

A new chapter: Cotton Gin to dedicate historical marker

Story Comments (1)

Share Print Font Size: + -



Jerel Harris | Enterprise-Journal
Johnnie Powell, owner of the Cotton Gin Restaurant in Liberty, is having a historical marker for Herbert Lee placed on her property.



Posted: Sunday, November 14, 2010 10:00 am | Updated: 1:58 pm, Sun Nov 14, 2010.

By Ernest Herndon, Enterprise-Journal | 1 comment

LIBERTY — At 11:30 a.m. Saturday, Nov. 27, the veil will come off a new state historical marker commemorating a 1961 civil rights-era slaying at an old cotton gin. The marker outside what is now the Cotton Gin Restaurant will cite the death of voting rights activist Herbert Lee.

"Herbert Lee, a 42-year-old dairy farmer in the Amite County area, became a member of the NAACP in the early 1950s," the inscription will read. "In the fall of 1961, Lee began transporting voting rights activists within the Pike and Amite County area. On Sept. 25, 1961, Herbert Lee was shot and killed while at the local cotton gin."

The building, formerly known as the old Westbrook Gin, is located on Highway 584 in Liberty. It was built around 1909.

The idea for a state marker came up in September when the Mississippi Historic Preservation Professional Review Board nominated the gin to the National Register of Historic Places.

"When the gin went up for a national historical site, they asked what happened there," said owner Johnnie Powell. "That was history happened here when he was murdered. When they approved the gin for a historical site, one of the members said we should do something for Mr. Lee."

Mrs. Powell hasn't received approval yet on the national designation, but she got the go-ahead on the state marker. There were no funds available from the state, however, so she paid \$1,790 for the sign herself.

Scheduled at the dedication ceremony is a welcome from Mayor Ricky Stratton and words from a chamber of commerce official, local historian James Allen Causey, Amite County Chancery Clerk Ronny Taylor, children of Mr. Lee, and Mary Williams, who was working in a nearby cafe on the day of the shooting.

Mr. Lee is survived by a wife, Prince, and eight children, Wilma Lee, Irma Jean, Shirley, Ruby, Roy, Ray, Frank and Herbert Jr. All are expected to attend.

The marker will go on the southwest corner of the restaurant property. "He was murdered outside by the road," Mrs. Powell said.

Mr. Lee was reportedly shot dead by the late E.H. Hurst, a member of the Mississippi Legislature. Hurst claimed self-defense and was not prosecuted.

Hurst is not mentioned on the marker.

"You can't do anything about what happened," Mrs. Powell said. "Look where we are now. You have to forgive."

Mrs. Powell, 71, acknowledged the irony that a cotton gin where a civil rights-era killing took place is now a popular restaurant owned by an African-American family and frequented by whites and blacks.

"I remember the time when black people couldn't walk the street in the daytime in Liberty. Now I own a business," she said.

She recalls when black people couldn't enter a restaurant. Now she owns one. When they couldn't buy a Coca-Cola. Now she sells them. When they couldn't use a public rest room. Now her rest rooms and restaurant are open to people of any race.

Mrs. Powell said she doesn't want to ruffle feathers with the marker, just recognize what occurred.

"That was a terrible day," she said. "But look at us now."

The Powell family bought the property — which housed Avesco oilfield equipment manufacturer for a short time in the early 1980s — in the mid-1980s.

During the Amite County Bicentennial in spring 2009, the gin hosted a civil rights memorial program attended by 150 people, black and white, including members of Herbert Lee's family.

The Powells converted the old gin into a restaurant a year ago. It specializes in down-home Southern cooking, from ribs to catfish. Family members working there include children Tyrone, Lloyd and wife Julia and their children Lisa and Marie, Emanuel Jr., Ricky, and Joye and husband Allen Causey.

"The main idea of turning it into a restaurant was (son) Ricky's idea," said Mrs. Powell, who's planning a bed and breakfast next door. "We had it in our hands. It was sitting here doing nothing. So take it and do something with it. ... It provides a job for all my family. All my children work here."