and their supporters to choose nonviolent direct action. On February 23, police attacked the strikers during a march from city hall to Mason Temple, spraying them with mace and beating them with clubs. On March 28, the first attempt at a march by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. fell apart, as some demonstrators among the almost 10,000 marchers broke the windows of local businesses. Police attacked, and fired tear gas into the Clayborn Temple as marchers sought cover. As riots erupted in cities across the country following the assassination of Dr. King, Coretta Scott King led a silent march in honor of her husband, the prophet of nonviolence, on April 8. Rev. Lawson instructed marchers to “honor Dr. King by making sure that the sanitation workers win their rights non-violently.”



*Women protest at City Hall on March 5, 1968. 117 strikers and supporters were arrested for refusing to leave City Hall. © James R. Reid- The Commercial Appeal.*

# ▶ Women Fight for CIVIL RIGHTS IN MEMPHIS





“

*It was a crusade really. It was more than a movement. — Maxine Smith*

”

By the time of the Sanitation Workers' Strike in 1968, African American women in Memphis had been speaking truth to power, organizing for better working conditions, and leading voter registration drives since the late 19th century. Black women were at the center of the Memphis Black Freedom Movement.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett, a co-founder of the NAACP, was among the most well-known Black women in the world in the late 19th century. From her office in downtown Memphis, Wells-Barnett documented the horrific lynching of Black people through numerous publications. She proved that the common public justification for lynching, that Black men were raping white women, was almost always wrong. The true motivation was white Memphians were irate that African Americans were gaining economic autonomy post slavery. In 1898, she was forced to flee Memphis when her newspaper office was destroyed by whites angry about her powerful investigative journalism.

Black Women were central figures in the city's labor movement throughout the 20th century. In 1942, Altha Sims petitioned President Franklin D. Roosevelt to include Black women in Memphis' expanding wartime economy. The vast majority of Black women in Memphis worked as domestic servants or laundry workers, and Ms. Sims argued that Black women should also be Rosie the Riveters.

In August of 1945, 200 women walked off the job to protest working conditions at a Loeb Laundry facility. Loeb Laundry was owned by the family of Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb. The Loeb's kept

wages painfully low at their laundries, and Henry Loeb's refusal to recognize the sanitation workers union led to the continual escalation of the strike.

In 1959, with a new Volunteer Ticket promoting African American men for city offices, African American women like Lola Lee, Geneva Evans and Lillie J. Wheeler kept the political operation going by staffing the campaign office, knocking on doors, organizing events and hosting meetings in private homes. During the 1968 sanitation workers' strike, just as they had done throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Black women like Maxine Smith played public leadership roles while also working behind-the-scenes as organizers and fundraisers.



*Cornelia Crenshaw leads a boycott in support of sanitation workers and their families. © photo by Richard L. Copley.*



*Woman confronts workers crossing the picket line on March 8, 1968.*

*© Tom Barber- The Commercial Appeal.*

## Maxine Smith

Maxine Smith, an activist who had escorted the first 13 Black children to desegregated schools in 1961, was executive director of the Memphis NAACP and a member of the strike's coordinating committee. Smith was a long-time advocate for the sanitation workers: "Nobody listened to us and the garbage men through the years. For some reason our city government demands a crisis. They seem not to hear Black people...We're invisible." After the NAACP board voted to support the strike, Smith made clear in a press conference that the situation was due to racial discrimination: "It is only Negroes who are relegated to this type of position."



## Cornelia Crenshaw

When Cornelia Crenshaw stepped forward to offer encouragement to sanitation workers at their first strike meeting on February 13, 1968, she brought the experience of her own battles with city government as she later noted: "I can understand them coming to a breaking point just the same as I did." In 1965, Crenshaw had been fired from a job she had held for 27 years at the Memphis Housing Authority, prompting her to file a discrimination suit under the U.S. Civil Rights Act. Focusing her activism on the strike, Crenshaw recruited many women supporters. Crenshaw was also instrumental in the formation of COME – Community on the Move for Equality – a group of 150 Black ministers who became active in marches and boycotts, while also collecting offerings from their congregations in support of the strikers.



*In March of 1968, the Invaders had a short sit-in at Memphis City Hall during the garbage strike. Pictured left to right: John Burrell Smith, Charles Laverne Cabbage, Charles Harrington, Charles Ballard, Verdell Brooks. © Robert Williams- The Commercial Appeal.*

# ▶ Black Power: The Invaders & THE STRENGTH OF YOUTH



“

*We want what people generally refer to as Black Power...  
to control the economics, the politics, the social life as well  
as the cultural life of their community.”—Charles Cabbage,  
Community Organizer and Civil Rights Activist*

”

Young people were central to the civil rights struggle across the South, and it was no different in Memphis. Students from Historically Black College and University Lemoyne College were leaders in the city's 1960 sit-in campaign, challenging segregation at the Brooks Museum, the Cossitt Library, and the Memphis Zoo. This early 1960s groundwork of youth activism became a foundation for recruiting and organizing youth to participate in the twice daily marches in the Sanitation Strike in February of 1968. Recruiting and organizing was led primarily by a local group of Black Power advocates, The Invaders.

The Invaders were inspired by Stokely Carmichael's call for Black Power on the Meredith March Against Fear that was launched in Memphis in 1966. Invader Charles Cabbage called for "black people...to control their own communities," which included community led programs designed to address poverty and police brutality in the Black neighborhoods. In the Sanitation Strike, the Invaders had an opportunity to directly address the widespread problem of Black poverty and police brutality right in their hometown.

The Invaders did not embrace nonviolence as promoted by Rev. James Lawson. But they did believe in the power of direct action and mass mobilization, and they agreed to work closely with the Community on the Move for Equality (COME). The alliance between the youth advocates of Black Power and the nonviolent ministerial leadership of the strike was difficult. Lawson and COME demanded that the Invaders remain nonviolent in word and deed, but the Invaders consistently and publicly criticized nonviolence and the ministerial leadership in the strike – arguing that Lawson and others had failed to reach the youth with a message of nonviolence. Like Stokely

Carmichael, they also claimed that the strategy of nonviolent direct action had not delivered sustainable progress for Black people in America. Because of their differences, each faction played an important role in the city-wide mobilization of the Black community. Together, they involved Black people of all ages and ideologies in the daily demonstrations and marches in support of the sanitation workers.



*Young protesters wait along the road outside a Memphis Sanitation Department facility in 1968. Memphis Press-Scimitar newspaper morgue, Special Collections department, University of Memphis.*





*Protesters confront workers crossing the picket line on March 8, 1968.*

© The Commercial Appeal.

## The Goal is a Union

*“The men weren’t thinking of strategy. They were thinking of justice and injustice.”*

—T.O. Jones, organizer and first AFSCME President

Memphis’ sanitation workers started a strike by refusing to show up for work. In doing so, they began a strike in the middle of winter without confirmed financial backing and with an uncertain outcome.

Local and national union leaders quickly stepped forward to provide organizational structure, meeting facilities, and financial support. These same union leaders partnered with ministerial groups and the NAACP in support of the strikers. Support came from the AFL-CIO, United Rubber Workers, and most importantly, from the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).

Within a week of the strike’s start, AFSCME gave \$5,000 to support the strikers. Soon, AFSCME’s national leaders, including President Jerry Wurf, Director for Legislation and Community Affairs Bill Lucy, and Director of Field Operations Julius Ciampa, would arrive in Memphis and remain directly involved until the strike’s conclusion. Local AFSCME leadership came from T.O. Jones, who had been trying to convince the sanitation workers to unionize for almost a decade.

AFSCME leaders understood from the beginning that the sanitation workers would make their own decisions. When Memphis city officials finally offered an agreement, Jerry Wurf presented the terms, stating “It is up to you to decide whether you like or don’t like the agreements and vote on them today.”



*Police in riot gear during the sanitation workers' strike on March 28, 1968  
Commercial Appeal newspaper morgue, Special Collections Department, University  
of Memphis.*

## White Resistance to Black Advancement: **THE STATUS QUO IN MEMPHIS**





“

*[Mayor Loeb] treats the workers as though they are not men. That's a racist point of view. For at the heart of racism is the idea of that a man is not a man, that a person is not a person. — Rev. James Lawson, February 24, 1968*

”

When sanitation workers began their twice daily marches for justice, they were well aware that violence might be used to subdue the strike. Black Memphians fought back against violent white supremacy during the Memphis Massacre of 1866. Whites terrorized the Black community in and around Beale Street over three days in April and May, killing forty-six people, raping five women, and destroying more than one hundred Black owned businesses and homes. In the early 1940s, political boss E. H. Crump launched a “reign of terror” on Beale Street that targeted Black business owners and political opponents through raids and arrests. Between 1877 and 1945, at least 37 Black women and men were lynched in Shelby County as white violence remained a constant threat. E.H. Crump’s iron fisted rule over the city, in addition to poll taxes, literacy tests, and violence directed at Black Memphians, prevented the city from electing a Black municipal official for almost one hundred years between 1877 and 1968 – making protection under the law impossible. Elected and appointed offices remained firmly in the control of whites in 1968, and Mayor Henry Loeb publicly and paternalistically treated the striking sanitation workers as ungrateful, defiant children – perpetuating the “plantation mentality” that long dominated white treatment of Black people in Memphis.

Mayor Loeb deemed the strike “illegal,” even though Executive Order 10988 allowed federally funded agencies to recognize public-employee unions. Despite protests from the three, newly-elected African Americans city council members, the first Black elected officials in Memphis since the 1870s, the council’s 10 white members used their majority power to give Mayor Loeb full authority to deal directly with the strike. For the mayor, this meant a continuing refusal to

recognize the sanitation workers union and the deployment of the Memphis Police Department to intimidate strikers and their supporters.

On February 22, 700 strikers and supporters filled the council room demanding that the council defy and recognize their union. Facing hundreds of men in their chambers, the council promised a resolution that would “recognize the union as the collective bargaining agent” and include “some form of dues check-off.” Instead, on February 23, 1968, nine white council members voted to recognize Mayor Loeb’s sole authority to resolve the strike while the three Black representatives – J.O. Patterson, Jr., James Netters, and Fred Davis – all voted against giving the mayor sole authority. The stunned workers had been betrayed. Rev. Lawson quickly organized a nonviolent march of the 700 workers from City Hall to Mason Temple, but within minutes police cars surrounded the marchers. Suddenly, a police cruiser ran over the foot of Gladys Carpenter. Police quickly surrounded the marchers and began to assault them with clubs and mace. The marchers fled the scene to nearby Clayborn Temple.



*National Guardsmen in armored personnel carriers on Main Street during the sanitation workers strike in April 1968. Commercial Appeal newspaper morgue, Special Collections Department, University of Memphis.*



*Supporters of the Memphis sanitation workers' strike march past National Guard troops in 1968. Memphis Search for Meaning Committee records, Special Collections Department, University of Memphis.*

## “Go back to work!”

*Mayor Henry Loeb, First meeting with striking sanitation workers  
February 13, 1968.*

Henry Loeb became mayor for the second time in January of 1968 with campaign themes of “Law and Order” and “Be Proud Again.” Declaring he stood for fiscal responsibility and enforcing the law, the slogans were in reality code words for maintaining white control, enforcing segregation, and oppressing African Americans. Loeb targeted the city’s public workers by denying overtime pay, refusing to replace broken equipment and hiring fewer workers. Loeb rejected any attempts by the sanitation workers to form a union, following a pattern he had set at his family’s laundry business. Loeb’s position towards the strikers was supported by the vast majority of white Memphians. Loeb embodied and perpetuated the racist white power structure in Memphis and saw the sanitation workers’ strike as a personal affront to himself, both as a white man and as mayor.

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# Tri-State

"The South's Independent"



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MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

# COPS WAGE WAR ON



TACK — Pictured above is one of the patrons of the Big "M" after the police made an attack on its patrons. These people hadn't

had no valid reason for making this attack on black business. The police brutally beat the patrons followed police orders to after they had peacefully

Tri-State Defender, vol 18, no 22, April 6, 1968. Accessed through the University of Memphis Libraries, Special Collections Department.



## A Tale of Two Cities: Black and White MEDIA REPORT THE STRIKE

# BLACK COMMUNITY

## Sanitation Workers Gain Local, National Support



followed police orders to vacate the premises. In full view of the entire Defender staff, police beat the patrons unmercifully.

Once known as "The City of Good Abode", Memphis' Negro population has become a community under siege. Since last Thursday's disturbance on Beale and Main St. many innocent Negroes have been beaten for no apparent reason.

One Memphis youth has been senselessly slain by police. It is now impossible for Negroes to travel in their own community or sit on their own porches. It is also impossible to travel in the Negro community without seeing heavily armed police, sheriff's men and fully armed national guardsmen.

### YOUTH IS KILLED

During the hours following the disturbance on Main and Beale, a 15 year old boy was slain by police. One observer said, "It was the worst example of police brutality ever



To get publicity (news coverage) is of the highest strategic importance to the Negro people.—Gunnar Myrdal, "An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy," 1944.

Like nearly every other aspect of political, social, and cultural life, the media in Memphis was rigidly segregated. Memphis had two daily newspapers owned by whites, the morning *Memphis Commercial Appeal* and the evening *Memphis Press Scimitar*. These two papers rarely covered news and events in the Black community, and when they did, the reporters relied on racist tropes and stereotypes – a practice exemplified by a serial cartoon in the *Commercial Appeal* entitled “Hambone’s Meditation.” Hambone was a racist caricature of an African American man, with exaggerated facial features, broken dialect, and an attempt to portray African Americans as shiftless and unintelligent. During the Sanitation Strike, the cartoon became a key piece of evidence for the Black community in their claims that the white community maintained a constant posture of racism towards African Americans.

The white-owned *Commercial Appeal* and *Memphis Press-Scimitar* remained firmly behind Mayor Loeb, as did most of the white community. The papers insisted, wrongly, that the strike was illegal. White Memphians read headlines like “Negro Pastors Take Reins as Garbage Strike Leaders Switch to Racial Pitch” and “(Mayor) Loeb Takes the Right Course.” Editorials were racially-charged: “The bluster, swagger and insolence of men purporting to represent city garbage workers cannot be construed as ‘bargaining.’ Mayor Loeb has...listened to the most brazen and abusive language from union leaders without losing his well-known temper.”

African Americans boycotted the white-owned newspapers and relied on the Black-owned papers the *Tri-State Defender* and the *Memphis World*. They also relied on radio stations *WDIA* and *WLOK* for regular updates, as well as nightly

mass meetings at Clayborn Temple and other churches. Newspaper headlines in the Black papers were much different than those of white papers, conveying the strike’s true intent: “Lawson Lambasts Way of Violence,” “Cops Wage War on Black Community,” “Law Officers Lit Cauldron,” and “Strikers Seek Justice.”

▶ *“If it hadn’t been for the media...the Civil Rights movement would have been like a bird without wings, a choir without a song.”*

—Congressman John Lewis, 2005



*Tri-State Defender, vol 18, no 22, April 6, 1968. Accessed through the University of Memphis Libraries, Special Collections Department.*

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**NATIONAL OUTLINE**  
 By Diggs Detroit

**Striker's Struggles**

It has become apparent to the nation as a whole that the Negro is not only fighting for his own rights but also for the rights of the white man. The Negro is not only fighting for his own rights but also for the rights of the white man. The Negro is not only fighting for his own rights but also for the rights of the white man. The Negro is not only fighting for his own rights but also for the rights of the white man.

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**A Point Of View**

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MEMPHIS — The Negro is the best man left in the world. He is the best man left in the world. He is the best man left in the world. He is the best man left in the world. He is the best man left in the world.

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**Strikers Seek Justice**

The past action of the city Commission and the city council has caused the workers to seek justice. The workers are not only fighting for their own rights but also for the rights of the white man.

Tri-State Defender, accessed through the University of Memphis Libraries, Special Collections Department.



# The Tri State Defender

As the strike continued, national Civil Rights leaders Roy Wilkins, head of the NAACP, and Bayard Rustin, head of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, were invited by strike leaders to come to Memphis. The city's Black and white newspapers reacted very differently to this news:

**From the white-owned Press-Scimitar:**  
 "The Press-Scimitar hopes Mr. Wilkins and Mr. Rustin will not forget that they are visiting the city with the best race relations record in the nation, and this is the first occasion when leaders of national stature have been called in to take a stand in a local situation."

**From the Black-owned Tri-State Defender:**  
 "The marches will continue until our sanitation workers get the dignity and justice that they deserve. We are not afraid of guns, the Gestapo, or Mace. If this community has to fight down to the very last Black man we will."



*Coretta Scott King marches with sanitation workers after the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. © photo by Richard L. Copley.*

# The Promised Land: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s **LAST CAMPAIGN**





“

*The question is not: if I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?  
The question is: if I don't stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen  
to them?"—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Memphis, April 3, 1968*

”

With Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb refusing to negotiate with the striking workers and their union, the Community on the Move for Equality (COME) invited national civil rights and labor leaders to Memphis to raise the profile of their campaign and pressure the Mayor. In mid-March, COME invited National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) President Roy Wilkins as well as March on Washington Organizer Bayard Rustin. The Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr. also invited his old friend, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., to speak to workers on March 18. In an unplanned moment of inspiration, King suggested a 'general strike' in the city to force the Mayor to acquiesce. A record snowstorm in the city delayed King's return to the city to March 28, where he joined more than 10,000 supporters on a march that began at Clayborn Temple. After half a mile, looting of local businesses led to a rapid police assault on the marchers. The police were armed with mounted .30 caliber machine guns and tear gas, and they attacked looters and peaceful protestors alike. Sixteen-year old Larry Payne was killed by Memphis police in the assault. Lawson ordered marchers to seek refuge inside Clayborn Temple where police entered the church swinging clubs and shooting canisters of tear gas into the sanctuary. One sanitation worker recalled jumping out of the church's stained-glass windows to escape.

Dr. King returned to Memphis on April 3, 1968 determined to lead a peaceful march – but was forced to contend with a court injunction before marching. King retained local attorneys Lucius Burch and Mike Cody to successfully overturn the injunctions. Worn out from constant travel, King sent his deputy Rev. Dr. Ralph Abernathy to Mason Temple on the night of April 3 to speak to the community in his place. Dr. Abernathy phoned King at the Lorraine Motel, located in the South Main Historic District, to tell him that more than 6,000 people were gathered to hear him speak.

King then drove to Mason Temple and gave a powerful speech with no notes. The "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech connected the Memphis strike to the national issue of racialized poverty, which he planned to address through his Poor People's Campaign. To recognize the significance of Mason Temple, the church was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1992. The South Main Historic District was also listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.

The next day, April 4, 1968, King was assassinated at the Lorraine Hotel. The day after King's death, about 150 clergy met at St. Mary's Episcopal Church and marched to City Hall to show their support for the striking sanitation workers. They confronted Mayor Henry Loeb and demanded that he meet with the workers and bring the strike to an end. St. Mary's Episcopal Church was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

King's plan to march with the sanitation workers from Clayborn Temple on April 8 was carried forward by his widow, Coretta Scott King. She led strikers and thousands of their supporters in a silent march to honor the slain civil rights leader and demand that Mayor Loeb agree to the union's requests. Rev. Harold Middlebrook recalled that it was silent, except for the sound of shoe leather on the pavement.

On April 16, 1968, the City Council, the sanitation workers, and AFSCME reached an agreement. Sanitation workers gathered at Clayborn Temple to hear the terms which included union recognition, a wage increase, dues check off, promotions based on seniority and a nondiscrimination clause. As the strikers stood to signal unanimous approval, the strike officially came to an end. Clayborn Temple was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.



*Dr. King delivers his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech at Mason Temple, the night before his assassination. © photo by Richard L. Copley.*



*The scene along Beale Street in the aftermath of a protest led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. © The Commercial Appeal.*



*Policeman wearing a gas mask during a protest on March 28, 1968. Commercial Appeal newspaper morgue, Special Collections Department, University of Memphis.*



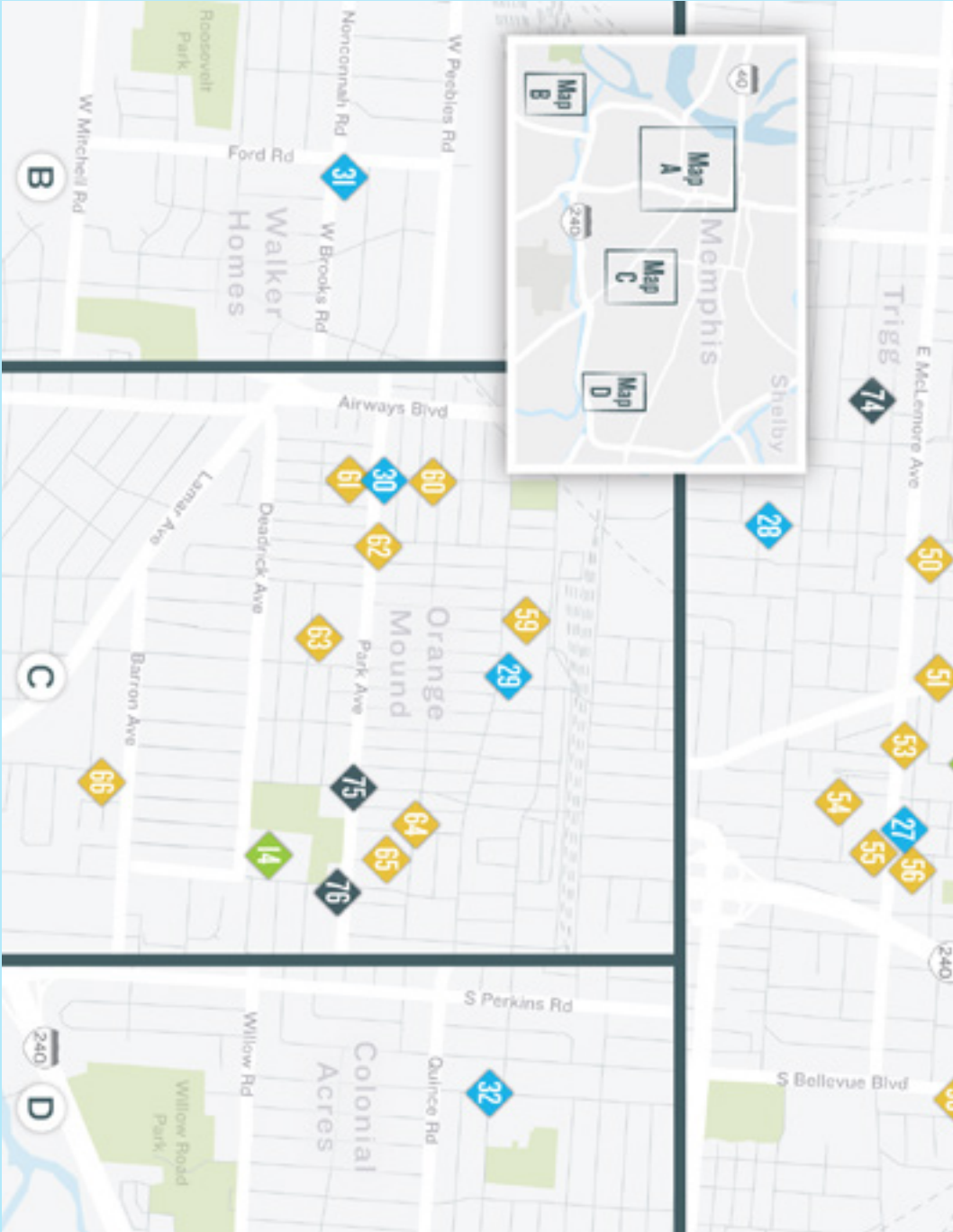


*T.O. Jones and sanitation workers celebrate the end of the strike at Clayborn Temple.  
© photo by Richard L. Copley.*

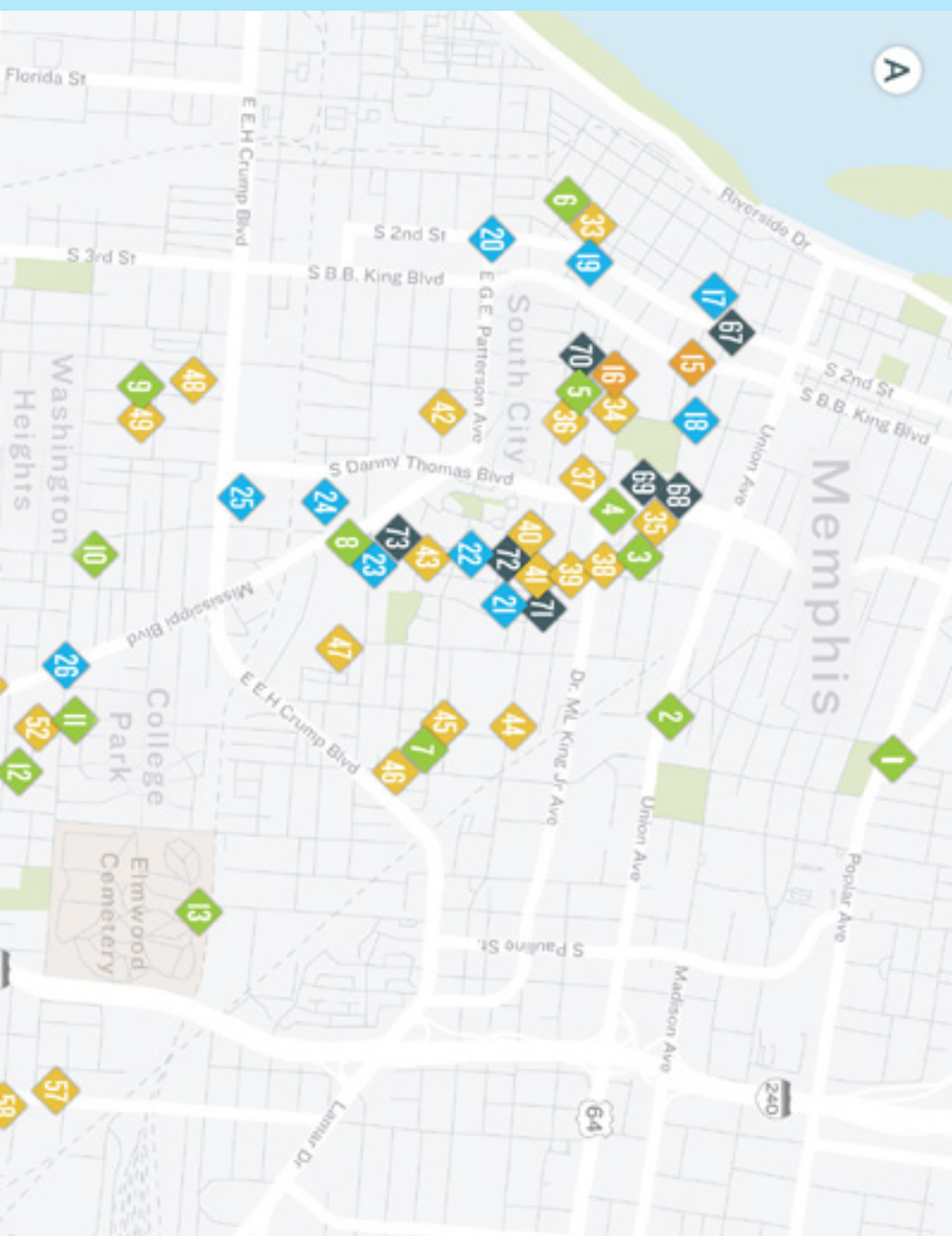




# Map of National Register Sites and African American Resources



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# List of National Register Sites and African American Resources (represented on map)

## PLACE

- 1 St. Mary's Cathedral, Chapel, and Diocesan House
- 2 Sun Studio
- 3 Hunt-Phelan House
- 4 Universal Life Insurance Building
- 5 Clayborn Temple
- 6 South Main Historic District
- 7 St. Paul Historic District/ South Main Street Historic District (Boundary Increase)
- 8 First Colored Baptist Church
- 9 Mason Temple, Church of God in Christ
- 10 George W. Lee Building
- 11 Second Congregational Church
- 12 LeMoynes-Owen College
- 13 Elmwood Cemetery
- 14 Historic Melrose High School
- 15 Beale Street Historic District
- 16 American Labor History Theme Study
- 17 Schools For Freedmen
- 18 W C Handy House Museum
- 19 WLOK Radio Station
- 20 The Blues Trail: From Mississippi to Memphis
- 21 Mt. Nebo Baptist Church
- 22 Former Robert R. Church Mansion
- 23 Former T.H. Hayes & Sons Funeral Home
- 24 Booker T. Washington High School/ formerly Clay Street School
- 25 Site of Martin's Stadium
- 26 People's Grocery Site
- 27 Stax Museum of American Soul Music
- 28 Willie Mitchell's Royal Studios
- 29 Ernest C. Withers House
- 30 Deaderick Family Cemetery
- 31 Mt. Moriah Baptist Church
- 32 Tragic Accident Sparks Sanitation Strike
- 33 Historic Shotgun Houses
- 34 St. Patrick's Catholic Church
- 35 AFSCME Local 1733

## RESOURCE TYPE

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# THANK YOU

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National Trust *for* Historic Preservation

**African American**  
Cultural Heritage Action Fund





[clayborn.org](http://clayborn.org)