

# Canton unveils new Freedom Trail marker. But, who was George Washington and C.O. Chinn?

By Meredith C. McGee  
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Wednesday, June 23, 1966 is noted historically for a state sponsored violent attack on Meredith March participants in Canton, Mississippi.

At that time, Muhammad Ali was the Heavy Weight Champion, opposition to the Vietnam War was overflowing, and *Born Free*, a movie about an African game warden and his wife raising three orphaned lion cubs, reached international acclaim.

While the movie showed the gentle side of vicious animals, the Black man was the number one victim of White on Black systematic cruelty which took Medgar Wiley Evers June 12, 1963 and Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner during Freedom Summer, June 21, 1964. In the previous decades, Whites got away with organized murders often under the cloak of the law.

The former sheriff, Billy Noble and his boys often stood on the courthouse steps and kept local Blacks from registering to vote. Their reputation of beating Blacks within an inch of their lives and their inhuman treatment of inmates was known near and far.

Meredith March participants felt the backlash of White rage June 23, 1966 when state law enforcement dispersed tear gas on them while they were peacefully gathered on the grounds of McNeal Elementary School on Owens St. (renamed Martin Luther King Dr.)

Glen Cotton, Canton Freedom House Museum Director, said, "Earlier that day, my grandfather (George Washington) extended an invitation to marchers to camp on his land which adjoined school property, but they declined his offer," Cotton stated. "Stokely Carmichael and C.O. Chinn led the charge to keep campers at the school since they had received approval from school officials previously," Cotton added.

However, via orders from Gov. Paul B. Johnson, state police informed organizers they could not erect camping tents on the school grounds. "That night dozens of people were beaten by police with rifle butts. Madison General refused to give them any medical service," Cotton reported. The injured were transported in hearses to hospitals in Jackson.

State leaders sought to discourage protesters. Its strategy backfired because the

event aired on national news. By the 24<sup>th</sup>, Cotton stated, "The crowd on Lutz St. and Boyd St. in Canton grew from 100 to 1000."

As news travelled, people wanted to stand up to bigotry. "People gathered on the corner and chanted 'we gonna pitch them tents' repeatedly," Cotton noted. Reportedly Annie Devine stood on a platform and told the people the march had been called off that day. Organizers wanted to ensure the safety of the people, but some of them felt portrayed. The march ended Sunday the 26<sup>th</sup> instead of Saturday the 25<sup>th</sup> which was James Meredith's 33<sup>rd</sup> birthday and when James Brown performed at Tougaloo College following a program.

Cotton's grandfather, George Washington is known well by Civil Rights workers who were in his inner circle half a century ago, but his story is worthy of the world arena. George and his wife Remberth played a major role in the Canton Movement. They moved to Canton from Summit, Pike County, Mississippi around 1935. George was self-made. Initially, he obtained a job at the saw mill and Remberth became a teacher at Kings Grammar School.

"My grandparents were business minded. They owned land, a general store, two gas pumps, and rental property," Cotton noted. George was a member of the NAACP. While attending Tougaloo College, his son, George Washington, Jr. met CORE workers and introduced them to his father.

"My grandfather leased two buildings to CORE. Dave Dennis, the Civil Rights organization's state coordinator, hired George Raymond to direct the Canton Freedom House activities and C.O. Chinn became Raymond's right hand man," Cotton noted.

Local banks would not cash Civil Rights workers checks. George and Remberth cashed them. George also bailed Civil Rights workers out of jail. "The headquarters reimbursed my grandfather for CORE expenses," Glen Cotton said.

"The Canton Freedom house was established by CORE in 1963. James Chaney did voter registration here in April and May of 1964. Then, he started working out of the Meridian office," Cotton added. Rims Barber ran Freedom Summer (1964) programs there also.

The Freedom House ran food and child care programs, and provided shelter for sharecroppers, who were evicted from White farm houses because of their involvement in movement activities.

Chicken wire is across the windows of the Freedom House today. The wires kept Molotov cocktails out of the house which Whites threw to damage the property or harm bystanders.

Barber, an Iowa Presbyterian Minister, volunteered to be a part of Freedom Summer through the National Council of Churches Commission on Religion and Race. Mississippi was, considered then, the worst state in the nation in reference to race relations.

Cotton said, "Marge Noble, the widow of Deputy Sheriff Billy Noble, told me Billy removed dynamite from Hwy. 51 which the Klan planted to harm marchers."

Then, Cotton reported, "Ms. Marge gave me pictures of damaged dynamite from her barn, and of Billy Noble and Jack Caughen in a display in this museum."

Joe Pritchard Homes Apartment resident, Robert C.O. Chinn, son of C.O. Chinn, was

23 years old on June 23, 1966 when James Meredith walked in George Washington's house on Lutz St. "March organizers were meeting in the den," he noted with a broad smile. "I was just a 'do boy' getting them water, following my father," he stated. He grew up in an era when men never grew up to their fathers.

"When James Meredith announced, 'Ya'll trying to take over my march,' I was shocked," Robert stated. Up until that point Chinn hadn't paid much attention to the historical discussion taking place, but Meredith's outburst got his attention. The room was full of powerful Black men: SCLC leaders Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, SNCC Chairman Stokely Carmichael, and CORE Organizers George Raymond and C. O. Chinn.

Andrew Young quickly refuted Meredith's accusation and replied, "We are here trying to make sure marchers make it to Jackson safe." Earlier that day, James Meredith arrived at the Canton Courthouse to a small gathering of supporters and local lawmen.

He was not greeted by any of the big wheels. From the moment Meredith's walk became

a march it became plagued with infighting, but the disputes over logistics, strategies, and phrases didn't stop progress.

Lutz St. has since been renamed George Washington Ave. in the icon's honor. However, the story of Robert's father, C.O. Chinn and Glen's grandfather is significant because they were Civil Rights legends.

"I think the Meredith March is one of the most unappreciated events in history. It bought a lot of important figures such as Dick Gregory, Martin Luther King, and others to our state," Robert determined.

Meredith March 50<sup>th</sup> Commemorative activities will begin, June 23, 2016 at 9 am in Canton at Southern Hill Baptist Church. The program will resume at 10 am at the Canton courthouse. A Mississippi Freedom Trail Marker will be unveiled at 12 noon. A Civil Rights tour begins at 1 pm. James Meredith will be in attendance at a reception and book signing at 6 pm at Mt. Zion M.B. Church.

Taylor feels Black youth are disconnected from history. "I was required to read *Three Years in Mississippi* (1966) by James Meredith and *Mississippi the Closed Society* by James Silver (1964) by my 9<sup>th</sup> grade teacher,

Rosetta Cornelius," Taylor declared. Today, entertainers and sports role models have replaced Civil Rights icons and Black historical heroes and sheroes.

The Canton Freedom House Museum has a lot to offer local school children. History covers every wall. Cotton spent private funds restoring the facility which has a computer station and free Wi-Fi. The public is invited to visit. Call Glen Cotton at 601.317.2537 or Tim Taylor at 601.209.7852 to schedule private tours.

Donations are welcome. Mail money orders to Canton Freedom House, 838 George Washington Ave., Canton, MS 39016. Visit [www.freedomhousecanton.org](http://www.freedomhousecanton.org). Looking back in time, Robert declared, "Money killed the movement." He determined it's hard to hold Black politicians accountable these days because they are separated from the masses. Money replaced community.

James Silver ahead Medgar Evers and James Meredith placed of their peers because he presumed their military training gave them a greater vision of the possibilities opening up in America.

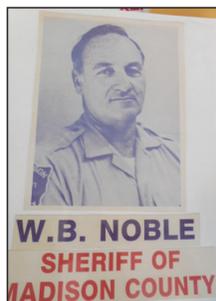
On June 7, 1966 at a press conference Martin Luther King, Jr. predicted the Meredith March had the potential to be more significant than the Selma March, called "Bloody Sunday" the previous year, from Selma to Montgomery, the capitol of Alabama.

He was right. James Meredith's June 6, 1966 shooting renewed pressure on Johnson's administration which guided federal officials and the voting preclearance process to Mississippi. Preclearance started in Mississippi and ended up in all the states which discriminated against Black voters.

Frank R. Parker reported that the Meredith March gave Black Mississippians a voting registration boost. MFDP carried the torch. Twenty-two blacks won elections in 1967. Silver argued that federal preclearance increased the Black vote and eventually gave the U.S. Pres. Barack Obama.

Today, new challenges are insurmountable! New strategies and alliances are necessary.

Meredith C. McGee is a niece of James Meredith, and the author of his biography, *James Meredith: Warrior and the America that created him*.



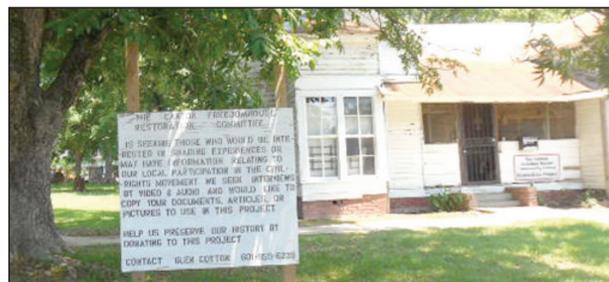
W.B. NOBLE  
SHERIFF OF  
MADISON COUNTY



C.O. Chinn's former home



Canton Freedom Church



Canton Freedom sign restoration sign



Corner where Meredith March crowd gathered in 1966



Holy Child Jesus School gym, site of police attack



George and Remberth Washington



Glen Cotton, Robert C.O. Chinn and Tim Taylor



Sheriff Jack Caughen



Wesley Rushing, Tim Taylor & William McGee at Canton Freedom House Museum



Southern Hill M.B. Church



Former home of George and Remberth Washington