



*The E.D. Nixon Institute for Research
and Cultural Enrichment*

of

**The National Center for the Study of Civil-Rights
and African-American Culture at Alabama State University**

Presents

*“The 1950s Social Impact of
Mobile Heights on the Black Community”*

(Montgomery’s First Tract Home Development for African Americans)



Thursday, April 22, 2010

11:00 a.m.

The National Center Annex
Alabama State University
1345 Carter Hill Road
Montgomery, Alabama

The Mobile Heights Phenomenon

“The Premise”

Mobile Heights was constructed in the early 1950s. It was the first Tract Home Development in the city of Montgomery established exclusively for African American occupancy. The community was principally developed in the wake of the influx of returning veterans from World War II and the Korean Conflict. As these veterans returned from their tours of military duty, they found little in the way of available housing for their newly established families. Generally, these veterans did not have the financial wherewithal to build homes on their own.

As a result, Black veterans and their families often had to resort to moving in with parents and grandparents until they could build individual homes from the ground up. The problem of segregation in Montgomery added immensely to the housing shortage for Blacks. Throughout the city of Montgomery, particularly in the eastern and southern sections, new homes and sub-divisions were being built for Whites. In his book, *Dividing Lines*, (University of Alabama, 2002) J. Mills Thornton III reports that, "Between 1951 and 1954 no less than sixty new subdivisions were completed in east and south Montgomery, and in 1955 another thirty-three were reported to be in the planning stages." Even though there were many vacant houses in these communities, they were not available to Black families. Thus, there was an urgent need for a Black housing development in the area.

With the planning and final construction of Mobile Heights in the 1950s on the southwestern edge of the city, potential Black homebuyers in Montgomery were finally able to purchase ready-built homes. Mobile Heights then became a much desired residential neighborhood. Soon it became home to a cross-section of African Americans from every economic strata. It was indeed a melting pot for Blacks, which soon became one of the most successful Black housing experiments in the South. Mobile Heights for all practical purposes, however, was the recognized locus of Montgomery's new Black middle class.

Within a very short period of time, African Americans in Mobile Heights became some of the most socially active groups in the city of Montgomery. This community gave rise to leaders who became spokespersons for a plethora of civil groups, social clubs and economic empowerment organizations which worked to make Blacks full participants in the social order. Mobile Heights leaders and the groups they represented played critical roles in the origin, evolution, and successful conclusion of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Mobile Heights also produced activists who in the 1950s worked to expand Montgomery's Black voting population. Others in this community gained notoriety as they led social and fraternal associations.

Mobile Heights signaled the beginning of a new day in social dynamics for Montgomery's African American citizens. It has consistently maintained a stable middle class character, which bodes well for the Black community. After sixty years of significant contributions to the advancement of the Montgomery Black community, Mobile Heights residents take pride in their neighborhood and its positive character. A civically active group, The Mobile Heights Community Association, has fought valiantly to maintain the quality and character of the neighborhood.

It is in this respect that the E.D. Nixon Institute for Research and Cultural Enrichment of the National Center for the Study of Civil Rights and African-American Culture celebrate the establishment of Mobile Heights. We also commend its long-term residents for the continuous existence of this community as one of the most stable residential jewels in the city of Montgomery.

Program

*“The 1950s Social Impact of Mobile Heights on the Black Community”
(Montgomery’s First Tract Home Development for African Americans)*

Presiding Charles Varner, Jr.
Special Projects Research Associate
The National Center

Invocation..... Rev. Filbert Martin
Pastor, Mobile Heights Baptist Church

GreetingsDr. William H. Harris
President, Alabama State University

Honoring the E. D. Nixon LegacyStanley Giles
President, Student Government Association

Part I: Panel Presentations

“How Mobile Heights Impacted African-American Daily Living in Montgomery in the 1950s”

The Impact on New Home Ownership.....Edward Stevens
Former Principal, McDavid Elementary School

The Impact on Civil Rights Involvement.....Thomas Gray
Retired Federal Administrative Judge

The Impact on Black Culture and SocietyBeverly Ross
President, Montgomery County School Board

Part II: Roundtable Informal Expositions

Personal Reflections.....Frederick Burks
Roosevelt Sanders
E. Farrior Claibon

Special Presentations and Remarks.....Dr. Janice R. Franklin
Director, Levi Watkins Learning Center
and the National Center for the Study of Civil Rights and African-American Culture
at Alabama State University

Honoring Dr. E. D. Nixon

The E. D. Nixon Institute for Research and Cultural Enrichment began in 2001 as a research-oriented educational program honoring a commitment to the late Dr. E. D. Nixon. A great friend and supporter of Alabama State University, Dr. Nixon was a regular visitor to the ASU campus. He enjoyed the free interchange which he had with students and employees alike. His wealth of daring experiences and individual knowledge, relative to the civil rights struggles in Montgomery and indeed the state of Alabama, was incomparable. He freely shared his personal experiences covering several decades and invited questions from listeners which opened veins of rare explorations into civil rights-related events in the Montgomery community.

Dr. Nixon's leadership in the area of civil rights placed him in a category of confrontational leadership all by himself, given the times in which he lived. As a fearless warrior for the humane treatment of Blacks in pursuit of their rights and responsibilities in civic intercourse, he often walked alone. But he carried the concerns and the anxieties of his people with him wherever he went. He earned the respect of all who met him, due to his straight-forward demands and his unrepentant desire to develop resolutions to problems in the Black community. Dr. Nixon's leadership and fearless advocacy laid the basis for the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the rise of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Montgomery's place in the Modern Civil Rights Movement.

The National Center for the Study of Civil Rights and African-American Culture at Alabama State University

The National Center for the Study of Civil Rights and African-American Culture at Alabama State University is dedicated to examining the history of civil rights in Montgomery and the state of Alabama, with special emphasis on the stories relating to the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the role of ASU in this amazing episode in American history. In its programming activities, the Center highlights the accomplishments of those who made personal sacrifices and gave of their time and resources toward the fulfillment of "The Dream." It is in the exploration of personal stories, oral histories and related first-person data that the National Center can best continue recording the deeds of those who sought no recognition nor received great honors for their contributions to civil rights. Our program today tells one such story of Montgomery Blacks who broke barriers and opened doors to a "new day of freedom" for African Americans in this city.

Acknowledgements

The National Center for the Study of Civil Rights and African-American Culture at Alabama State University wishes to thank program participants, members of the National Center Steering Committee, with special appreciation to Mr. Charles Varner, Jr., and all others who helped to make this program possible.