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This IS the American Story

By Nibs Stroupe

The stunning events of mid-May remind us that the maintenance of white supremacy IS the American story. With the SCOTUS 6-3 decision in *Louisiana v. Callais* to further eviscerate the Voting Rights Act, most of the Southern states wasted no time in seeking to redistrict so that Black people would be deprived of their votes. It was as if they were all lining up to get a date with a hunky matinee idol. Then the Virginia Supreme Court overturned Virginia's voter referendum by a 4-3 vote to redistrict their state, and the white supremacists are cheering it on.

Though I am hoping this is not true, it is likely that this is the culminating point of a long effort to suppress the votes of Black and Brown people. When the federal troops pulled out of the South in 1877 in the "Great Compromise," it pointed to a long slide back into neo-slavery. The Mississippi Plan of 1890 led the way for all Southern states to strip Black people of their voting rights. In 1896, SCOTUS decided 8-1 in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that "separate but equal" was the law of the land, thus codifying neo-slavery for almost 70 years. It is interesting to note that both the *Plessy* decision of 1896 and the *Callais* decision of 2026 came out of the state of Louisiana.

Neo-slavery (not "Jim Crow," as it is often called — a misnomer that seeks to soften the blow of reinstating slavery as much as possible) ruled as a central part of the American story until the Voting Rights Act (VRA) was passed in 1965. John Roberts came into the Reagan Administration in 1980 as a lawyer determined to dismantle the Voting Rights Act, so that white supremacy could be clearly re-established. He led the SCOTUS decision in 2013 in *Shelby v. Holder*, which was the first major blow to the VRA. It dismantled the provision of the VRA that required that all election-related changes in the Southern states had to be pre-approved by the Justice Department. In the current Trumpster Department of Injustice, this might not have mattered, but for almost 50 years, it forced Southern white legislatures to seek some bit of equity as they sought to revive and continue the power of neo-slavery.

Now the floodgates are open for re-establishing neo-slavery, and though it is hard to imagine that being done, we only have to skim the surface of American history to realize that this pattern of establishing and protecting white supremacy IS the American story. In the Constitution, Black people and Indigenous people are deemed "three-fifths" of a person, so this American story is deep and long and wide. Women had no right to vote in the Constitution, and it took over 70 years of labor and protest and marching to get that right in the Constitution in the 19th Amendment. It is hard not to be discouraged in this kind of atmosphere, but we must start where we are — THIS IS THE AMERICAN STORY. The desire to establish white, male supremacy is at the heart of American history, and whether we have the 19th Amendment or the Voting Rights Act, all of the efforts to move us to codify our ideals of



2017 Charlottesville | Andrew Caballero-Reynolds | AFP/Getty

equality and justice and equity fly in the face of this American reality — we want, we believe that white men should be in charge of things.

In these discouraging days, we must remember witnesses like Ida B. Wells, who was born into slavery in Mississippi and who lived most of her life under the power of neo-slavery. She refused to accept the definition of herself as unequal because of her racial

Neo-slavery (not "Jim Crow," as it is often called — a misnomer that seeks to soften the blow of reinstating slavery as much as possible) ruled as a central part of the American story until the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965.

classification, and she refused to stand down and defer to men of any racial classification because she was a woman. If you want to know more about her and her relevance, read the book that Dr. Catherine Meeks and I wrote about Wells, *Passionate for Justice: Ida B. Wells as Prophet For Our Time*. In the midst of raging racism and sexism, she was fierce, fearless, ferocious and formidable. No, we are not Ida B. Wells, but her witness for such a time as this calls on us to find our place in this small but great parade of witnesses who stood for justice, equality and equity. Let us join in that company now — there is no time to waste. †

Nibs Stroupe is a longtime friend of the Open Door, retired pastor and author of Deeper Waters: Sermons for a New Vision and She Made a Way: Mother and Me in a Deep South World. He and Catherine Meeks are authors of Passionate for Justice, a book about the life and witness of Ida B. Wells for our time. He is managing editor of Hospitality. He writes a weekly blog at www.nibsnotes.blogspot.com. (nibs.stroupe@gmail.com)

A Manna House Response to the Intended Destruction of Black Power in Memphis

By Pete Gathje

The Republican-controlled Tennessee State Legislature and our Governor, Bill Lee, have created new congressional election districts that take direct aim at the political power of Black voters in Memphis. What does this mean for the people who come to Manna House?

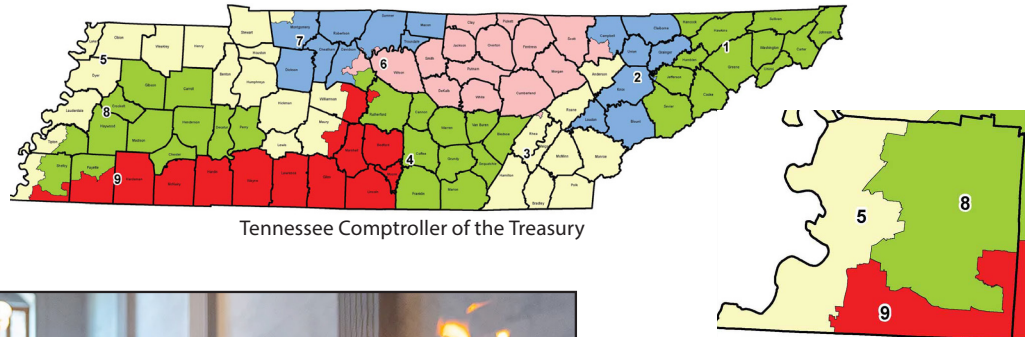
Those who come as guests are either on the streets or in a poverty that barely keeps them off the streets. They are all housing insecure. They are hungry. They face significant health challenges, both physical and mental. A significant number are LGBTQ persons. They deal with a public transportation system that is not dependable for getting to work on time or even reaching places of work from where they live. Reflecting the demographics of Memphis, most are African American.

Since Trump's "Big Beautiful Bill" passed last summer as part of his war on the poor, I have seen a steady rise in the number of people who come to Manna House. With costs for food and other basic goods escalating thanks to Trump's war on Iran, I am certain this rise is going to continue.

The newly drawn district maps make it unlikely that the next elected congresspeople from the now three districts encompassing Memphis (instead of one) will devote a great deal of time and energy advocating for the city at the federal level. This will have negative consequences for housing, health care and other basic infrastructure in the city.

The redistricting calls to mind a passage from the prophet Isaiah:

Doom to you who legislate evil,
who make laws that make
victims —



Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury



Martin Cherry | Nashville Banner

Above: *The gerrymandered Congressional District map adopted on May 7, 2026 at the Legislature's Special Session which divided Shelby County and Memphis into three districts.*

Left: *Tennessee Representative Justin Jones reacts to the House vote.*

Jesus, in the spirit of Isaiah, was clear about the criteria for the judgment of the nations. "Whatever you do unto the least of these you do unto me." And he said that those who did injustice unto the least of these "will go away to eternal punishment." (Matthew 25:31-46)

There is no doubt that this redistricting will harm people in Memphis who are poor and on the streets. There is no doubt that it was

done to support Trump's political agenda, which is racist and anti-poor. There is no doubt that the God of the prophets and of Jesus is angry. There is also no doubt that those of us who seek to be faithful to that God must work to overturn the Trumpian agenda. The work of hospitality at Manna House is grounded in solidarity with people on the streets and people in poverty. Out of this work of hospitality comes the clear conviction that the injustice of redistricting must be resisted. ✠

Peter Gathje is Professor of Religion at LeMoyne-Owen College and a founder of Manna House, a place of hospitality in Memphis. He wrote Sharing the Bread of Life: Hospitality and Resistance at the Open Door Community (2006) and edited A Work of Hospitality: The Open Door Reader 1982–2002. (peter_gathje@loc.edu)

Laws that make misery for the poor,
that rob my destitute people
of dignity,
Exploiting defenseless widows,
taking advantage of homeless
children.

What will you have to say on
Judgment Day,
when Doomsday arrives
out of the blue?

Who will you get to help you?
What good will your money
do you?

A sorry sight you'll be then,
huddled with the prisoners,
or just some corpses stacked in
the street.

Even after all this, God is still angry,
his fist still raised, ready to hit
them again. (Isaiah 10:1-6 MSG)

For 90 Minutes, I Watched an Execution Go Horribly Awry

By Maria DeLiberato

Last month, I walked into Riverbend Maximum Security Institution to watch the State of Tennessee kill my client, Tony Carruthers. Nothing prepared me to witness the agony that Mr. Carruthers experienced in the execution chamber. Not the nearly 20 years I had spent as a capital defense lawyer. Not the thousands of hours building cases to keep people alive. Not even having stood in a Florida witness room just five months earlier, watching the state kill another one of my clients, Frank Walls, even though he had an intellectual disability.

I first met Mr. Carruthers in March, nearly 30 years to the day since he was convicted and sentenced to death for the kidnapping and murder of three people in Memphis. He arrived at our first meeting

From the moment I reviewed his case, I recognized the hallmarks of a wrongful conviction: the absence of physical evidence connecting Mr. Carruthers to the crime, forensic evidence that had never been linked to anyone, and testimony from a jailhouse snitch who later recanted. I was also shocked to learn that Mr. Carruthers was forced to represent himself at trial after several lawyers asked to be removed from his case, claiming that he was too difficult to work with.

With just two months until Mr. Carruthers's execution date, we went to court to demand that the state test fingerprints and DNA from the crime scene that do not match Mr. Carruthers's or the victims'. Despite the signs that Tennessee was preparing to execute a wrongfully convicted man, our efforts were unsuccessful. The state fought us at every turn. When the



Tony Von Carruthers

ACLU

morning. I knew that if every legal avenue failed, I could still give this to my client. I could remain with him until the end.

I arrived at the prison with full knowledge of Tennessee's history of procedural failures in its execution chamber. An independent investigation commissioned by Tennessee's governor found that, between 2018 and 2022, the state repeatedly failed to follow its own protocols while carrying out executions.

The state faced renewed scrutiny last year when prisoners filed a lawsuit challenging its lethal injection protocol. A few months later, the state executed a prisoner without deactivating his heart device, which medical experts warned could cause the device to repeatedly shock him during the lethal injection. Witnesses reported that the prisoner groaned and said, "It's hurting so bad" during the execution.

Corrections officers met me in the prison's lobby and walked me to Mr. Carruthers's cell. Mr. Carruthers was seated on his bunk in his prayer shawl. On the count of three, guards lifted him onto a gurney while his cuffed hands remained in prayer. Then the guards wheeled Mr. Carruthers into the execution chamber.

Inside, I started furiously taking notes. Tennessee bars journalists from witnessing



Calvin Kimbrough

On May 18, faith leaders, civil rights advocates and community members marched to the State Capitol to urge Governor Bill Lee to grant Mr. Carruthers clemency or stay his execution to allow additional DNA testing, delivering a petition with over 130,000 signatures. Governor Lee announced on May 19 that he had no plans to intervene and stop the execution.

carrying a stack of legal papers. He shook my hand and immediately started talking about his case. He wasn't wearing shackles, and the guards permitted him to walk back and forth to his cell to grab more paperwork. The guards treated him with respect, and he showed them the same. Mr. Carruthers was genuine. I believed him. We got to work.

morning of the execution arrived, my work changed entirely. I became a witness. My responsibility was to remain present while the state killed my client, and to refuse the comfort of looking away.

My job, as the anti-death-penalty activist Sister Helen Prejean once told me, was to be a face of love in the room. I carried her words with me into the prison that

the intravenous line insertion process, the first major step of the lethal injection protocol. I noted the time we entered the chamber. After about seven minutes of searching for a vein, they were able to insert an IV into his right arm. Then, following protocol, they also tried to set an IV in his left arm. That failed, so they moved on to his left hand, poking him over and over again. Cycling through needles, the executioners communicated mostly through tense glances and head shakes. The used needles were dropped one by one into a small plastic receptacle.

Clink. Clink. Clink.

About 30 minutes in, a doctor entered and began directing increasingly desperate efforts to tap into Mr. Carruthers's veins. He told the executioners to remove Mr. Carruthers's socks and search for veins in his feet. They stuck at least one needle into his foot. He winced, clearly in pain. After that didn't work, the doctor asked whether anyone in the room knew how to gain access to Mr. Carruthers's jugular vein.

Then the doctor decided to attempt to establish a central line. This is an invasive procedure that requires puncturing the neck, chest or groin. I immediately objected to the warden. The doctor admitted in a deposition last year that he hadn't performed one in over a decade and didn't have privileges to perform one in any hospital in the country. My objection changed nothing. That moment revealed something deeply unsettling about the machinery of executions in America. The states that still execute people insist that executions are controlled, humane and medically precise. Yet a significant number of executions have gone awry in the past decade, causing agony for prisoners across the country.

When I saw the process unraveling with my own eyes, it became clear that the overriding imperative was not competence or even the appearance of professionalism. It was completion. The executioners draped Mr. Carruthers in a blue surgical cloth with a hole for his face. The doctor gave him a shot of lidocaine in his chest and told him it would feel like a bee sting. Before the doctor did that, he asked

whether "the patient" was allergic to the drug. He referred to Mr. Carruthers as the patient, as though this room existed to heal.

Lethal injection relies on clinical and carefully sanitized language, intended to create emotional distance. The state cloaks killing in the vocabulary of medicine because acknowledging the reality plainly would force us to confront what executions truly are: acts of deliberate violence carried out in the name of justice.



Calvin Kimbrough

his body for another access point. The room no longer resembled anything clinical or controlled. I could see blood coming out of the puncture wounds. Mr. Carruthers moaned while the executioners moved frantically around him. The state's constructed illusion of precision had collapsed, revealing something far more chaotic and brutal.

Then the phone in the execution chamber rang. The warden answered, listened, then hung up and said we weren't doing this. I almost collapsed right there. Mr. Carruthers was pale, trembling and drenched in sweat.

About 90 minutes after the execution attempt began, I walked out into the sunlight and spoke to reporters, who had been kept in the dark about what Tennessee had done. This is when I learned that Gov. Bill Lee had just postponed Mr. Carruthers's execution for at least a year. I called his sister to deliver the news, and she wailed with relief.

When I went back to see Mr. Carruthers, he was exhausted and shaken. He could barely keep his balance. He said of the doctor, "He was hurting me and he knew he was hurting me." All of the words I could use to describe what I saw and what the State of Tennessee did and failed to do pale in comparison with that simple observation. The state works hard to wrap

An independent investigation commissioned by Tennessee's governor found that, between 2018 and 2022, the state repeatedly failed to follow its own protocols while carrying out executions.

When the doctor prodded Mr. Carruthers's chest with a scalpel or large needle, Mr. Carruthers cried out in pain. But the doctor continued to push into his chest. Mr. Carruthers started groaning. I told him that his legal team was calling the courts and the governor. I told him that I was sorry. Mostly, I tried to hold his gaze and reassure him that we were still fighting for him.

Eventually, the doctor said he was not able to set a central line. Mr. Carruthers was in agony. By then, an hour had passed. Still, the execution team continued probing

executions in clinical language, but inside that room, there was no escaping the reality of what was happening. ♦

Maria DeLiberato is senior counsel at the A.C.L.U.'s Capital Punishment Project and a legal consultant for Floridians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty. She has been a capital defense attorney for nearly 20 years. This article first appeared as an op-ed piece in the New York Times on June 1, 2026, and it is reprinted here with her permission.

In God's Family Everyone Is Documented

By Catherine Meeks

I imagine that many who will read this piece share my sentiment about the present state of affairs regarding the treatment of Latinos at this moment in the United States. All thoughtful and caring people would like to see this country develop a humane immigration policy that reflects a deep sense of appreciation for the challenges that folks face who leave their homelands to come to the United States as immigrants. But before we do anything we need to acknowledge the United States' complicity in destabilizing the region.

The United States has contributed to the destabilizing of Central America for decades, but this is not a fact that we care to remember most of the time when talking about our Latino immigration challenges. One example that helps us to understand the larger picture occurred in Guatemala in 1954 when the CIA helped to organize a coup to overthrow their democratically elected government. This act of destabilization retarded democracy and development for years and led to civil war. In the 1980s, the Guatemalan military received support from the United States that aided them in carrying out major violence against their people. It has been estimated that more than 200,000, mostly indigenous people were killed.

Another example of the impact of United States interference occurred in 2017 in Honduras when the Organization of American States cited irregularities in polling places as a reason to carry out a new election and then went on to accept the reelection of the incumbent President Juan Orlando Hernandez as the winner. Protests broke out, and the state responded with violence against the protestors that continues to the present time.

In addition to political corruption, the climate has not been kind to the region either, and major droughts have had a negative impact on agriculture. This combined with additional expressions of government exploitation, as farmlands were confiscated and farmers were driven off their lands or murdered. As the people watched their countries become increasingly unable to support a decent lifestyle, they sought

alternatives away from their homelands.

Immigration to the United States became a way to try to create a better life for their families. It is important to note that those who have come to the United States have been a great resource for the U.S. For instance, according to the Institute for Taxation and Economic Policy report,



The New American Gothic | Criselda Vásquez

which reflects data collected in 2022, those who were working here as undocumented workers paid \$96.7 billion in federal, state and local taxes. This money went to support payroll taxes, Social Security, Medicare and unemployment insurance, which did not benefit them in any way.

Stephen Miller, Project 2025 and the Trump Regime need to cease telling the lie about how much the immigrants are costing the United States. Their contribution in taxes alone is astounding. In addition to that, they provide a much-needed remedy to the labor shortage in this country in terms of the jobs that they are willing to do, jobs that are not being filled by others.

The current assault on Latinos has everything to do with the fear that the white male ruling class has about being displaced. There are too many Black and Brown people in the United States for their comfort. Their fear has led us to where we are today. They are worried about the power shift that will be possible if minority groups learn to work as collaborators

instead of competitors.

The violent assault upon Latinos is an atrocity, and we must not allow ourselves to be silent about it or to turn our eyes away from it. We have to resist. We know that in God's family the undocumented are worthy and beloved human beings, and we have to be unrelenting in standing against whatever threatens that notion in our everyday lives.

My Turquoise and Lavender Institute Inc. is hosting a GoFundMe to help support Latino families who have lost their primary breadwinner through ICE deportation. Thus far we have raised and distributed over \$11,000 and we are continuing to seek funds for that purpose. Many families have been left with no one who has a job, and they face homelessness and hunger. Some of them are self-deporting because they cannot stay here without any resources. The link is included here to be shared with all who might wish to assist some of these families. (<https://www.gofundme.com/f/support-latino-families-who-are-impacted-by-deportation>)

But in addition to helping the current victims, we must insist on the humane treatment of all who live within our borders, and we must be vigilant in seeking a more humane immigration policy. And we need to explore all of the ways that the United States can support the regeneration of the region by ceasing to interfere with their political and economic operations as they find new paths for themselves. Latinos are in God's family, a family where there are no undocumented people. †

Catherine Meeks was the recipient of the Joseph R. Biden Lifetime Achievement and Service Award in 2022. She is the Founder and Executive Director of the Turquoise and Lavender Institute for Transformation and Healing. She has published eight books, including her latest, The Quilted Life: Reflections of a Sharecropper's Daughter, in 2024. She and Nibs Stroupe are authors of Passionate for Justice (2019), a book about the life and witness of Ida B. Wells for our time. She is involved with prison work, visits on death row and works for the abolition of the death penalty. (cmeeks@turquoiseandlavender.com)

won't you celebrate with me

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

— Lucille Clifton

Lucille Clifton was an American poet, writer and educator. She was born in Buffalo, New York, in 1936, and moved to Baltimore in 1967. She attended Howard University. From 1979 to 1985 she was Poet Laureate of Maryland. Clifton was a finalist twice for the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. She died in Baltimore in 2010.

It's Time to Right a Wrong

By John Cole Vodicka

It was 95 years ago, May 19, 1931, when a mob of several thousand people descended on the Elbert County, Georgia, jail intent on lynching John Downer, Jr., a Black man arrested earlier that day and charged with rape. A young white woman, Hazel Scott Craft, told law enforcement she'd been sexually assaulted by a Black man in a wooded area of Elberton while her assailant held a gun to her boyfriend's head, which should have raised doubts from the start; how could someone sexually assault Ms. Craft while holding a gun to her boyfriend's head? Sheriff's deputies apprehended several Black men and brought Downer to Ms. Scott Craft's home where she said she recognized him by his color, size and "thick lips."

At the jail, Sheriff S.C. Seymour wired for help from the Georgia National Guard to keep the growing rabble of vengeful citizens at bay. Shots were fired into the jail, and an effort was made to break into Downer's cell. Two members of the mob were wounded in the crossfire. An attempt to dynamite the jail was thwarted. Thanks to the presence of soldiers and pleas from the sheriff and a local preacher, Henry Tate

Brookshire, the mob backed off, giving the sheriff enough time to secret Downer and one other prisoner out of the jail, first to Athens and then Atlanta for safekeeping.

While the mob dispersed that night, it never really went away. To quench the mob's thirst, Superior Court Judge B.T. Mosely immediately convened an all-white, all-male grand jury who indicted Downer the very next day. One week after that, on May 26, the trial was held. Members of the mob were present inside and outside the courtroom; Georgia guardsmen stood watch throughout the proceedings. Hazel Scott Craft testified that Downer raped her. Defense witnesses swore that Downer was at home during the time of the alleged crime. Downer himself maintained his

the first trial should not have happened in Elberton, given the highly charged atmosphere there, and that Downer had inadequate legal representation. A federal appeals court rightfully threw out the Elberton verdict and death sentence and ordered a change of venue.

A second trial was held in Lexington in Oglethorpe County (25 miles from Elberton) the first week of April 1933. Judge Mosely again presided. White supremacists from Elberton were on the scene to observe and intimidate. Hazel Scott Craft repeated her claim that it was Downer who raped her. Downer, who maintained his innocence from the moment he was arrested in May 1931, also testified. "So far as this crime, I don't know anything about it, gentlemen,

Governor Eugene Talmadge denied clemency and on March 16, 1934, John Downer, Jr. was put to death in the electric chair at the state penitentiary in Milledgeville.

innocence. The trial lasted one day, with the jury deliberating less than ten minutes before returning a guilty verdict and a death sentence.

The lawyers who volunteered to represent Downer on appeal were successful in gaining a new trial after arguing that

that is the truth. I am innocent of that crime." (Some locals believed Downer. Many thought, including members of the Georgia National Guard, that Ms. Scott Craft made up the story of the rape because she was desperate to cover up the bleeding from intercourse with her boyfriend. "Well,

personally and frankly,” stated a captain in the Guard, “I think the boy with her screwed her.”) No matter. Like their counterparts in Elberton, the all-white, male jury of Lexington citizens found Downer guilty a second time and recommended no mercy. Judge Mosely sentenced the 27-year-old Downer to be executed at the end of that month, on April 28.

Appeals were filed to overturn the inevitable but proved unsuccessful. Governor Eugene Talmadge denied clemency and on March 16, 1934, John Downer, Jr. was put to death in the electric chair at the state penitentiary in Milledgeville. He maintained his innocence until the very end. He’s buried in a pauper’s grave in the Red Hill prison cemetery at the now abandoned state prison.

Ninety-five years later, the Jim-Ree African American Museum in Elberton is working to correct the injustice done to John Downer, Jr. Museum founders Aurolyn and Jimmy White, together with supporters and several of Downer’s descendants, are partnering with Northeastern University’s Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project (CRRJ) to seek a posthumous pardon. CRRJ was founded by

Northeastern law professor Margaret Burnham, whose recent book, *By Hands Now Known: Jim Crow’s Legal Executioners*, examines dozens of the thousands of cases of racial violence during the Jim Crow era. Burnham says CRRJ investigates “harms resulting in the massive breakdown in law enforcement in the South from 1930 to 1970.” She explains that the project researches anti-civil rights violence to uncover the historical context of these crimes, so that amends can be made and healing and reconciliation can begin. John Downer Jr.’s case is one of them.

Locally, the Whites and museum allies like myself are now busy locating courthouse records, transcripts and newspaper articles; genealogically tracking descendants of people involved with the Downer case in Elbert and Oglethorpe counties; reaching out to Downer’s kinfolk to assist in petitioning for the posthumous pardon and examining the neo-slavery legal

system that existed in northeast Georgia in the 1930s. “John Downer was wrongfully arrested, unfairly tried two times, maliciously sentenced to death and executed without even a modicum of due process involved,” maintains Aurolyn White. “His death was really a legal lynching, and like Professor Burnham says, we’re at work in Elbert County on a ‘restorative reckoning.’”

Aurolyn and Jimmy White



Jim-Ree Museum

Photographs courtesy of the Jim-Ree Museum

Elbert Parr Tuttle was in the 1960s the highest-ranking federal judge in the Deep South. He served as the chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals in the Fifth Circuit. Today, the Federal Court of Appeals building in Atlanta bears his name. But in 1931, he was a young Atlanta lawyer and a captain in the Georgia National Guard. Tuttle had been dispatched to Elberton on the night of the mob’s attempt to lynch John Downer, Jr. He later recruited and assisted the volunteer lawyers who represented Downer in the effort to keep him out of the electric chair. Tuttle had witnessed up-close the racism and rage of the mob in Elberton and experienced neo-slavery’s legal system as it acquiesced to that racism and rage. Tuttle wondered what was worse — lynching by a lawless mob, or permitting passion and violence to operate through the machinery of the law? Recalling those years where he helped in the attempt to

save John Downer, Jr.’s life, Judge Tuttle often remarked, some say with bitterness, “A Black man had no rights which a white man was bound to respect.”

There have been just four posthumous pardons granted by the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles in its 82-year history. Missionaries Samuel Austin Worcester and Elihu Butler were pardoned in 1992. The men were imprisoned for four years after their 1831 conviction for protesting the removal of Cherokees from North Georgia. Leo Frank was pardoned in 1986. He was the manager of an Atlanta pencil factory convicted in 1913 of murdering a 13-year-old employee. Two years later, after Frank’s death sentence was commuted by the governor to life in prison, he was lynched by a mob that stormed the state prison and kidnapped him. There is considerable evidence that Frank was innocent.

And in 2005, the Board granted a posthumous pardon to Lena Baker, 60 years after she’d been executed in Georgia’s electric chair. In 1944, Ms. Baker, who was Black, killed her abuser, a prominent white man, in self-defense in Cuthbert, Georgia. The trial in Randolph County lasted six hours with an all-white, male jury sending her to death row. She was executed March 5, 1945, at the Reidsville State Prison. The Americus-based Prison & Jail Project, which I led, along with Lena Baker’s great-nephew Roosevelt Curry, filed the successful pardon application.

Today, those of us in Boston, Massachusetts, and Elberton and Athens, Georgia, are engaged in an effort to bring about the day when the State of Georgia will fully atone for the legal lynching of John Downer, Jr. and pardon him posthumously. †

John and Dee Cole Vodicka and sons were Resident Volunteers at the Open Door Community in 1985-86 and 1992-93. John founded and, for 15 years, directed the Prison & Jail Project in Americus, Georgia. Today he is an activist, writer and community organizer who lives in Athens, Georgia. (johnvodicka@gmail.com)

Welcome to Indian Country

Where is Indian Country?
It's everywhere we stand.
It's anywhere we dance.
It's where the earth loves
the feel of our feet.

Welcome to Indian Country.

What does that mean?
It means this is where
we lift our voice in song
and make a joyful drumbeat
so our hearts can sing along.

Welcome to Indian Country.

This beloved country here,
where we honor our ancestors
by growing stronger every year,
by making laughter the answer
that wipes away our tears.

Welcome to Indian Country.

What does the future hold?
In uncertain times like these
we reach for words like hope
and things we can be sure of —
sunrises, beauty, and love.

Welcome to Indian Country.
It's everywhere we dance and
where the feast is truly grand.
Welcome to Indian Country.
Now give us back our land!

— Rena Priest

Rena Priest is a poet and a member of the Lhaq'temish (Lummi) Nation. She was born in the Pacific Northwest and does not share her birthdate. She has an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College, and lives in Washington state. She was the 2021 Washington State Poet Laureate 2021-2023. Her literary debut, *Patriarchy Blues*, was honored with a 2018 American Book Award.

Death, O Death

A Review of Wade Crumbley's *Though the Heavens Fall*

By Nibs Stroupe

In one of the many powerful scenes in the movie “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” Ralph Stanley sings the Appalachian dirge “Death, O Death,” a traditional religious song attributed to Baptist preacher Lloyd Chandler. Stanley sings the song while young Tommy, an African American blues guitarist is bound and being led to a fiery death by the KKK. Tommy is rescued by his Odysseus-like white friends, and the Klan misses this time. It is a stunning scene with hordes of Klansmen pushing Tommy towards a fiery cross, with “Death, O Death” ringing out in the background.

I thought of this song and this theme as I read through Wade Crumbley's moving book, *Though the Heavens Fall*, about working to free a Black man, Jerry Banks, who was wrongly convicted of murdering a white couple and sentenced to death by the state of Georgia in 1975. It was published earlier this year. The power of death

Though the Heavens Fall

by **Wade Crumbley**

BookLogix Press
288 pages
February, 2026

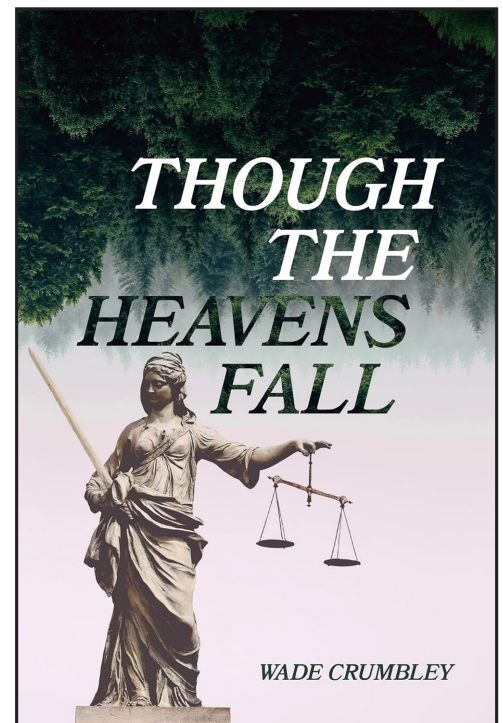
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— especially the unjust death meted out to Black people by a society soaked in white supremacy — hovers and flows through this book. However, this book chronicles the power of life searching for itself and affirming itself through the efforts of three white attorneys in Henry County, Georgia, who sought to get a new trial for Jerry Banks. Prior to that, Banks had been tried twice and convicted both times.



Wade Crumbley is one of those three attorneys; A.J. “Buddy” Welch and Steve Harrison are the other two. Welch and Harrison both have passed, and I am grateful to Wade Crumbley for giving us this narration of the saga of the death penalty, especially in the South, where it is used as a weapon of terror against Black people. It is focused on the powerful and tragic story of Jerry Banks and his being crushed by the system of white supremacy, while at the same time giving us the story of a few people working to restore some sense of justice. In simple and strong terms, it exposes to us the demonic power of the death penalty, while narrating the story of working to get Jerry Banks exonerated.

The story begins when the first Africans were brought in chains to the shores of what became the United States, but this particular story begins on November 7, 1974, when the bodies of Marvin King and Melanie Hartsfield were found in the woods in Henry County after they had been brutally shot and murdered. Jerry Banks was hunting in those same woods on that day and came upon the bodies. He ran out of the woods and flagged down a passing motorist, seeking to get help and to get them to call the sheriff; this was long before the advent of ubiquitous cell phones. From there, the story is the same one repeated over and over again throughout the country, especially in the South. A month or so later, Banks is charged with the murder of these two people, even though he has no connection to them, even though his ancient (and taped together) hunting shotgun could not possibly have fired the shots that killed the victims, and even though there was no motive established whatsoever for Banks to kill them.

Wade Crumbley and his two allies come into the case after Banks has been convicted and sentenced to death, not once, but twice. The book is their discovery of the many holes in the case against Banks, of the suspicious activity of many of those in law enforcement, and of a legal system which presumes that all Black people are criminals — some of them just haven’t been caught yet. Wade’s brother Alex, who previously was a public defender and was now a Superior Court judge, persuades Wade to

take up the appeal of Banks’ conviction as the time for the death warrant nears. Alex had played a small part in the Banks case, and he always felt that there were some important things that were left out in the presentation at Banks’ two trials.

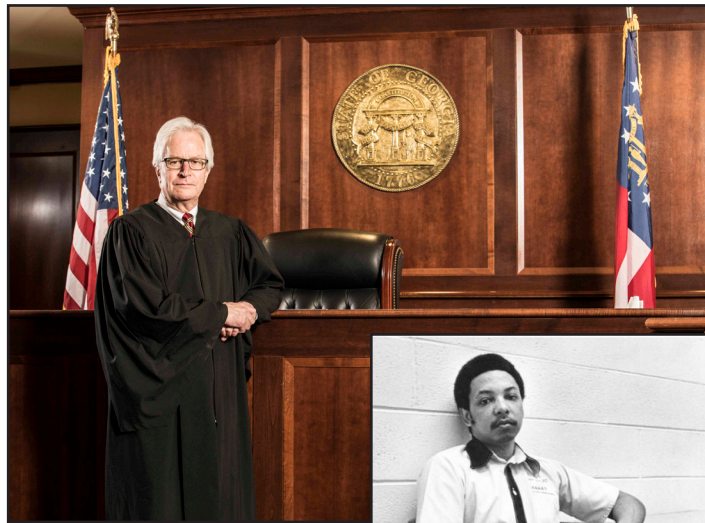
In 1978, Crumbley goes to death row in Jackson, Georgia, to meet Jerry Banks for the first time. Crumbley is 25 years old, and this is his first visit to a prison. As all of us who have visited in prisons know, the clanging of the cell block doors is a jarring experience, and Crumbley notes that also. When he comes into the room, Banks is

two trials. Indeed, in Jerry’s first appeal to the United States Supreme Court, they find that the attorney’s appeal is a poem to the court. They find inconsistencies in the evidence and downright underhandedness in the legal system. They build a case for the record to go to the Georgia Supreme Court, and in the process they go back before State Judge Hugh Sosebee to seek a new trial. At the pre-trial hearing to determine if there will be a third trial, Murphy Davis brings a set of clothes for Jerry to wear in court instead of his prison garb. While still in the hall, Crumbley gets the clothes from Murphy and describes what happens next: “I asked: ‘Jerry, would you like to wear this in court?’ Judge Sosebee answered in a loud voice before Jerry could speak, ‘No! He is a convicted felon and has no right to wear anything other than his prison clothes in this court!’” (p 110).

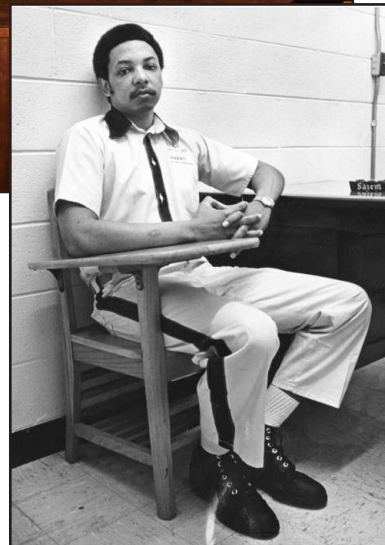
Through hard work and the support of many people (including *The New York Times* columnist Tom Wicker, whom Murphy recruited), Crumbley and his team discover and develop evidence that not only could Jerry not have committed the murders, but that several law enforcement officers mishandled and perhaps cheated on the evidence. They took this evidence to the Georgia Supreme Court, and by a 6-1 vote, the Court ordered a new trial. Byrom Smith was now the district attorney for Henry County, and he indicated that he would seek a third trial and would seek

the death penalty again. The team decides to take the evidence of the mishandling of evidence directly to Smith, and they receive stunning news. Here is Crumbley’s description of it: “On December 22, 1980, I got a call from Buddy [Welch]. ... ‘I just got a call from Byrom Smith. You won’t believe it. He has decided to dismiss Jerry’s case!’” (p 193) Later that day, Jerry Banks walked out of prison as a free man after six years in prison under death sentence for a crime that he did not commit.

Ed Loring recently described to me the great celebration that Jerry’s family and church community had upon his release. Ed



Above: *Judge Wade Crumbley, Superior Court Judge, Flint Circuit, Georgia.*



Right: *Jerry Banks, April 9, 1980, Jackson State Prison*

Lanna Swindler / AJC

sitting with Reverend Murphy Davis, who, along with her husband Ed Loring, had befriended Banks on death row. She says to Crumbley, “I can’t tell you how grateful I am that you have agreed to help Jerry. It’s bad enough that the State wants to kill the people on death row who are guilty. Jerry is not even guilty.” Crumbley notes that he felt as though he had encountered an angel at the gates of hell. (pp 36-37)

Crumbley and his fellow attorneys begin to work to get Banks a third trial, and as they do their work, they discover that he had an inexperienced and probably incompetent attorney representing him in his first

remembered preaching a sermon at Clifton Presbyterian Church for one of the celebrations — he and Murphy were pastors there. He noted that even after he finished the sermon, the congregation would not let it go; many moans and groans and “Thank You, Jesus” followed the sermon. The congregation did not want to let this opportunity pass without a visceral celebration of what a powerful (and surprising) miracle it was to have Jerry released from prison and from the death sentence.

Crumbley, though he was a “good old boy” in Henry County, became mighty unpopular at that time. Indeed, the KKK decided that they would have a public meeting on October 23, 1981 in Henry County to burn Crumbley and partner Steve Harrison in effigy. They also promised to come out to shoot up and perhaps burn Crumbley’s house. He looked for friends to sit with him overnight to protect his family and his house, and Ed Loring was one of those who volunteered. Because of Ed’s commitment to non-violence, Crumbley declined Ed’s offer with this reflection: “Ed was a courageous Christian soldier, but I did not think he would be much help if things turned violent, and violence was the only thing that concerned me.” (p 240)

Another friend sat with Crumbley overnight, and though they were armed to defend his home, only one car came out for a brief time but left without incident. Crumbley did learn later that he and Steve Harrison were burned in effigy by the KKK, and as Ed Loring told me recently, “Wade said that perhaps the greatest honor of his life was to be burned in effigy by the Klan.”

Death, O Death. I wish that the story ended there, but death had its firm grip on Henry County and on Jerry Banks. When he got out of prison, Jerry found out that his wife, Virginia, had started dating another man because she had thought that Jerry would be executed. The power of death had her by her imagination, and it was a crushing blow. White supremacy and death hovered over Jerry and his family. His wife filed for divorce, and a few days before the hearing on the divorce, Jerry shot his wife and then killed himself. Virginia died some days later from her wounds, and Death, O Death continued its power. It is a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions, and we should not be blind to the realities behind this tragedy.

The recent SCOTUS ruling that eviscerated the Voting Rights Act is a reminder of the continuing power of the death dealt

out by white supremacy. This is a fine book, and though space prevents me from sharing more details, go get this book now and read it and absorb its lessons. Though it is from a case over 40 years old, its lessons ring out loudly for us now. As we know from the Army of the Patriarchy, there are Black and Brown men and women being rounded up and harassed and jailed, and some are being deported. Though we may not be as skilled as Wade Crumbley or as courageous as Murphy Davis and Ed Loring, it is now our time to stand up and resist in whatever way we can. The Jerry and Virginia Bankses of this world depend on our responses. ✦

Nibs Stroupe is a longtime friend of the Open Door, retired pastor and author of Deeper Waters: Sermons for a New Vision and She Made a Way: Mother and Me in a Deep South World. He and Catherine Meeks are authors of Passionate for Justice, a book about the life and witness of Ida B. Wells for our time. He is managing editor of Hospitality. He writes a weekly blog at www.nibsnotes.blogspot.com. (nibs.stroupe@gmail.com)

HOSPITALITY

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HOSPITALITY

Volume 1, No. 1 January, 1982

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What Is The “OPEN DOOR”?

This is the first edition of The Open Door's newsletter and needless to say, we are excited about it! Hopefully you will hear from us 5 or 6 times a year with news about our ministry, our common life and the needs of our sisters and brothers on the streets and in the prisons. We value such a newsletter as a very important way to keep in touch with you, our co-workers and supporters—the folks who make our work possible.

Although many of you know something about us and about our commitments and our work, we decided to include a word about ourselves as a way of introduction. The Open Door is a Christian covenant community of 3 partners, a children and a street friend who is a part of our covenant family. We covenant partners—Ed Loring, Nibs Stroupe, and Catherine Meeks—were, at one time, all members of Clifton Presbyterian Church. Ed and Nibs were there for 6 years, during which time Ed served as pastor. Catherine and Nibs joined the congregation in 1978 and Nibs served as a ruling elder for 4 years. Out of a common consensus for mission at Clifton, we four began to intensify our Bible study and prayer in the Fall of 1978. During these times we discovered that God was calling us to serve the poor and to live our lives based on the Scriptures.

From November '79 until Easter of '81 we provided the leadership to begin and sustain Clifton's Night Hospitality Ministry. This ministry used donations and volunteers to provide transportation, shelter, food, clothes, showers and hospitality to approximately 30 homeless ones every night for almost 2 years. (With our leaving, the Clifton congregation took over the leadership and continues the night hospitality to work there.)

As the work with our homeless friends grew, so did our commitment and work with prisoners. We all began to share more deeply in Nibs's and Ed's ongoing work with Southern Prison Ministry. As we opened our doors to share hospitality with friends who are walled out we have found it important to share that same hospitality with women and men who are walled inside the prisons and jails of our state. God's good grace calls us to visit, a simple act of compassion where we meet again and again Jesus Christ and learn of his suffering in a world filled with unrepentance.

HOSPITALITY

HOSPITALITY is published by the Open Door Community, Inc., Baltimore, Maryland. The Open Door is a Prophetic Discipleship Community honoring the Black Jesus, Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr. Manuscripts and letters are welcomed. Inclusive language editing is standard.

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HOSPITALITY *prays*

Prayer is the heart of a genuine Christian radicalism. — Ron Ferguson

A Prayer for Peace

O Lord Jesus, You are the “Prince of Peace!”¹

You bring us into a redemptive relationship with our Creator.
You call us to live in harmony with all humankind and all creation.
You show us life with wholeness and well-being...
fulfillment and soundness...
health and tranquility...
justice and security.

You offer peace to our lives that is different from what the world gives.²
Indeed, You portray an alternative vision for living that is radically different
from the wars, divisions and injustices that define our realities of the day.

As our brother, Martin, preached,
“... we have neither peace within nor peace without.
Everywhere, paralyzing fears harrow people by day and haunt them by night.”³

So, God of peace, we pray
that we may live with the *internal* “peace that surpasses all understanding;”⁴
that we may live in loving *relationships* that unite us in harmony;
that we may live in *beloved community*—free from war, terror, injustice and greed;
that as the prophet envisioned, “the wolf shall live with the lamb...”⁵

We know, O God, that such peace, such shalom,
will not come to pass simply because we desire personal comfort, but peace will come
because You gift us... with your presence, with Holy Spirit,
because You gift us... with the courage and faith to follow the Prince of Peace.

So come, Lord Jesus, and bring peace to our anxious, divided, war-torn world,
that our nations will lay down their weapons and end their warring ways;
that our governing bodies will seek lasting ways to end poverty, hunger and disease;
that our economies will work for the common good;
that we may join with You and boldly live out our vocation as peacemakers.

AMEN

— Lee Carroll

¹ Isaiah 9:6

² John 14:27

³ Sermon by Martin Luther King, Jr., Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Christmas 1967.

⁴ Philippians 4:7

⁵ Isaiah 11:6

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Ricardo Levins Morales