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CAGED BIRDS:  
THE STORY OF THE YOUTH IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT  
OF AMERICUS, GEORGIA IN 1963

BLAIRE BOSLEY

Under the Direction of John McMillian, PhD

ABSTRACT

Much has been written on the history of the civil rights movement in the U.S. South during the 1960s. Historians have devoted most of their attention to the movement in the urban South and the role of adults. We need more attention to the activism of young people, especially in the small-town and rural South. My thesis shines a light on the youth-led civil rights movement in Americus, Georgia, in the summer and fall of 1963. I focus on the story of thirty-two Black girls who, after being arrested at a protest in Americus, were detained in the Leesburg Stockade, a decrepit Civil War-era building. My thesis investigates what happened, how it was covered at the time, how some of the women recalled their experiences, and how efforts continue to memorialize this significant but still not well-known episode in civil rights history. I hope that my work will reinforce the case for more academic and public attention to the historical contributions of young people to the ongoing Black freedom movement.

INDEX WORDS: African American History, Civil Rights Movement, Youth Activism, Americus, Georgia, Leesburg Stockade



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by

BLAIRE BOSLEY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2020

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2020

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In 1861 “a rebellion hysteria swept across parts of the South’s plantation belt.”<sup>1</sup> In Georgia, this hysteria had a large impact on the relationships between slaves and their owners. Sweeping from the north to the south, the fear of insurgence challenged race relationships in rural Georgia and placed many on edge with fear that the slaves would up rise at any moment. In Sumter County, located in west Georgia, the population of enslaved Blacks (4,890) to White citizens (4,536) was so close that these rumors drastically changed the treatment off slaves by their owners and caused heightened violence.<sup>2</sup> This fear finally culminated in the summer of 1862 when a slave was lynched by an angry mob after trying to gain his freedom by escaping to the blockading Union forces on the coast. This fear amongst slave owners was not only due to the potential loss of land, but also due to the threat of freed blacks ruining common racial traditions of the state. As the end of slavery fast approached, White citizens in Sumter tried to find new ways of maintaining control and enforcing White supremacy.

From 1900 to 1930, Black community members in Americus, the county seat of Sumter, learned how to operate within a racial hierarchy and these lessons were passed down from generation to generation. These lessons were actualized during a 1930s play that was organized for the Centennial Festival in Americus. In this play several Black community members were cast to play subordinate roles such as a mammy and slaves.<sup>3</sup> This play depicted paternalistic ideas of the Deep South with a clear wish for Americus to return to the past. A blind eye was cast upon the trauma that Black residents of Americus experienced while enslaved. This could be

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<sup>1</sup> David Williams, *A People’s History of the Civil War: Struggles for the Meaning of Freedom*, (New York: The New Press, 2005), 333.

<sup>2</sup> In 1831 a northern section of land in Lee County was sectioned off in order to become Sumter County, Georgia. *U.S. Census Bureau. Sumter County Census Record, 1860.*

<sup>3</sup> William Williford, *Americus Through the Years: The Story of a Georgia Town and its People, 1832 – 1975* (Atlanta: Cherokee Publishing Company, 1975), 303.

seen during one of the scenes which depicted an ante-bellum slave quarter where several “slaves were seated about a huge basket” ... “busily engaged in picking their shoes full of cotton[seeds].”<sup>4</sup> Upon finishing their task, the slaves started to sing Negro spirituals which were met by applause and a request for an encore from the White audience. Although the Black community of Americus were free, they were still expected to operate and submit to a White supremacist government.

From the 1930s to 1950s, race relations in Americus worsened due to heightened violence and the practice of segregation within the county. Furthermore, the Americus government and White citizens ignored the laws established by the federal government to dismantle segregation. By the 1960s Black residents had finally had enough of the unequal treatment which resulted in the residents starting to become more vocal about their rights and demand integration within public spaces. As Black residents became more vocal they also defied a “lifetime of custom[s]” that were constructed by the White society.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, by defying the social customs, protestors faced brutal violence perpetuated by the police and White supremacist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan. Faced with escalating violence against Black citizens, the Americus city council took an “unprecedented step of abridging the First Amendment to the Constitution by requesting that all news media ‘[not] ... print or broadcast news of racial disturbances without the council’s prior approval’” in an effort to protect the public image of the city.<sup>6</sup> As a result of this request, many of the atrocities that took place in Americus were swept under a rug and ignored. This thesis works to uncover one of the atrocities during the Americus civil rights movement by focusing on the story of more than thirty girls who took part in a civil

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<sup>4</sup> Williford, *Americus Through the Years*, 303 – 304.

<sup>5</sup> Williford, *Americus Through the Years*, 354.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

rights protest and were arrested and inhumanly detained in Leesburg Stockade, an old Civil War prison.

While the overall civil rights movement in Americus was historically ground breaking because of how organized this rural town was, the lack of newspaper attention on certain aspects of activism and its consequences contributed to a loss of collective memory and public recognition of the full scope of the Americus movement. Through my research I try to uncover the movement by focusing on a group of young activists who challenged White supremacy. Furthermore, through this thesis I will show how the girls held in Leesburg Stockade were the epitome of what the civil rights movement meant. Additionally, the lack of articles written about the girls by newspapers in the 1960s helped the city council to perpetuate silences within the narrative of the Americus movement which were only recently deconstructed in the twenty-first century. With this thesis I will offer new ways to correct this history by showing how their memories can be preserved and honored in the present.

It is important to recognize the historiography of the civil rights movement and the ways that historians have engaged with topics like youth and women's activism. Recently, historians have challenged the writing of the past in order to create new work that deconstructs the existing narratives of the movements and is more inclusive of gender, socio-economic status, and age. It is integral that these new bodies of literature are discussed within this thesis because they offer new ways of engaging with older sources and help to show how historians have started to deconstruct the past narratives in order to give voice to those who have been silenced.

### **History of the Civil Rights Movement**

While past historians have focused on what Emilye Crosby considers the classical civil rights movement of leaders and laws, recently the new scholarship has focused on the forms of

resistance taken by Black people during the movement. Moreover, this scholarship also shows how individuals in the South were collaborating in order to protest segregation and discrimination in their communities. For example, the collaboration taking place can be seen in the organizations that were sent to help with organizing the communities in the South.

One prominent organization was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Historian Clayborne Carson's *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* focuses specifically on the efforts of SNCC in the South and the many ways its activists worked to challenge racism.<sup>7</sup> SNCC established new radical ideologies which would become very influential in social movements in the U.S. Carson shows how the structure of SNCC was group centered, rather than leader centered, which allowed individuals who usually did not receive recognition because of their gender, class background, or lack of education to become leaders. SNCC's efforts challenged the way that established civil rights organizations were run and prioritized strengthening the communities they volunteered in.

### **Local and Grassroots Civil Rights Movements**

In addition to SNCC, local and grassroot organizations were integral to the civil rights movement because Black communities did not simply open their doors to national civil rights leaders and groups. In *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, Charles Payne investigates how Mississippi residents who had no political background were able to organize in such large numbers to protest and campaign for their freedom.<sup>8</sup> In a similar manner, Glenn T. Eskew's *But for Birmingham: The Local and*

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<sup>7</sup> Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition of the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

*National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* highlights local and grassroots leaders in its detailed account of the Birmingham civil rights movement.<sup>9</sup> He observes the relationship between the residents of Birmingham and the national leaders of the civil rights movement and shows how they learned to collaborate, even though national leaders were not placing the needs of Birmingham's residents at the forefront of the movement. Comparable to the Birmingham movement, the movement in Mississippi according to Payne was solely or largely propelled by grassroots leaders. Furthermore, Payne argues that new and younger protestors utilized the established networks created by older activists to push forward the movement until these networks were deemed useless. Payne is able to complicate the previous narrative of the Mississippi movement by addressing the actual forms of resistance and ways of protesting that were used.

Emilye Crosby's recent edited collection *Civil Rights from the Ground Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement* can be connected to both Eskew's and Payne's argument through the work it does to deconstruct the national narrative and show how grassroots movements were organized.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Crosby and her contributors showcase the latest scholarship on the forms of resistance by ordinary grassroots activists rather than prominent national leaders.

### **Civil Rights Movement in Georgia**

With this grassroots lens we can shift the focus of the civil rights movement from urban areas to rural areas in the South as well as from older to younger cohorts of activists. Stephen Tuck's *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* emphasizes

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<sup>9</sup> Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movement in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Emilye Crosby, ed., *Civil Rights from the Ground Up: Local Struggles, a National Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

the freedom movement in rural Georgia and the different ways that individuals throughout the state were protesting segregation and disenfranchisement.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Tuck argues that by looking at the movements in rural Georgia we are able to get a clearer perspective of the civil rights movement during this era and the ways everyday people were organizing. These movements highlight the successes that took place in rural Georgia and show the shortcomings of the movements as well.

While Winston Grady-Willis's *Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 1960-1977* looks at an urban freedom movements, students and younger organizers are at the center of the story.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to Tuck, Grady-Willis shows how these students pushed beyond "racial equality" to an understanding of the systemic nature of segregation and discrimination, a system on a par with apartheid in South Africa at the same time. They developed a human rights framework and took up a demand for self-determination by the Black community in Atlanta.

### **Women in the Civil Rights Movement**

When journalists first covered the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and then when biographers, sociologists, political scientists, and historians first began to recount and analyze the movement, men were placed at the front of the narratives and women at the back. However, things have changed significantly over the last three decades of civil rights scholarship. The edited collections *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965*, published in 1993, and *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American*

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Winston Grady-Willis, *Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 1960-1977* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).



*Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*, published in 2001, began the process of centering Black women in the movement and its history.<sup>13</sup> In 1997, Belinda Robnett put forward the key concept of women as “bridge leaders” between the local and national movements in *How Long? How Long?: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*.<sup>14</sup> In the years since, for example in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, published in 2009, scholars have gone on to show how critical the role of Black women and women of color are in movements for gender, racial, social, and economic justice in the United States.<sup>15</sup>

If Black women are now seen as central to the Black freedom struggle, at least in the historical scholarship, the same cannot be said of youth activists, especially girls. In spite of iconic moments like the college student sit-ins in Greensboro in the winter of 1960 and the Children’s Crusade in Birmingham in the spring of 1963, youth activism has not received the sustained attention it deserves. I hope my investigation of what happened with the girls of the Leesburg Stockade will demonstrate the importance of teen and “tween” activists, particularly girls, in the movement leading to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But I also hope that my retracing of the lifelong impact of this experience on at least some of the women who have spoken and written about it and my tracking of the growing public recognition of this episode in the civil rights history and heritage of Americus and the

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<sup>13</sup> Vicki Crawford, Jacqueline Rouse, and Barbara Woods, eds., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, eds., *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup> Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

surrounding area can serve as a model for an inclusive history that today's young activists will find relevant and inspirational.

Overall, the following chapters offer a new way of looking at the civil rights movement from the perspective of youth. In Chapter Two I give an overview of the story of the girls who were held in Leesburg Stockade and analyze the ways that different newspapers in 1963 neglected to fully report the imprisonment of the girls. In Chapter Three I compare and contrast the autobiographies, affidavits, and presentations of several of the girls, now women, who were held in Leesburg Stockade and show the importance of telling their story. Furthermore, this chapter shows how the memories of the women have helped to shed light on the what took place in Americus during the movement. In Chapter Four I look at how museums, newspapers, magazines, podcasts, and other institutions and media have started to memorialize the story of the girls held in Leesburg Stockade. Finally, I offer new ways to create memorials for the women and share their stories with the broader public.

## 2 The Power of Journalists and the Stories They Hide

Growing up, Sam Mahone was cognizant of the fact that his Black family was treated very differently from the White individuals in his community. As a child Mahone noticed how his father would not make eye contact when speaking to White individuals. Mahone also observed that his family, and the Black community were “totally dependent on the [W]hites for their services.”<sup>16</sup> He illustrated this by discussing the White insurance agents who would come to each of the neighborhoods and go door-to-door collecting insurance money. Rather than knocking on the doors of Black families’ homes, these White men would presumptuously walk inside because they knew how necessary they were for the Black community to live comfortably.<sup>17</sup> In his Black community there were only dirt roads, no sidewalks, and his family did not have a working toilet. Born in Americus, Georgia in the year 1945, Mahone also grew up on the proverbial other side of the tracks.<sup>18</sup>

While growing up, Mahone became determined to change the unfair treatment of Blacks in Americus. Working in the Americus Voters League in 1960, 16-year-old Mahone joined with other activist in what would later become the Americus Movement. The eye-opening experience he gained inspired Mahone to start talking with his young classmates about voter registration. Although some students were receptive, others only started to participate when they were recruited by SNCC members who came to the county a few years later, in 1963.<sup>19</sup> Put another way, what Mahone did in the voter registration laid the foundation for the work that would later be done by SNCC.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Sam Mahone, Interviewed by Hasan Kwame, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Sam Mahone, Interviewed by Hasan Kwame, 2013.

Through the organization of Black youth, SNCC, and other Black community members, efforts to desegregate the county started to get underway in 1962. In addition to ending desegregation in public spaces such as lunch counters, movie theaters, and taxi-cabs, protestors also aimed to win better job opportunities and police protection for Black people. Instead of having the list of their demands met, however, the Blacks were brutalized by the police and jailed. Many protestors, including the young girls in Leesburg Stockade, were imprisoned for considerable lengths of time. Meanwhile, protest movements in the North and South garnered a lot of newspaper attention. However, the Americus movement – and the efforts of the girls held in Leesburg Stockade – received far less attention, partly due to the city council’s efforts to protect the city from bad publicity. This was done by hiding where the young girls were placed and requiring newspapers to gain permission from the city council before publicizing stories.

In this chapter, I will show that although the newspapers outside of Americus covered the movement and had access to information about the girls held in Leesburg Stockade, they failed to comprehensively show what was taking place. Each of the papers I examine – SNCC’s *Student Voice*, the *New York Times*, and *Atlanta Daily World* – offered incomplete accounts. In some respects, that is not surprising, since the papers also had different audiences. For example, the *New York Times* was considered a national paper and thus served a larger population of the United States, while *Atlanta Daily World* and SNCC’s *Student Voice* primarily appealed to African-Americans. To fully understand what the media neglected, however, it is important to first know more about the story of Americus, and the girls held in Leesburg stockade.

As Mahone saw in his early organizing work, racial tensions were growing in Americus. Although the tension had always been prevalent, it was not until the summer of 1963, through the efforts of organized protest, that the Black Americus community became increasingly vocal

about the issues affecting them. As the number of protestors were increasing, so too was violence against the protestors, much of which was enforced by Americus Police Chief Fred Chappell (whom Martin Luther King, Jr., once called “the meanest man in the world”).<sup>21</sup> An example of Chappell’s use of force was described in detail during a recorded kitchen conversation between John Perdew and Randy Battle, who recalled a time when he roughly dragged two women they knew out of the White women’s restroom in the courthouse.<sup>22</sup>

In February 1963, three prominent SNCC organizers – Don Harris, Ralph Allen, and John Perdew – arrived in Sumter County, Georgia to assist with community organizing and voter registration.<sup>23</sup> SNCC likely chose Americus as a place to organize because of its demographics: over 50 percent of the population was Black, and the racial dynamics in the community were extremely tense.<sup>24</sup> When the three SNCC organizers arrived in Americus, they started to engage with the Black community by speaking at churches and befriending the high school students.<sup>25</sup> Through these connections, the SNCC workers were able to create a foundation of support while also getting familiar with the community that they hoped to help. These SNCC workers also tried to recruit new members into their organization. As more individuals become active in the Americus movement, SNCC organized training sessions for the protestors.<sup>26</sup>

### **News Reports on SNCC**

In addition to registering voters and training protestors, SNCC helped the community organize marches against discrimination and segregation, despite the fact that they were

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<sup>21</sup> Glenn Robins, “Americus Movement,” *New Georgia Encyclopedia* (February 29, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> John Perdew, Interviewed by Rand Battle. Recording, Albany, October 2005.

<sup>23</sup> In an oral history interview of Sam Mahone, the SNCC workers Don Harris, John Churchfield, and Ralph Allen arrived in Americus, Georgia at 1962. Although there is some disputed information in regard to who was in Americus at what time, there have been articles that have listed 1963 as the arrival date of SNCC workers.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 173.

<sup>26</sup> Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 173-174.

continually targeted with violence. The *New York Times* reported that on April 25, 1963, SNCC worker Ralph Allen was attacked while taking a “Negro girl,” Mary Alice Henderson, to the courthouse in order to register her to vote.<sup>27</sup> After driving and escorting Henderson to her home, Allen returned to his car to find a White man waiting for him.<sup>28</sup> As Allen approached, the man asked, “didn’t you run that stop sign back there?”<sup>29</sup> Rather than wait for a response the man started hitting Allen on his head, kicking him on his back, and jumping on him repeatedly.<sup>30</sup> Following the assault of Allen, SNCC sent a telegram to protest this violence to both Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, and the governor of Georgia Carl Sanders.<sup>31</sup>

Although the violence perpetrated against Allen, other SNCC workers, and the Americus Black community was brutal, it did not stop them from protesting. In fact, many Black youth in Americus were motivated to join and help the organization because they faced segregation and violence on a daily basis in Americus. For instance, two years earlier, the Americus school system openly opposed desegregation and pushed to maintain segregation at all cost.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, after the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, which declared segregation unconstitutional in schools, many White Americus residents asked the school board chairman John Sibley what options were available for circumventing the new law. Sibley recommended that the White residents stand by Georgia’s school closing law, which was used to limit and end desegregation in schools. Sibley also urged them to accept the tuition grants for

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<sup>27</sup> “Vote-Drive Aide Beaten in South: Student Group Protests to U.S. on Attack in Georgia Special,” *New York Times* (April 26, 1963).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Galphin, Bruce, “Keep Segregation at All Costs, School Panel Told at Americas,” *The Atlanta Constitution* (March 4, 1960), p. 1-2.

other school options rather than public schools.<sup>33</sup> Due to these actions, school segregation remained in Americus until 1961. As a result, Black youths saw an important reason to voice their opinions and challenge the Americus government. Following the arrest of many students during their protesting of the segregated Marvin Theater, approximately 2,000 Black students boycotted their school.<sup>34</sup>

As the summer started, Black community members and SNCC workers continued to organize against racism in Americus. SNCC workers soon found themselves mentioned on the front page of several newspapers, alleging they were “conspiring” to lead an insurrection in Georgia. Furthermore, their actions – such as unlawful assembly, rioting, assault, and resisting arrest – were considered treason by the Georgia Constitution. Later, on August 8, 1963, three SNCC workers, Don Harris, John Perdew, and Ralph Allen, and two Americus students, Sallie Mae Durham, and Thomas McDaniel, were arrested. Following their arrest, the *New York Times* sent a reporter to Americus to uncover the legal terror that was being inflicted upon African-Americans.<sup>35</sup> Black citizens also filed numerous complaints regarding harassment, police brutality, and arbitrary bail bonds. According to the *Atlanta Daily World*, the FBI reported that immediately after receiving these complaints they opened an active investigation in order to see if there was actually a case of injustice in Americus, Georgia.<sup>36</sup> However, after the FBI visited, they concluded in a report that there was no evidence supporting these complaints.

With an end to the FBI investigation, and the arrest of SNCC leaders, the SNCC office relocated its fieldworkers in Americus to other rural Georgia communities. While this was

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<sup>33</sup> Galphin, Bruce, “Keep Segregation at All Costs, School Panel Told at Americas,” *The Atlanta Constitution* (March 4, 1960), p. 1-2.

<sup>34</sup> Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 173.

<sup>35</sup> “‘Legal Terror’ in Americus” *New York Times* (September 30, 1963).

<sup>36</sup> “FBI Is Checking Police Brutality in Americus, Ga.” *Atlanta Daily World* (September 15, 1963).

occurring, the Black protestors in Americus continued to organize on behalf of voter registration and desegregation.<sup>37</sup> Through their efforts, they were able to maintain the support of up to five hundred people who attended their monthly meetings about civil rights in Americus.<sup>38</sup> Although there was not a large group of SNCC workers helping to organize the civil rights movement in Americus, the citizens there remained dedicated to the cause. According to Charles Sherrod, the SNCC Project Director for the Southwest region of Georgia, the people of Americus “[were] the most amazing people we deal with. Nothing can defeat them.... They turn out every week in large numbers. This week we had an overflow crowd and we were late. They were there as always.”<sup>39</sup> Overall, the summer of 1963 was a time for radical change in Americus. Furthermore, the Americus protestors would soon be tested, as protests led to massive arrests and a traumatic experience for dozens of girls protesting in Americus, which in turn would gain the attention of federal authorities but then become a forgotten story in the history of the civil rights movement in the South.

During the Americus movement, the overwhelming majority of protestors were Black youth. As observed by the *Americus Voice*, “students are out of school, the weather’s hot and everyone is expecting something big to happen in our civil rights movement.”<sup>40</sup> With the start of the summer, Black youth started to move to the front line of the movement and protest in the stead of Black adults, who were seen as having considerably more to lose. Youth ranging from the ages of ten to eighteen took part in various protest. For example, during one protest, students and adults marched from the Black neighborhood, around Carter Street, to the police precinct where they stopped to pray. It was after several protests such as these that Americus’s Black

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<sup>37</sup> Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 175.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 175.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.



residents, both young and old, started to get arrested at alarming rates, causing the Americus County jail to overflow with protestors, as more people flooded to Americus to get arrested. Due to the lack of space in the Americus jail, many protestors were moved to different counties in order to make room for the new protestors who were getting arrested almost daily.

### **The Story of Leesburg Stockade**

As a number of students were also being imprisoned, those in charge of the Americus jail also realized that they had a growing number of girls imprisoned. In an effort to make room, the girls -- ranging from the ages of eleven to sixteen -- were removed from the jail in Americus, taken out of Sumter County, and placed in Leesburg Stockade, an old Civil War prison located several miles away from Americus. As time progressed there were at most thirty-three girls forced to stay in an eight by twelve-foot room in Leesburg Stockade. These girls were: Carol Barner, Lorena Barnum, Pearl Brown, Bobbie Jean Butts, Agnes Carter, Pattie Jean Collier, Mattie Crittenden Barbara Jean Daniels, Gloria Dean, Carolyn Deloatch, Diane Dorsey, Juanita Freeman, Robertina Freeman, Henrietta Fuller, Shirly Ann Green, Verna Hollis, Evette Hose, Mary Frances Jackson, Vyrtil Jackson, Dorothy Jones, Emma Jean Jones, Emmarene Kaigler, Barbara Ann Peterson, Annie Lue Ragans, Judith Reid, Laura Ruff, Sandra Russell, Willie Mae Smith, Billie Jo Thornton, Gloria Westbrook, Lulu Westbrook, Ozellar Whitehead, and Carrie Mae Williams.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Carol Seay, *Up Above My Head: I See Freedom in the Air* (Xlibris, 2015), ix.

Since Leesburg Stockade had not been used since the 1860s, living conditions for the girls were horrible. The concrete floors were filthy, and the girls were not given a broom or any supplies to clean up the stockade. The rusty water that trickled out of the showers was the girls'



Figure 1: © Danny Lyon/Magnum Photos - Leesburg Stockade Girls

only source for drinking water.<sup>42</sup> In order to collect water, the girls would cup their hands and place them under the faucet. Additionally, the toilets in the stockade were broken and stopped up.<sup>43</sup> Because of the horrible facilities, and the lack of working plumbing, the girls used the oldest of the dirty mattresses they had

been given as a toilet. The girls were given food once a day, and usually their meals consisted of greasy and undercooked hamburgers.

The Americus police department kept the girls under constant supervision. Many of the girls reported that these guards would treat them cruelly. One officer threw a rattlesnake into their cell, and left it there all day, even though the girls begged and pleaded for it to be removed.<sup>44</sup> Many of the girls endured these extremely horrible conditions for over a two-months. While these girls were held in the stockade, SNCC sent a photographer, Danny Lyon, to investigate the situation.<sup>45</sup> Upon arriving in Americus, Lyon met a Black teen who offered to take him to the stockade in the countryside.<sup>46</sup> When they arrived at the stockade, the teen offered

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<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Thomas, Interviewed by Lois Barnum Holley, September 13, 1963.

<sup>43</sup> Lulu Westbrook-Griffin, *Freedom is Not Free: 45 Days in the Leesburg Stockade* (Rochester: George Eastman House, 1998), 14-16.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Danny Lyon, *Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 80.

<sup>46</sup> Lyon, *Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement*, 80.

to distract the guard while Lyon snuck around to the back of the stockade in order to take photos.<sup>47</sup> When Lyon got to the jail window, the girls quickly surrounded the bars and asked who he was and why he was there. When he flashed a peace sign, the girls instantly realized he was a freedom fighter. Lyon had the girls show him their living area while he took photos. He returned to the Atlanta office to process his photos and report his findings back to the SNCC office. The report and photos were quickly sent to U.S. government officials and were placed into the *Congressional Record* by Senator Harrison A. Williams, Jr.<sup>48</sup>

As a result of the exposure of these horrible and disgraceful conditions, federal officials demanded instructed local authorities in Americus to promptly release the girls.<sup>49</sup> The girls' plight was mentioned in only two periodicals, however – SNCC's *The Student Voice* and *Jet Magazine*. *The Student Voice* produced a vivid account of the living conditions of protestors in Georgia including that of Leesburg Stockade. It described the putrid odor of the stockade and stressed many of the incarcerated protestors were young children. Furthermore, the *Student Voice* showed the horrible treatment of other African Americans, of varying ages, who stood up to discrimination and oppression in Americus.

### **The Student Voice**

*The Student Voice* was SNCC's internal organ, and the paper showed a lot of concern about what the girls experienced while in Leesburg Stockade.<sup>50</sup> After Lyon collected information about the stockade, news of the situation was sent to SNCC headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, to U.S. Rep. Harrison Williams, and to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. Lyon's shocking photographs, which were placed in congressional records, played a big role in forcing the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> *Will Americus Free Don Harris*, 88<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., *Congressional Record* 109, pt. 13:1107.

<sup>50</sup> "Police Rampage, Jails Like Cages." *The Student Voice* (October 1963).

government of Americus to release the girls. *The Student Voice* also collected interviews and affidavits from the young women upon their release.

### **The New York Times**

In contrast to the detailed report by the *Student Voice*, the *New York Times* was silent about the girls locked up in Leesburg Stockade. Instead, the newspaper focused on the protest by Americus's Black community in response to the arrest of SNCC workers who were being held in prison at this time. The highly regarded *New York Times* was long known as a stolid newspaper, which avoided "sensationalizing" the news.<sup>51</sup> Still, it is surprising that at a time where numerous White governmental structures and institutions were doing horrible things, the paper largely neglected horrific abuses taking place in Americus.

The *New York Times* was the only newspaper that mentioned youth in Americus without also discussing SNCC workers. Their first report about the situation documented the arrest of thirty-two students ranging from the ages of eleven to sixteen who were arrested after protesting against the imprisonment of 175 others during the civil rights movement in Americus.<sup>52</sup> Although it was a very short article, it highlighted the ways that youth in rural areas were protesting against brutality and segregation within their communities. Furthermore, this article also shows the importance and national attention that the *New York Times* gave to Black youth in Americus at this time. Nevertheless, the newspaper completely neglected to mention the girls being held in Leesburg Stockade.

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<sup>51</sup> "The New York Times," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 16, 2020.

<sup>52</sup> "32 Arrested in Georgia." *New York Times* (August 31, 1963).

## **Atlanta Daily World**

Similarly, the *Atlanta Daily World*, a Black newspaper, published just one story on the Americus movement in 1963. Rather than focusing on the mistreatment of demonstrators, however, its article discussed the Black youths' motivations for protesting, and the responses of adults in the community. Its report, which was much fuller than what the *New York Times* provided, stated that the children, while walking to school, had been approached by someone who tried to dissuade the young students from attending. The children agreed with suggestion and decided that they would march around the school chanting that they "won't go to school" rather than avoid the school completely.<sup>53</sup>

The *New York Times*, *The Student Voice*, and the *Atlanta Daily World* offered varying glimpses into the civil rights movement in Americus in 1963. However, none of the newspapers shared the story of the girls imprisoned in Leesburg Stockade in full detail. Instead they all spoke of the stories of the movement taking place by Black youth protestors in Americus. This is important to mention because Americus was a small rural town in the middle of the rural West Georgia county of Sumter. Furthermore, unlike major cities, Americus did not have the presence of a big civil rights leader to call the media's attention to the county. This is yet another reason that the saga of protestors in Americus was not fulsomely discussed.

In contrast to the *Student Voice*, the two other newspapers, *The New York Times* and the *Atlanta Daily World*, did not bring notice to these girls at all. The *Atlanta Daily World* was founded by Morehouse graduate William Scott II.<sup>54</sup> Its main purpose was to highlight news about the Black community that was being overlooked, such as education, churches, businesses,

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<sup>53</sup> 32 Children Stay Out of School; Apparent Protest." *Atlanta Daily World* (August 31, 1963).

<sup>54</sup> Alan Sverdlik, "Atlanta Daily World." *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. August 1, 2019. Web.

and other news deemed important to Black Atlantans. These topics were chosen in order to combat the racist characterizations that the larger White newspapers often perpetuated.<sup>55</sup>

As can be seen in past publications of both the *New York Times* and the *Atlanta Daily World*, focus was always placed on telling histories that were overlooked as well as reporting on different angles to news stories that might have already been reported. One possible reason for the neglect of the stories of the girls by newspapers was due to a lack of importance placed on their story. During the same time that the girls were imprisoned in the Leesburg Stockade, other major historical events were also taking place. For example, in August 1963 -- the same month that the girls were imprisoned -- Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his momentous "I Have a Dream Speech." Leading up to this speech there were a number of articles that discussed the March on Washington and other marches and protests that national leaders of the civil rights movement helped galvanize.

Another reason that the story of the girls might have been overlooked is because their story was being hidden by the American government. Since no one outside of American Police Department was aware of where the girls were being held, or of the deplorable treatment they received in the stockade, no mass movement arose on the girls' behalf. Overall, the lack of media attention surrounding Black youth and girls in American seemed to push the idea that they were not particularly relevant to the civil rights movement. The tremendous sacrifices they made were overlooked.

Although the horrible conditions that the girls were placed in while at the Leesburg Stockade eventually came to light, Blacks in American were continually mistreated during the American Civil Rights Movement. Protestors were still finding themselves locked up in prisons

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

and treated unjustly. For example, on September 13, 1963, Bobby Lee Jones told SNCC officers about his stay in prison, and the injustices he saw. Furthermore, he witnessed the Americus police perpetrating the same actions that they had waged against the girls held in the stockade, when at one point he described guards ushering in a group of fifteen girls into an eight-by-twelve-foot prison cell. Many of them had been burned by cattle prods.<sup>56</sup> Jones also faced cruel treatment and was forced to work in the city jail after he was arrested, just like so many other young protestors.<sup>57</sup> As mentioned, however, there was little to no media attention given to this movement and these incidents of brutality.<sup>58</sup>

For Black youth in Americus, the threat of violence and imprisonment led them to organize in order to create a way of protecting themselves. This was achieved in October 1963, when two students -- Dave Bell and Bob Mantas -- created an organization called the Youth Council, which was designed to “build and channel the activities of the active and militant young people of Americus and the county.” Although this organization did not meet frequently, due to the start of the school year, it was still seen as an important group.<sup>59</sup> The Youth Council was considered the strongest element of the Sumter County Movement.<sup>60</sup> Since mainstream news outlets were neglecting to discuss what was happening in Americus, it became necessary for Black activists to document what was happening there.

During the height of the civil rights movement newspapers, television reports, and radio announcements were considered extremely important because they offered a lens to what was taking place during the movement. For example, media reports of the March on Washington for

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<sup>56</sup> Bobby L. Jones, Interviewed by John L. Bernum, Jr., September 13, 1963.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Don Harris, *Evaluation of SNCC in Americus*, December 1963.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

Freedom & Jobs gave people all around the nation, and indeed the world, the opportunity to see the purpose of the march, and to witness the dignity and comportment of the marchers.

Furthermore, the newspaper and television reports inspired other protestors from the North and other countries to join in the efforts of Blacks in order to disrupt the practices of segregation.

By neglecting to show the girls in Leesburg stockade and the Americus movement, the media silenced a group of activists who were attacked after a peaceful protest. Furthermore, as will be shown in the following chapters, the story that was shared by the media was not comprehensive, and so it could not bear witness to what was taking place in Americus.

Additionally, by focusing all the media attention on SNCC workers in Americus, the actions being taken by other Black youth in the community were disregarded. As time passed, the lack of preservation taken to memorialize the girls experience led the women to become vocal about their experiences and share the truth of what happened in Leesburg Stockade. In the following chapter, I will show how the girls in Americus preserved their own stories in order to share a part of the Americus movement that was neglected.



### 3 The Price of Freedom

#### Memories of the Stockade

O wretched place of fear, so cold I found  
It taught me hope while peace abound  
Faith gave me a prayer and brought me strength  
Although the joy renewed my mind.

O I thought of times when I cried  
O help me for you are my Guide,  
Then peace came so deep within  
And I could sing and smile again.

Days and years has passed since then  
But it's Wisdom You give and Grace you send,  
And it's You who made the change in me  
Regardless of my part in AMERICUS' History!

-Lulu Westbrooks-Griffin<sup>61</sup>

One day while playing outside of her house, twelve-year-old Carol Seay was approached by two men, one Black and the other White. Although it was considered inappropriate at the time for Black people to look White people in the eyes, Seay's gaze was met by the White man as she stared up at him. He asked her if "she knew that the White folks in her town didn't count her and other colored folks as human beings?"<sup>62</sup> The man followed up by inviting Seay and her parents to a mass meeting that would be held at the Allen Church that evening. During the meeting, community members would discuss how to "get the [W]hite man to treat" them equally.<sup>63</sup> Upon hearing the news about the meeting, Seay ran home, calling back to the men that she and her

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<sup>61</sup> Lulu Westbrooks-Griffin, "Memories of the Stockade" (1975), Civil Right Movement Archive, Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement. <https://www.crmvet.org/poetry/pgriffin.htm>.

<sup>62</sup> Carol Seay, *Up Above My Head: I See Freedom in the Air* (Bloomington: Xlibris, 2015), 7.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

family would “be there for sure at the meeting!”<sup>64</sup> For Seay, this was the moment when she started to participate in the Americus civil rights movement.

Although she was young, Seay, along with many other children, was excited to be a part of the civil rights movement. In addition to seeing an opportunity to end segregation in their community, they saw their actions as a way to potentially show the future youth the meaning of equality. In Americus, Black youth were the one of the drivers of the Americus civil rights movement.<sup>65</sup> Although the young women in the Leesburg Stockade were instrumental in Americus, they were largely overlooked during the 1960s, when the movement was taking place. It was not until the youth of the Americus movement grew up and documented their history that the fuller reality of the price they paid for their activism was uncovered.

This chapter will look first at the ways that Carol Seay and Lulu Westbrooks-Griffin documented their experience in Leesburg Stockade through their books and oral presentations. Second, it compares and contrasts the accounts of Seay and Westbrooks-Griffin. Third, it places both women’s narratives in conversation with the narratives, collected by SNCC, of the other girls who were locked up in Leesburg, in order to get a broader picture of what actually took place during their movement. Finally, these narratives show how the memories of the women in Leesburg Stockade offer a new perspective of what took place during the Americus movement by giving greater detail of the movement and the experiences of the protestors.

### **Carol Seay**

In 2015, Seay released *Up Above My Head*, a memoir of her experience during the Americus movement. In the book she documents her journey into the movement and the

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<sup>64</sup> Seay, *Up Above My Head*, 8.

<sup>65</sup> Don Harris, “Evaluation of SNCC in Americus,” message to SNCC Headquarters, December 1963.

obstacles she faced. Throughout her work, Seay explains why the children in Americus felt the need to be a part of the civil rights movement. By answering a call from God and the civil rights leaders, Seay and many other African Americans said, “here am I, send me!”<sup>66</sup> By answering this call, many civil rights protestors joined the fight to end segregation and disenfranchisement; furthermore, they were willing to risk “injury, prison or even death” in order to gain their freedom.<sup>67</sup> In Americus, Black youth, such as twelve year-old Seay, were moving to the front line of the movement even though many were unsure of whether they would see their family again.<sup>68</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Seay joined the Americus movement after she was invited to the mass meeting held at Allen Church. Upon walking into the church, accompanied by her mother, Seay saw attendees from all over Sumter county.<sup>69</sup> As the meeting started, the church’s pastor, Rev. J.R. Campbell, led the congregation into prayer and a song. Then he began introducing the strangers who had come to their county. After leaving the meeting, all Seay “could think about was how the White man had been treating them.”<sup>70</sup> The next day, Seay’s mother kept close watch of her because she had stopped engaging in activities common amongst children. To Seay, this mass meeting had been a wakeup call from God who was defining her future in “a profound way.”<sup>71</sup> The call pushed Seay to become active in the Americus movement and she was soon inspired to join non-violent protests in her county.

Although young, Seay made some trenchant observations. For instance, she observed that “[W]hite children, no older than [herself], had to be addressed as ma’am and sir.”<sup>72</sup> African-

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<sup>66</sup> Seay, *Up Above My Head*, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>71</sup> Seay, *Up Above My Head*, 10.

<sup>72</sup> Seay, *Up Above My Head*, 13.

Americans, of course, were not addressed so respectfully. Seay also commented in her autobiography on how weird segregation was. For example, she observed that Black people were hired as chefs for White restaurants during segregation; however, Black people were not allowed to sit-down and dine in the same restaurant.<sup>73</sup> Seay's awareness of these racist practices led her to become active in the Americus movement; she aimed to help give her community a better future.

During one humid day in the summer of 1963, Seay joined a group of more than a hundred people standing in front of Allen Church. After praying, and receiving instructions from civil rights organizers, the group started their march from the church on Carter Street, down North Lee Street, to the Sheriff's Department, which was over a mile away. Halfway to their destination, however – while they were still in the designated Black section of town -- they were met by a group that Seay calls the “good ole boy welcoming committee,” which consisted of “local police, sheriffs, and a group of outsiders called the *Blue Angels*.”<sup>74</sup>

The protestors were greeted with the rhetorical question, “niggers, who do you think you are?”<sup>75</sup> While in previous marches they had been told to disperse, on this day they were instead directed to stand in the Wheatley Plaza and “shut up.”<sup>76</sup> Seay was grabbed by a police officer who dragged her towards a police wagon, at which point another officer walked up ready to assault her with a cattle prod. Luckily, before she could be assaulted, Seay was swiftly pulled into the wagon by another protestor, Edward Thomas. While Seay and others were taken to the Sumter County Jail, another contingent of demonstrators was moved to an overflow jail that was already packed with protestors from past marches. Upon arriving, Seay was not photographed, or

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<sup>73</sup> Seay, *Up Above My Head*, 14.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>75</sup> Seay, *Up Above My Head*, 16.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

finger printed. Instead, she was quickly placed into a cell. Within a day, two of her cousins, Gloria and Lulu Westbrooks, were placed in the same cell. While Gloria “looked as if she had seen the devil himself,” Lulu’s face was covered in her own blood from a head injury. Seay was quickly filled in about the events that had occurred leading up to her cousin’s arrest.<sup>77</sup>

The Americus jail started to fill up as more and more protestors were being arrested. In her autobiography, Seay discusses the way that County Sheriff Fred Chappell moved the girls to another prison instead of just releasing them. Chappell called the sheriff of Dawson County, Z.T. Matthews, and asked if he would be willing to house his “niggers,” because his sheriff’s department was “gathering them up like bees gather honey” and he needed to figure out what to do with them.<sup>78</sup> With the space offered by Matthews, several young girls were taken from Sumter County and moved to Dawson County. Upon arriving in Dawson, they were placed in a cell with twelve other young girls, all of them ranging from the ages of eleven to sixteen. The girls spent their time praying and singing, and when the authorities demanded the girls be quiet, they sung louder. Three weeks later the girls were placed into a sweatbox, a hot, pitch-black room where the only air came from a small crack under the door.<sup>79</sup> The girls took turns laying on the concrete floor in order to take in the fresh air. Although some of the girls were yelling to be released from the room, their request was ignored.<sup>80</sup> The following day, the young girls were removed from their jail and placed back in their previous cell where they remained for three more weeks. One night, two armed deputies took the girls from their cells and placed them into a police van.

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<sup>77</sup> Seay, *Up Above My Head*, 17.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

The girls asked the deputies where they were going, and why they were being moved at night, but their questions were met with silence. Although the girls hoped that they were being taken home, they realized that was not the case as the police van drove over unfamiliar roads and train tracks, causing the young girls to fear that the sheriffs were planning on killing them.

Within an hour, the van drove up a dirt road through an abandoned overgrown area of land. They



Figure 2: © Danny Lyon/Magnum Photos - Inside Leesburg Stockade

were ordered out of the van and forced to go into a stark white building, known as Leesburg Stockade, with bars on the window. For many of the girls, that would be their home for 45 days. The concrete floors were filthy and thick with grime, and the girls stood looking at this small room before

vomiting due to the overpowering smell of mildew and what Seay describes as “rotting skunk urine.”<sup>81</sup> In the corner was a pile of mattresses which crumbled when one of the girls touched them.<sup>82</sup> The toilet did not work and the only water, which was always warm, trickled out of the shower head. Although, they were given lemons, they made “the best damn lemonade the world has ever tasted.”<sup>83</sup> The next day, after adjusting to their new circumstances, they asked the guard, Mr. Countryman, for a broom, and he obliged. He also explained to the girls that they were being held in a condemned Civil War prison 25 miles outside of Americus in Leesburg, Georgia.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Seay, *Up Above My Head*, 25.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Seay, *Up Above My Head*, 26.

<sup>84</sup> Seay, *Up Above My Head*, 27.

Later that evening, Mr. Story -- the Americus dog catcher -- fed them their first meal in 24 hours. Every day, for the remainder of their stay, each girl was given either four hamburgers or an egg salad sandwich. The hamburgers were burnt on the edges, and raw in the middle, while the egg salad always “turned rancid because of the hot weather.”<sup>85</sup> Many of the girls after eating the sandwiches would get food poisoning and would be forced to use the broken toilet, broken shower, or repurpose the boxes that their foods came in to relieve themselves. Furthermore, they would wipe themselves with the hamburger wrappers which were rationed amongst the girls. With no running water, and various other dehumanizing deprivations, some of the girls’ spirits were broken and they felt as though they couldn’t keep living in the stockade. When this occurred, however, the other girls would “hug her and give her words of encouragement.”<sup>86</sup> They would also sing, pray, and have church in order to occupy their time.

As the days went by the fifteen girls were joined by other girls around the same age range. At one point there was over thirty girls in the stockade. Because of the number of girls in the prison at that time, the guards – including Mr. Story – felt it was necessary to share the girls’ locations with their families.<sup>87</sup> As a result, several parents were able to visit their daughters. These families later found out that they could free their daughters by paying their bail which was set at an amount of two dollars for each day they were imprisoned. While some families were able to pay bail in order to free their children, other families could not, which resulted in the girls being left in the stockade. When the SNCC activist Danny Lyon arrived in August 1963, he saw and photographed not all, but the remaining girls. The girls showed him the horrible living conditions that they were in, with hopes that the resulting images would lead them to be released.

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<sup>85</sup> Seay, *Up Above My Head*, 28.

<sup>86</sup> Seay, *Up Above My Head*, 29.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

Later, these images would be used in an article written by Julian Bond, and were submitted to Congress by Senator Harrison A. Williams, Jr.<sup>88</sup> Several days later a police van drove the girls back to the Americus jail, where their parents were waiting for them. For over forty-five days these girls had been stuck in a jail during the hottest months of Georgia and now they were finally free.

Upon their release, several girls were required to meet with a judge in order to promise that they would not protest or engage in the Americus movement. When Seay was asked by the judge whether she “intended to get involved in this mess again?” she stated that she had been in a peaceful protest and would in fact do the same again.<sup>89</sup> For the remainder of her time in Americus, she continued to be a part of the freedom movement until she moved out of the state. Although, several of the girls would stop talking about their traumatic experiences, others, such as Seay, and Westbrook-Griffin, would share their memories of the Americus movement.

### **Lulu Westbrook-Griffin**

Westbrook-Griffin has spoken several times about her experiences in the Americus Freedom movement, and in 1998 she published a book, *Freedom Is Not Free: 45 Days in Leesburg Stockade; a Civil Rights Story*. Through her work, we are able to better understand Westbrook-Griffin’s experience in the Americus Freedom movement. Just like Seay, even as a girl, Westbrook-Griffin was able to witness the unfairness of racism in Americus. Yet she never fully grasped the purpose of segregation as a young child. She once underscored the point to a group of students of the Rochester City School District, where she shared a question she had asked her mother when she was a child: “What does the water from a White drinking fountain

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<sup>88</sup> Seay, *Up Above My Head*, 35.

<sup>89</sup> Seay, *Up Above My Head*, 40.



taste like?” As she got older, she was able to learn from the speeches of civil rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and from tragic incidents, such as the murder of Emmet Till.<sup>90</sup>

Although young, Westbrook-Griffin was made aware of the violent atrocities and dehumanizing acts toward Black people due to the color of their skin. Westbrook-Griffin attended her first mass meeting, which was held in a local funeral home, with her college-age brother.<sup>91</sup> During their mass meetings, protestors were taught freedom songs that they would sing during their marches. They also were expected to take an oath of non-violence before participating in any marches. As time progressed, Westbrook-Griffin attended more mass meetings and training sessions before she was finally allowed to participate in making posters, and marching. In July 1963, twelve-year-old Westbrook-Griffin joined a group of marchers who were walking toward the Martin Theater in downtown Americus in order to protest its practice of segregation.<sup>92</sup> As they approached the theater they were stopped by a group of police officers and self-deputized citizens. In their hands were billy clubs, fire hoses, and other weapons. Others in the mob also had dogs that were ready to attack the group of protestors. Although the mob told the group of protestors to stop walking, they did not listen. Instead, they marched closer to the mob, took a knee, and prayed.<sup>93</sup> The White mob descended on the group with fire hoses and their other weapons, and Westbrook-Griffin was one of the victims. She lay bleeding from her skull after an officer hit her over the head with a club.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Lulu Westbrook-Griffin, “Lulu Tells Her Story to Students in Rochester City School District.” (presentation, Rochester City School District, Rochester, NY, February 14, 2018).

<sup>91</sup> Lulu Westbrook-Griffin, “Lulu Tells Her Story to Students in Rochester City School District.” (presentation, Rochester City School District, Rochester, NY, February 14, 2018).

<sup>92</sup> Ansley L. Quiros, *God with Us: Lived Theology and the Freedom Struggle in Americus, Georgia, 1942-1976* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 103.

<sup>93</sup> Quiros, *God with Us*, 103.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

Afterward, Westbrooks-Griffin remembered being placed in a vehicle and taken to a number of different prisons before being placed in Leesburg Stockade with a group of other girls.<sup>95</sup> Although she was placed in the stockade under exceedingly grim conditions, she did not let it break her spirit. The girls were told that if they tried to run away or escape, they would be killed. Eventually, the girls had to use the bathroom and became aware of how horrible their living conditions actually were. The girls also had to face dehumanizing treatment from the guards, such as the incident when someone threw a rattlesnake into their cell. Haunted by this event, one of the girls would scream throughout the night.<sup>96</sup>



*Figure 3: © Danny Lyon /Magnum Photos - Lulu Westbrooks*

As stated by Seay, Lyon, a 20-year-old college student from Chicago was sent down to Americus in August to take images of the young girls and show the world how they were being treated. After getting to the stockade with the help of a Black teen in town, he took photos of the girls with shaking hands. One well known image was of Westbrooks-Griffin. In the photo she is lounging on the concrete floor in her worn and ragged dress with a “turban made from the remnants of her dress” wrapped around her head.<sup>97</sup> This turban was used to help cover the blow on her head that she had still not received medical attention for.<sup>98</sup> All the girls had clothes on that

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<sup>95</sup> Quiros, *God with Us*, 103.

<sup>96</sup> Quiros, *God with Us*, 104.

<sup>97</sup> Lulu Westbrooks-Griffin, *Freedom is Not Free: 45 Days in the Leesburg Stockade* (Rochester: George Eastman House, 1998), 20.

<sup>98</sup> Westbrooks-Griffin, *Freedom is Not Free*, 20.

might have been considered “filthy rag[s];” however, in the photo many of the girls still smiled because of the hopes that they were going to be rescued with the help of these photos.<sup>99</sup>

Lyon sent the images to the main SNCC office in Atlanta where they were relayed to several federal officials.<sup>100</sup> As seen earlier, these images did not cause for newspapers other than *Jet* and the *Student Voice* to write stories about these young girls. Westbrook-Griffin observed, however, that several newspapers, such as the *New York Times* and the *Christian Century*, wrote more broadly about jails and prisons in Americus rather than include the experiences of the girls in their report.<sup>101</sup> Westbrook-Griffin speculated that of all the people to receive the photos, the most important was Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who she assumed sent the photos to Congress and to his brother, President John F. Kennedy.<sup>102</sup> Within a week of these photos being taken, the young girls were released. According to Westbrook-Griffin, the release of the girls only came when the National Guards was sent to Americus in September.

School in Americus was underway by the time that the girls were released. Thus, the girls were all ordered to get a vaccination shot – all with the same needle – before they were placed back in classrooms.<sup>103</sup> Additionally, none of the girls received counseling even though they had suffered from traumatic experiences while imprisoned.<sup>104</sup> Although these girls, and many other Black youth in Americus, had risked their lives in order to protest against segregation, race relations were not getting better in town. Due to the tension that was still felt among Americus’s

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<sup>99</sup> Westbrook-Griffin, *Freedom is Not Free*, 20.

<sup>100</sup> Quiros, *God with Us*, 105.

<sup>101</sup> Westbrook-Griffin, *Freedom is Not Free*, 21.

<sup>102</sup> Quiros, *God with Us*, 105.

<sup>103</sup> Lulu Westbrook-Griffin, “Lulu Tells Her Story to Students in Rochester City School District.” (presentation, Rochester City School District, Rochester, NY, February 14, 2018).

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

Black residents, Westbrooks-Griffin and her family moved to New York City, where she started high school.<sup>105</sup>

Through the accounts of Seay and Westbrooks-Griffin, we are able to gain an understanding of the horrible experiences that the girls stuck in the stockade had to live through. It is important to note the huge differences in the structure of these women's books and presentations. These differences are noticeable in the way that both of the narratives talk about the reason the girls were released and the girls' memories of the guards' treatment toward them. They differ in turn from the narratives in the girls' 1963 affidavits. Although Seay and Westbrooks-Griffin's narratives are similar in many respects, they frame them differently. Seay's narrative is rooted in religion, while Westbrooks-Griffin is written as an educational tool.

Seay's work focuses a lot on her relationship with God and the ways that relationship grew during this time. Furthermore, while some chapters in her book speak to her experience while protesting, others use passages from the Bible in order to show how several of the experiences during her stay in the stockade could be considered a test by God. As can be seen in the chapter titled "Sold Out Life," Seay discusses the way she was willing to lose her life for the march because she knew "she would find it again in Jesus."<sup>106</sup> At such a young age her faith in God allowed for her to discern His calling on her life and see that it was fighting for the rights of herself and others like her.

In contrast, Westbrooks-Griffin's *Freedom is not Free* can be seen as a tool for education. In each section that discusses the Americus movement, she shares the story of her imprisonment in Leesburg Stockade. Additionally, Westbrooks-Griffin asks her readers thought-

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<sup>105</sup> Lulu Westbrooks-Griffin, "Lulu Tells Her Story to Students in Rochester City School District." (presentation, Rochester City School District, Rochester, NY, February 14, 2018).

<sup>106</sup> Seay, *Up Above My Head*, 58.

provoking questions; although, she does not offer answers to these questions. For example, while discussing the newspapers that talked about the Americus movement, Westbrook-Griffin asks the reader why the newspaper in Americus did not talk about the incidents, and invites speculation about what they would have said if they had done so.<sup>107</sup> Likewise, Westbrook-Griffin wonders if Lyon's photos might have pushed for the young girls to be released if they had been taken earlier.<sup>108</sup> She also asks the reader to ponder why Lyons was frightened while taking the girls' photos. During her presentations at the Rochester City School District, Westbrook-Griffin also made it her mission to engage and inspire the youth to protest for their rights, even though they were young. During her presentation she urged the youth in attendance to always fight for what they believe in, just like she did as a girl.<sup>109</sup>

While both women say that Lyon's photos brought their imprisonment and struggles to the end, they express conflicting views about the ways that the girls were released. In Seay's narrative, after the photos were submitted to Congress, the city sheriff was forced to let the women go. In contrast, Westbrook-Griffin states that the submission of the photographs to Congress led to the National Guard being called into Americus to free the young women. (Westbrook-Griffin is almost surely incorrect; there is no record of the National Guard arriving in Americus.) Nevertheless, both narratives helpfully showcased the need for government intervention in the county. Furthermore, in reality Congress was shared the disgraceful living conditions and it was questioned whether these images could have even been taken in 20<sup>th</sup> century America due to how deplorable the facilities were.<sup>110</sup> It was emphasized during the

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<sup>107</sup> Lulu Westbrook-Griffin, *Freedom is Not Free*, 21.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>109</sup> Lulu Westbrook-Griffin, "Lulu Tells Her Story to Students in Rochester City School District." (presentation, Rochester City School District, Rochester, NY, February 14, 2018).

<sup>110</sup> *Will Americus Free Don Harris*, 88<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., *Congressional Record* 109, pt. 13:1107.

congressional proceeding that these young students were being forced to stay in prison because their families could not afford an ordinance which required the prisoner, or their family, to pay \$2 a day for the length of time that they were imprisoned.<sup>111</sup> It was also noted in Congress that this ordinance was only passed on August 9, after the girl's imprisonment.<sup>112</sup>

Even though Seay's and Westbrook-Griffin's narratives are helpful in constructing a story of the thirty women's experiences at Leesburg Stockade, they are not the only personal accounts that exist. Following the release of several of the girls imprisoned in Leesburg Stockade in September 1963, SNCC took time to interview some of the girls and several other Americus citizens who were active during the 1963 movement. The interviews of the girls were collected and used as affidavits in order to help Americus challenge the county and uncover the inhumane treatment of African American citizens. These affidavits and narratives were placed into a Freedom Summer archive, with documents from other citizens and protestors from Americus. These narratives suggest a novel interpretation of the guards on duty.

### **Affidavits**

In both Seay's autobiography and the affidavits, the girls' memories of the guards are notable. While it is unclear whether there were more than two guards, the narratives are helpful in painting a picture of the guards' overall treatment of the girls. In Seay's book, the guards were often protective of the girls. For example, she says Mr. Story contacted the parents of the girls and told them where they were being held. But the affidavits showed a different version of the guards' treatment of the girls. Eleven-year-old Lorena Barnum gave an example of the guard's treatment of the girls by telling a story of one evening where two of the girls were sick. While

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

one of the girls had an appendix problem, the other had a bad heart. When the guard on duty was called to get help, he instead told the girls that “if they [the two sick girls] aren’t dead by morning, we’ll [the guards] come and look at them again.”<sup>113</sup> In another affidavit, Elizabeth Thomas also mentions the horrible treatment toward the girls by the guards. In her affidavit, Thomas mentions that on days the girls had soap, they would wash their clothes and the guard on duty would stand watching them as they walked around in their underclothes.<sup>114</sup> The affidavits suggest that the guards who were selected to watch the girls could protect them in some rare instances, while inflicting trauma on them in others.

Both Seay and Westbrook-Griffin offer the reader a more personalized look at the incidents that took place in Americus at the time. As newspapers ignored this relevant story of young girls being locked up in an old Civil War prison, the need for personal accounts is even more important. Through their work we are able to see how these girls survived through this horrible and traumatizing treatment. Through these memories, we are able to see how these girls ranging from the ages of eleven to sixteen were willing to risk their lives and their freedom in order to give themselves, and their community, a better future. Moreover, even though these narratives differ from one another, they help to give a fuller picture of what took place in Leesburg Stockade. Each girl who was imprisoned had a unique vantage point from which to tell what happened during her imprisonment.<sup>115</sup> As Westbrook-Griffin’s poem suggests, the stockade was able to teach these women how to have hope and faith even though they faced tremendous obstacles.

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<sup>113</sup> Lorena Barnum, Interviewed by Lois Barnum Holley, September 13, 1963.

<sup>114</sup> Elizabeth Thomas, Interviewed by Lois Barnum Holley, September 13, 1963

<sup>115</sup> “Girls of the Leesburg Stockade,” YouTube video, posted by “GPB,” June 27, 2016, <https://youtu.be/WCr9XuaE9SQ>

Although their story was not as well-known as it should have been, these girls would go down in history as part of an amazing group of youth in Americus who pushed for equality during the summer of 1963. In 2003, several of them had a reunion and were finally able to share their stories with the world.<sup>116</sup> This reunion brought greater attention to the women, and it gave them a platform that they did not have during their imprisonment, to talk about their time in Leesburg Stockade. As a result, they have been able to show the world how they were determined to survive the inhumane treatment and unspeakable cruelty they experienced in the stockade.

The following chapter will discuss the new attention from the media, such as newspapers and podcasts, and other organizations in an effort to preserve the story of Leesburg Stockade. Furthermore, it will also show how the preservation of these stories has been lacking.

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<sup>116</sup> “Girls of the Leesburg Stockade,” YouTube video, posted by “GPB,” June 27, 2016, <https://youtu.be/WCr9XuaE9SQ>



#### 4 Memorializing Leesburg Stockade

“The story of what happened to these women  
deserves national exposure.”

-Travis W. Lewis<sup>117</sup>

On April 4, 2015, fifteen women who were held in Leesburg Stockade as young girls were recognized as outstanding and brave during a dark period in American history.<sup>118</sup> In a speech honoring these women, and bearing witness to the horrible atrocities they endured, Representative Sanford Bishop, Jr. of Georgia spoke about the difficulties they experienced while being locked in the stockade. He also recognized the efforts of these women during the civil rights movement and spoke of an upcoming event where the women would be honored. Americus Mayor Barry Blount, Dr. Damon A. Williams, and Deborah Tulani Salahu-Din, and the Boys and Girls Club all recognized the women at an event, “the Leesburg Stockade Women’s Honor Program.”

As noted in Bishop’s speech in Congress, many of the women imprisoned in Leesburg Stockade did not want to relive their memory of being imprisoned in the stockade. This resulted in over fifty years of silence surrounding the girls’ ordeal. All this began to change in 1990, when Lulu Westbrook-Griffin found a book that had the archived images from Danny Lyon.<sup>119</sup> Upon seeing the images of the stockade in Lyon’s book “the memories came out in floods.”<sup>120</sup> Westbrook-Griffin started to write down her memories and give lectures at “schools, churches

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<sup>117</sup> Donna Owens, “Stolen Girls,” *Essence Magazine* (December 19, 2009).

<sup>118</sup> The people attending the event were Dr. Damon A. Williams, the senior vice president of the Boys and Girls Club of America, the mayor of Americus, and Deborah Tulani Salahu-Din who is a museum specialist at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. See Sanford D. Bishop, Jr., “In Recognition of the 1963 Leesburg Stockade Women.” (speech, Washington, DC, March 26, 2015), *Congressional Record*.

<sup>119</sup> Cathy Roberts, “Documentary tells horrific Civil Rights era story,” *Democrat & Chronicle* (February 21, 2014).

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

and events” in order to share her stories of the civil rights movement.<sup>121</sup> By reckoning with the suppressed memories of her past, Westbrook-Griffin was able to give voice to the experiences of the girls held in Leesburg Stockade.

Westbrook-Griffin’s writing also allowed the stories of the women to gain national attention and transformed how journalists approached the Americus movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, using various forms of media such as podcast, newspapers, and documentaries. Newspapers in the 1960s had focused on the SNCC members who were stationed in Americus and said little about the youth protesting in the civil rights movement in the county. More than fifty years later, however, newspapers started revisiting stories of these women and the Americus youth in more detail. In this chapter, I will show how the media, government, and museums have put forth simplified narratives of these women and memorialized just some of their stories. Furthermore, it will become apparent that this memorialization has not worked and instead limited the narrative of the stockade to the memories of only fifteen of the women.

In addition to the articles and exhibits being published by the women in several different local newspapers in Americus and Albany, Georgia, the women’s stories were memorialized in two documentaries: *Lulu and the Girls of Americus, Georgia 1963* (2003) and *The Leesburg 33: Americus’ Most Wanted* (2006). All the work that has been done, however, is not enough. I believe that there are many more ways that the strength, bravery, and courage the women showed while being imprisoned for 45 days in Leesburg Stockade can be memorialized. Furthermore, through this chapter I hope to offer suggestions about ways that the Americus Movement can create a space to connect the present with the past and give room for individuals to learn about the event for the first time.

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<sup>121</sup> Cathy Roberts, “Documentary tells horrific Civil Rights era story,” *Democrat & Chronicle* (February 21, 2014).

## Documentaries

Prior to sharing my own suggestions, it is important to see how these women have been memorialized in the present. The women first gained national media attention in 1999 when an article published in the local Americus newspaper by Lulu Westbrook was discovered by Richard McCollough, a broadcaster and meteorologist, and Travis Lewis, a producer, director, and owner of Titan Media Productions, LLC. They both were blown away by this incredible story and “spent hours and their own money” in order to document this incident, which they successfully accomplished when they produced *Lulu and the Girls of Americus, Georgia 1963*.<sup>122</sup> This documentary gained them numerous awards and accolades such as the Telly award in 2004, which honors the “best in cable, news, and video.”<sup>123</sup> In addition to this documentary, Shari K. Thompson, a professor at Temple University, was inspired to produce her own film when she was approached by Calvin Taylor, Jr. an attorney who was hoping to use the film to help “build a legal case on behalf of the women.”<sup>124</sup> This documentary, *The Leesburg 33: Americus’ Most Wanted*, highlighted the amazing sacrifices made by these women during their incarceration. Both of these documentaries helped to shine a light on the strength of these women and allowed their story to gain national attention.<sup>125</sup>

More of the women started sharing their stories in the late 2000s and received significant media attention. The first media outlet to recognize these women in retrospect was the *Albany News*, which published an article on the women and focused on Sandra Mansfield and Carol Seay.<sup>126</sup> Mansfield and Seay made a visit to the stockade, and after having spent 45 terrifying

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<sup>122</sup> Owens, Donna. “Stolen Girls,” *Essence Magazine*, (December 19, 2009).

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> “Stolen Girls remember 13 in Leesburg.” *WALB 10*, (July 24, 2006).

days there in 1963, both were still emotionally affected by the prison, and felt as though they were suffocating when visiting the space.<sup>127</sup> The also mentioned during this interview that after leaving the stockade in 1963, they had long avoided talking about their experiences there. Furthermore, they mentioned that more than forty years went by before the women decided that it was time for them to share their story, partly because they wanted the future generation to recognize the amazing opportunities that were only afforded to them by those who fought for their rights during the civil rights movement.<sup>128</sup>

Later in 2009, *Essence* – a lifestyle magazine that primarily spoke to African-American women – published “Stolen Girls,” a detailed article that shared the story of the thirty-two women held in the stockade. The author Donna Owens relays the memories of the women held in Leesburg and explains how the racial tension in Americus during the civil rights movement led to their imprisonment. Furthermore, Owen also talks of her own experience three years prior, in January 2006, when she visited Americus, Georgia and invited the women to tour the stockade with her.<sup>129</sup> Just like the prior media outlet, in the article Owens recounts the experience of the women when they were held in Leesburg before sharing the experiences of the women now and the new work that is being done in order to preserve their history such as the documentary *Lulu and the Girls of Americus, Georgia 1963*.

While touring the stockade, many of the women mentioned the reoccurring nightmares and trauma that they experienced while being held there. As the women reflected on their experiences they stopped walking, “alternately crying and holding one another.”<sup>130</sup> Although some had sought healing by getting counseling, others decided to bury their experiences, and

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Donna Owens, “Stolen Girls,” *Essence Magazine* (December 19, 2009).

<sup>130</sup> Donna Owens, “Stolen Girls,” *Essence Magazine* (December 19, 2009).

refused to discuss their ordeal. Owens went on to talk about how Americus has not reckoned with its collective past and instead has buried incidents just like this and many others.<sup>131</sup> Furthermore, the documents and records that might have spoken of this mistreatment have been lost making it even more important that the women are sharing their experiences now.<sup>132</sup> Through the *Essence* article, one can clearly see the necessity of preserving the stories of these women, and understand how much the burying of their stories have emotionally impacted the women.

### **StoryCorps**

Six years after *Essence* published its article, the women received recognition from the State of Georgia during a program that honored them in April 2015. That year, the women also received recognition from multiple news organizations. Their story was reported by organizations such as StoryCorps and Georgia Public Broadcasting (GPB). Unfortunately, however, both outlets produced inaccurate stories. Both the video and oral history collected by GPB and StoryCorps only mention fifteen girls, although it is unclear whether this number refers to the initial fifteen girls taken from the Dawson County Jail or the remaining girls pictured in Lyon's photos.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, the story of the girls' arrest told by the media only makes mention of the protest against the segregation of the Martin Theater, and does not address the countless other protests that the girls took part in, which led to their arrest and imprisonment in the stockade.

One reason for the changes to the stories might have been due to the women that they were able to interview. For instance, the only people StoryCorps interviewed were Shirley

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> "Girls of the Leesburg Stockade," *Georgia public Broadcasting* video (August 9, 2019). <https://www.pbs.org/video/girls-of-the-leesburg-stockade-01tycm/>

Green-Reese, Emmarene Kaigler-Streeter, Diane Bowens, Verna Hollis, and Joseph Jones, the son of Hollis. During the interview, Green-Reese, Kaigler-Streeter, and Bowens talked about the hope of being rescued that they constantly had while imprisoned in the stockade, and the fear of not knowing how long they would be imprisoned.<sup>134</sup> Furthermore, they spoke more of their experience within the stockade and only mentioned a few of the women. For example, they spoke of how worried they were for Verna Hollis, who seemed to be having a harder time than the others during their imprisonment.<sup>135</sup> During her stay, Hollis seemed to be getting weaker day by day. She sat in the same spot and would not move. Additionally, everything she ate would come back up and Bowens was “scared that Verna would die on the spot.”<sup>136</sup> It was not until after their release that they all found out that she was pregnant.

During the StoryCorps interview, Hollis, who passed away in 2017, sat down with her son, Joseph Jones, who she was pregnant with during her imprisonment, and finally told him about her stay in Leesburg Stockade. When Jones asked how she felt after arriving to the stockade, Hollis stated that she “was scared and mad that they could treat human beings like they treated” the girls in the stockade, which was a sentiment echoed by all the women in the stockade.<sup>137</sup> These women were treated less than equal because they were Black.<sup>138</sup> Later on, during the interview between Hollis and Jones, Jones asked his mother why this story had not been talked about and discussed within the Americus community. Hollis stated that although she

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<sup>134</sup> Morris, Jasmyn. “The Leesburg Stockade Girls.” *StoryCorps*. Podcast audio, January 8, 2019. <https://storycorps.org/podcast/the-leesburg-stockade-girls/>.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

had told him the story when he was around the age of thirteen or fourteen, she had wanted to put the past behind her – a common remark among many of the other women.<sup>139</sup>

The podcast from the StoryCorps and video from GPB was used by many other news sources in order to share the story of the women. For example, the National Public Radio (NPR) published an article titled “I Gave Up Hope,” which quoted the other two published interviews in order to construct a narrative of what took place in Americus and the Leesburg Stockade. In addition to sharing the story of the environment the girls were placed in, the article also focused on the women’s lives after they left the stockade and the trauma that afflicted them. One example of this can be seen in the statement by Diane Bowens, who said that after being released she became claustrophobic and did not “do well in confined spaces.”<sup>140</sup> For example, one time after her imprisonment, she felt as though she was going to have a heart attack when she got on an elevator.<sup>141</sup>

Another example of the traumatic experiences these girls suffered can be seen in the account by Green-Reese, who stated that after being locked up -- and having no contact from her family -- she started to feel as though they did not care about her.<sup>142</sup> Many times, during the weeks that she was locked up, these thoughts would cause her to cry.<sup>143</sup> Although these news outlets were able to share the stories of these women, they neglected to include all of the women who were previously held in Leesburg Stockade, and instead mention only fifteen girls and those who stayed in the stockade the longest. Although the article was wrong, the news organizations powerfully memorialized the girls and helped to share their story with a wider audience.

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<sup>139</sup> Morris, Jasmyn. “The Leesburg Stockade Girls.” *StoryCorps*. Podcast audio, January 8, 2019, <https://storycorps.org/podcast/the-leesburg-stockade-girls/>.

<sup>140</sup> Bowman, Emma. “‘I Gave Up Hope’: As Girls, they were Jailed in Squalor for Protesting Segregation,” *National Public Radio* (January 18, 2019).

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

Subsequently, museums began to pick-up interest in their stories, and place the story of the women on exhibit.

### **Museum Exhibits about Leesburg Stockade**

The first museum to document the stories of the women from Americus was the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, DC. Established in 2003, the museum's main task is to preserve the history, art, and culture of African Americans. The museum has worked for over thirteen years to preserve the history of African Americans by collecting artifacts and stories. Thus, it is not a surprise that in 2018 the NMAAHC museum specialist, Tulani Salahu-Din, wrote a short blog post in order to explain how the museum planned to preserve the girls' history. Throughout her post, Salahu-Din wrote about how children were integral to the civil rights movement.<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, Salahu-Din showed that although the story of the girls held in Leesburg Stockade had been largely overlooked, it was still a powerful example of the bravery and courage that some young activists demonstrated during the movement.<sup>145</sup>

The blog post also shares a simple narrative of the events that took place prior to the arrest and unlawful detainment of the fifteen girls who were in the stockade the longest. Through the retelling of their story, Salahu-Din shows how that the girls, with ages ranging from twelve to fifteen, had marched from Friendship Baptist Church to the Martin Theater in order to protest the segregation enforced at the theaters.<sup>146</sup> In Americus, Black citizens who wanted to go to the theater would have to enter from the back through the alley. The protestors attempted to purchase

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<sup>144</sup> Tulani Salahu-Din, "Hidden Herstory: The Leesburg Stockade Girls," *National Museum of African American History & Culture* (blog), <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/hidden-herstory-leesburg-stockade-girls>.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Salahu-Din, "Hidden Herstory: The Leesburg Stockade Girls," *National Museum of African American History & Culture*.



their tickets from the front, which went against the customary practices during segregation.<sup>147</sup> Soon law enforcements had arrived, arrested the girls, and took them to Leesburg Stockade.

Furthermore, according to the NMAAHC, the young girls remained in Leesburg without their parent's knowledge.<sup>148</sup> The release of the girls did not come until after they were photographed by Danny Lyon, who sent their photos to prominent lawmakers. For the NMAAHC, the stories of these women and their efforts during the movement helped to facilitate a discussion on the efforts of Black youth in Alabama during the Birmingham "children's crusade." By becoming vocal about their experiences, and realizing the importance of their memories, the women who were imprisoned in Leesburg Stockade have been able to share a piece of a hidden history. Following the blog post by the NMAAHC museum, Lyon's photos were displayed at the museum in order to share this history with the broader public.

Other museums and institutions followed suit in preserving the memories of the girls. For instance, the America's Black Holocaust Museum paid tribute to these women by reposting the Salahu-Din's blog post.<sup>149</sup> As a digital museum that looks at the history of the Black Diaspora -- as well as the cultural and social issues effecting the Black communities in the present -- this institution was able to preserve the history of the women digitally. Another virtual museum that highlighted the women was the Girl Museum. In an article titled "55 Years Later: The Leesburg Stockade," the museum's curators recognized the women who were "abducted by the police and unlawfully imprisoned in a condemned stockade."<sup>150</sup> The museum further utilized other

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<sup>147</sup> Salahu-Din, "Hidden Herstory: The Leesburg Stockade Girls," *National Museum of African American History & Culture*.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Tulani Salahu-Din, "Hidden Herstory: The Leesburg Stockade Girls," *America's Black Holocaust Museum* (July 13, 2018).

<sup>150</sup> Tiffany Rhoades, "55 Years Later: The Leesburg Stockade," *Girl Museum* (July 19, 2018).

interviews by the women in order to give a detailed look into the experiences of the women while they were imprisoned.

The Girl Museum highlighted the march to desegregate the Martin Theater as the leading moment in which the majority of the young girls were arrested by the police.<sup>151</sup> Moreover, the narrative shared by the Girl Museums stated that the protestors, including all fifteen girls, were met with police officers brandishing clubs and dogs that were prepared to attack the marchers. It was during this protest that Lulu Westbrook was “clubbed in the head” and given no medical attention throughout her time during the stockade.<sup>152</sup> The article also discusses the way that several young girls were taken out of town, to Dawson, due to overcrowded jails prior to being placed in Leesburg Stockade.<sup>153</sup>

The Girls Museum gives a semi-detailed account of the living situation of the girls upon their arrival of the stockade. It also shares how they were transported to the stockade by being packed in a windowless van before being forced into a dilapidated one-story building.<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, the museums offer a detailed description of the room and its smell of mildew and urine, which made several of the girls sick. In order to bide their time while imprisoned, the museums recounts how the girls would play cards, pray, sing, and teach sermons to uplift their spirits.<sup>155</sup> Although, they were stuck within this confine, with no knowledge of how long they were remaining in jail, they found ways of staying hopeful. The museum finished by speaking of the photos taken by Lyon and the newspapers that published them.<sup>156</sup> However, unlike other newspapers and museums, the Girl Museum also offers a glimpse of the feelings from the girls

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<sup>151</sup> Tiffany Rhoades, “55 Years Later: The Leesburg Stockade,” *Girl Museum* (July 19, 2018).

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

upon their release. Many of the girls found themselves unable to resume their normal life. Furthermore, even though they had been unjustly imprisoned, many felt ashamed about their experience.<sup>157</sup> Through this blog post, the Girl Museum was able to share a story that had been hidden for many years.

By centering the experiences of young girls, specifically those who are Black, each museum was able to share the story of an overlooked moment in history. Furthermore, their work also created a narrative of the events that took place in rural areas of the South during the civil rights movement. However, as stated earlier, the narrative they shared did not fully give credit to the more than one dozen other women who were also held in Leesburg Stockade. The museums also neglected to focus on the many different ways that these girls were protesting and demanding change, not only from the theater in Americus, but also, from the sheriff's department. I believe that there are many other initiatives that can be created in order to help memorialize the stories of these women. Furthermore, the initiatives I suggest are the creation of a museum and a website about the women and the Americus movement.

### **Potential Memorials for Leesburg Stockade Girls**

In an interview with *Essence* magazine, several of the women wanted to see a “memorial or museum erected at Leesburg to educate young people” and I am of the same belief.<sup>158</sup> I think a more suitable memorial for these women would be a museum that is modeled after the Equal Justice Initiative's Lynching Memorial and Museum, which has an external memorial and a museum that was built in an old slave market, and which puts forth information about mass incarceration and lynching. Specifically, at Leesburg Stockade, the area surrounding the stockade

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<sup>157</sup> Tiffany Rhoades, “55 Years Later: The Leesburg Stockade,” *Girl Museum* (July 19, 2018).

<sup>158</sup> Donna Owens, “Stolen Girls,” *Essence Magazine* (December 19, 2009).

would be used as a memorial to the individuals who were instrumental in the Americas civil rights movement, while also creating an outside amphitheater where presentations and movies can be shown. In addition to a memorial outside of the building, the internal building could be turned into a museum that recognizes the efforts of all of the women held in the stockade. The area of the stockade that the young girls were placed in would be restored to how it looked in the 1960s. Furthermore, the area would only have the images taken by Lyon hanging on the wall with an audio led tour by one of the women held in the stockade.

Due to a renovation of Leesburg Stockade in the early 2000s, part of the prison that the girls had been held in has been enclosed. In the renovated room that is attached to the original structure of the stockade, I would place images of the young women and share each of their narratives using the autobiographies, interviews, and affidavits. Furthermore, I would also have an oral history component that allows the visitor of them museum to sit down and hear the women recount their stories of being imprisoned. The oral history project would be modeled after the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center's project, where the institution created a hologram of Aaron Elster, a Holocaust survivor. Not only does the hologram of Elster tell the story of the Holocaust in Poland, but there is also an interactive feature that allows the hologram to answers the questions of the audience members by recognizing key words when the question is asked verbally.<sup>159</sup> This would be an extremely important feature to have in the museum because it would allow the women's stories to be shared in more detail, even if they are not able to be physically present at the museum.

In addition to the physical museum, I would also create a website dedicated to the civil rights movement in Americas and the stories of these women. Through the museum, there would

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<sup>159</sup> Ellen Braunstein, "At this Holocaust Museum, you can Speak with Holograms of Survivors," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* (January 22, 2018).

be pages dedicated to each of the women, which would allow the visitor to read about their stories and seen any other articles that cite the women. There will also be a 3D model of the stockade that will allow the website visitor the opportunity to see what the structure looks like. Hopefully, this will inspire people to visit the museum. This website could also share resources with users, allowing them to explore books, articles, websites, and that speak of the movement. All of this could potentially be achieved by through funding from a Digital Humanities Advancement Grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, or a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Although there have been numerous ways that the memories of these women have been preserved, there has been a failure to recognize the many other women who were imprisoned, and the many ways that they found themselves in jail. Through my suggestions, I hope that a light can be shown on the more than thirty women who were imprisoned in the stockade and the many ways that several of them have been working to get recognition for the trauma that they endured. Furthermore, through my suggestions, the children who were the driving force of the Americus movement will also gain the recognition they deserve and hopefully this will inspire youth to take initiative and push for changes even though they might be overlooked.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In 2019, a historical marker was placed in front of Leesburg Stockade acknowledging that the girls that had been imprisoned there for forty-five days.<sup>160</sup> Although groundbreaking in recognizing the efforts of these Black youth in Americus, this marker also caused questions in how the memory of Leesburg Stockade has been preserved. As seen in previous chapters, in the 1960s, newspapers did not do justice in portraying the history of the Americus movement, which left this task solely on the women held in Leesburg stockade. The main question that many started asking after the ceremony was whether more of the girls should be recognized in the narrative about Leesburg Stockade, which was previously limited to fifteen because of the number of girls present in Lyon's images. After the ceremony for the historical marker, a news station interviewed Lorena Barnum Sabbs, one of the women held in Leesburg Stockade but not pictured in Lyon's photo.<sup>161</sup> In her interview, Sabbs shared her experience of being jailed at the age of eleven and how she did not fully understand the impact that the stockade would have on the government and others in the Americus community.<sup>162</sup> Furthermore, she notes that long imprisonments, like that of the girls held in Leesburg Stockade, were common during this time in Americus, and that many other people -- such as her brother -- were likewise imprisoned for extended amounts of time.<sup>163</sup> Unlike her brother, however, the most crucial fact of the women held in Leesburg Stockade was that there was documentation that allowed for the preservation of their story.

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<sup>160</sup> Jennifer Parks, "Leesburg Stockade Building Receives Historical Marker," *Albany Herald* (September 28, 2019).

<sup>161</sup> Grant Blankenship, "New Historical Marker for Girls Illegally Jailed During Civil Rights Era," *Georgia Public Broadcasting* (October 18, 2019).

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

As seen through the previous chapters, the women suffered inexcusable trauma in order to help change the way White American citizens treated the Black community. Back in 1963, the young girls were placed into a prison van and taken to a stockade where they were forced to remain for at the most forty-five days. While in this prison, they saw first-hand how Black people all around the South were considered “less than,” and had their innocence and humanity stripped away. Furthermore, when they were finally released, they did not receive any form of reparations for their experience. They were instead forced to go to court and promise that they would not protest again, making it seem as if they – rather than the White government in charge – were the ones who had done wrong. This did not, however, cause any of the girls to stop their protesting. Instead, it was the motivation for them to continue.

Although it is easy to isolate one moment in history and show its importance, it is also necessary to see what this moment meant for the overall American movement. While the protest in the American during 1963 and 1964 helped lay a foundation for important and necessary work in making the civil rights movement in America successful and getting Black citizens rights they did not have before. The protest in 1965 unraveled that foundation as White supremacist leaders stood fast and ensured that officials in power only protected the rights of their white citizens. Furthermore, as more significant numbers of individuals came to protest against the discrimination in America, racial tension rose. It finally reached a boiling point during the evening of July 28, 1965.<sup>164</sup> On this evening, young White teens were throwing rocks at passing cars, when a vehicle turned around and decided to retaliate by shooting at the teens.<sup>165</sup> Two of

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<sup>164</sup> Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 184.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

these shots hit and killed “twenty-one-year-old marine recruit,” Andrew Whatley, an innocent bystander who had just left the movies.<sup>166</sup>

The murder of Whatley inflamed the county and caused a great uproar amongst Americus’s White citizens, many of whom reportedly bought firearms near the theater the following week.<sup>167</sup> Furthermore, violence by gangs of White people went unpunished and a rally took place with more than 600 Klan members and sympathizers a week after Whatley’s murder. During this rally, individuals marched to the capital and escalated the racial tension.<sup>168</sup> Furthermore, there were cases of voter disenfranchisement that were being uncovered against Black Americus citizens, and many of Americus’s Black residents found themselves facing an uphill battle against racism. It was at this time that the Americus movement saw its demise, and other SNCC workers in the county were directed to go to other counties.<sup>169</sup> While SNCC had hoped to make Americus an example for other rural Georgia counties, after, Whatley’s death, it made a tactical withdrawal.<sup>170</sup>

Although the efforts by protestors in 1963 had been groundbreaking in setting an example of how transformative the movement could be in rural areas, the failure of the movement led to a resurgence and rise in racial tension and segregation. It took time for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to be fully implemented and to begin to challenge the hold of White supremacy. Given such tension in Americus, it is not surprising that the girls held in the Leesburg Stockade had not been vocal about their experiences. For over 40 years, the stories of these women remained hidden; however, when they gained the courage to

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<sup>166</sup> Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 184.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*



speaking about their pain, the Americus government deemed their story important, and the girls won recognition outside of the county, too.

By sharing their story, the women contributed to the narrative of the civil rights movement in rural Georgia. Even more, they showed how Black youth were participating in the civil rights movement like youth in urban areas. However, as shown in chapter three, the story of these women was changed and reconstructed to make it more digestible. It was not until the addition of a historical marker that the story of the women perpetuated by newspapers and other organizations started to get challenged. As a result, the narrative of the girls held in Leesburg Stockade's became far better known than it was before.

Although these young girls' acts did not cause a significant impact on the Americus movement going forward, they offer a glimpse into the history and minds of youth activists during the 1960s, and they help to illustrate what the movement was about. Young protestors played an important, and often overlooked, role in the civil rights movement. This was partly due to the dearth of parents, and Black adults, who were willing to risk retaliation from their White employers if they or their children were caught going against the laws of segregation. For Black youth, participation in the civil rights movement amounted to a revolt against the preconceived notion of what children are expected to do. Furthermore, the activism of Black youth also showed how racism was not just affecting a particular age group. Instead, it had its sharp claws digging under the skin of every single person of color, no matter their age.

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