

Scottsboro Boys museum to educate public on early days of civil rights movement

The Huntsville Times
By David Brewer
Dec. 15, 2009



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Scottsboro-Jackson County Multi-Cultural Heritage Foundation members Shelia Washington and Garry Morgan look at one of the photographs that will be displayed in the Scottsboro Boys Museum. The museum will be located in the Joyce Chapel United Methodist Church in Scottsboro. An open house at the church will be Sunday from 4 p.m. until 6 p.m. dedicated to the 1930s Scottsboro Boys case.

SCOTTSBORO, AL. - For 17 years, Shelia Washington has been trying to get a museum dedicated to the 1930s Scottsboro Boys case.

On Sunday, an open house will be held at the 131-year-old Joyce Chapel United Methodist Church on West Willow Street where the museum will be located.

Its establishment will help educate the public on the early days of the civil rights movement, Washington said in an interview today at the church.

"This case was global," she said. "It was not isolated to Scottsboro."

Scottsboro City Councilman Gary Speers said many people today believe the civil rights movement started in Montgomery when it actually began here 78 years ago with the Scottsboro Boys case.

"We want to show that the movement existed here before Montgomery," Speers said. "It's sad that it happened, but we can't deny that it happened."

On March 25, 1931, nine black men were accused of raping two white women while riding a train through Jackson County.

At their trial here, all but one were found guilty and sentenced to die in the electric chair on July 10.

But after Ruby Bates, one of the two alleged victims, purportedly wrote a letter to a friend denying she'd been raped, the nine men were given new trials in Decatur in 1933.

Charges were dropped against four of the men. Of the remaining five, four received lengthy prison sentences and one, Clarence Norris, was sentenced to death.

But Norris was pardoned in October 1976. He died in January 1989.

When the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the verdicts against the men because they were not represented in the first trial, it issued two groundbreaking rulings - the right to legal counsel and the right to equal protection under the law.

Washington said she became interested in the case at 18 after discovering a book about the case her parents had hidden from her and her siblings because its content might bother them emotionally.

Having worked for 17 years in trying to get a museum created, Washington, who is now 49, said it was not until she and several other people started the Scottsboro-Jackson County Cultural Heritage Foundation about a year ago that progress began to be made toward that goal.

About a week ago, the church, which closed in January, was leased to them for the purpose of locating a museum inside. The foundation now hopes to raise \$75,000 to buy the church.

Garry Morgan, a member of the foundation, said it's appropriate for the museum to be located in the church because of the church's role during civil rights movement to bring people together regardless of their race.

"This can be a healing process so history is not repeated," Morgan said.

Donations for the museum may be mailed to: Scottsboro-Jackson County Multi-Cultural Heritage Foundation, P.O. Box 1557, Scottsboro, AL 35768

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