

Amy Guffey  
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Dr. Karen Cox  
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### **Praying for Sheetrock**

In the 1960s black leaders like Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. provided guidance to black communities throughout the United States, giving them hope and inspiration. Their ambitious desires to seek political justice and civil equality encouraged others, white and black, to join together and fight the war against inequality. Together, citizens throughout the nation, sparked one of the most historical movements in history—the Civil Rights Movement. Eventually the response to this course of action was successful and by the early 1970s most black people in the U.S. were liberated from oppression.

While most people's lives had significantly changed through the course of this historical event, the residents of McIntosh County, Georgia had been completely unaffected. Racial injustices were upheld by supremacist power structures, controlled by a one-man dictatorship. Though it seemed as if McIntosh County would stay this way forever, in 1972, after years of oppression, the “sleeping giant” awoke; angry and frustrated the black community desperately needed civil equality. As the black residents of McIntosh County began their own “civil rights movement” they turned to Thurnell Alston a “...uneducated, unemployed black man with a passion for justice,” who changed life in McIntosh County forever. Praying for Sheetrock traces McIntosh County's awakening to civil rights and follows Thurnell Alston through his rise to victory and fall from grace, reveling how the corruption and deceit bred into McIntosh County affected even those with the best intentions.

By the 1970s, most of the nation in response to the Civil Rights Movement had begun to establish a more equal form of government. Throughout the nation, strong political structure was developing, initiating a balance in power. For the residents of McIntosh County, political structure consisted of one man—Sheriff Thomas Poppell. Poppell had reigned over McIntosh County for over thirty years and to this day he is still remembered as one of “...the last old-time political bosses in Georgia” (p.6). From the late 1940s through the late 1970s under Poppell's authority, McIntosh County “...was a mini—Las Vegas, a mini—Atlantic City, a southern Hong Kong or Bangkok where white men came looking for, and found, women, gambling, liquor, drugs, guns, sanctuary from the law, and boats available for smuggling” (p.14). Poppell was a dictator that

“...flourished in a system of favoritism, nepotism and paternalism known as the ‘courthouse gang’ or the ‘good old boy’ system” (p.74).

For the residents of McIntosh County, sheriff Poppell was the “...judge jury and monarch” (p.6), a friend indeed as long as you abided by his laws. In the course of his career, Poppell found ways to pacify the black and white communities of McIntosh County through manipulation, deceit and corruption. Poppell understood that nothing in life was for free and with that mentality he was able to control McIntosh County and its residents. When a truck would overturn on US 17 (highway running through McIntosh) Poppell would distribute the goods that had spilled from the truck to black and white residents of McIntosh County but he would always remember who had accepted his generosity. For white residents who found themselves in trouble with the law, Poppell was always there to help but for a small fee and for the black residents who didn’t have any money Poppell would gladly take land, “...hundreds of acres of Prime Confederate land waved into their family lines by General Sherman” (pg.82).

For the most part, the white residents of McIntosh County valued the system that Poppell provided for their communities. Poor and uneducated, many black residents in McIntosh County were unaware that Poppell’s acts of generosity and willingness to communicate with black citizens was only part of his plan to keep them silent in an attempt to push them further into oppression. Then there were others like Thurnell Alston, who not only understood what Poppell was doing but wanted to do something about it. For Alston, “...the voice of civil rights sounded years before he received it in the form of news reports from the outside world” (p.37). At the age of fifteen Alston’s father was laid off of work without pay. With a family to feed and no money for food Thurnell and his father went to sheriff Poppell requesting for an extension of credit at the local stores in McIntosh County. Sheriff Poppell repeatedly turned them away, telling them there was nothing he could do for them. He was later heard to remark: “Only way you can control the Negroes is to keep them hungry” (p.38). For Alston this was “...his first lesson in the extent of the sheriff’s power and cynicism, and of the black people’s naïve dependency” (p.38) but unfortunately it would not be his last. From this experience, Alston began his own personal search for civil rights that would eventually radiate outward and reach into others.

On March 22, 1972 the “season of great change” began. This would also mark the beginning of Alston’s rise to victory. In Darien, a town located within McIntosh County, a black man by the name of Ed Finch was shot in the face by Guy Hutchinson, Darien’s chief of police; who was later seen dragging Finch

across the street to the jail where he was locked in a cell and left alone without any medical attention. In broad daylight, the black community had just witnessed a white man shoot a black man in the face, without any reasonable cause for doing so. For the black residents of McIntosh County, this horrific episode was marked as a watershed, forcing the community to acknowledge their poor quality of life. It was here that the “sleeping giant” awoke and through this event the black people of McIntosh County, for the first time in their lives joined together in a courageous attempt to exonerate their oppression. In their awakening to civil rights they sought council and direction from Thurnell Alston, “...whose natural leadership of the black community was from that day on, a given” (p.137).

For the residents of McIntosh County this was only the beginning. The Finch episode had in fact sparked there very own civil rights movement but it was now up to them to uncover and expose the corruption, deceit and betrayal of sheriff Poppell and his courthouse gangs, a “good old boy” system that enforced class, race and gender distinctions and monopolized local and illegal sources of wealth. By exploiting sheriff Poppell, justice would be served and with assistance from the black residents of McIntosh County and the Georgia Legal Services Program (GLSP), developed to provide free legal services for poor people with civil legal problems, this goal was attainable. In an attempt to resolve racial persecution in McIntosh County, Thurnell Alston joined forces with Nathaniel Grovner and Sammie Pinkney. Together they would be known and remembered as the “Three Musketeers”. Nathaniel Grovner, an old friend and former schoolmate of Alston’s, was a school teacher and minister of a local Holiness church. Sammie Pinkney, also a former schoolmate of both Grovner and Alston, was a retired police officer who had worked for the New York City Police Department. Together these three men were unstoppable. They would meet together in Grovner’s church forming coalitions and chapters designed to support the black residents as they gathered evidence against sheriff Poppell. Pinkney remembers: “We were in the process of becoming a major force in the political arena” (p.149). However, the significance of these three men was far greater than they would ever comprehend. The support they provided through their strong will and determination changed McIntosh County forever.

Meeting with lawyers from the GLSP proved to be one of the best decisions Alston and the other members of the “Three Musketeers” would ever make. Through documentation and extensive research, GLSP lawyers found ample information that provided enough evidence to file numerous civil suits against McIntosh County. Through the course of history in McIntosh County the black vote didn’t count. Unimaginable voting

requirements were upheld and false documentation was created in case questions were raised. In 1975 the GLSP prepared for their first civil suit against McIntosh County stating: "...This is an action for injunctive and declaratory relief to secure the right of qualified adult black residents and adult female residents of McIntosh County, Georgia, to be fairly chosen for Grand Jury and traverse jury service in McIntosh County, Georgia, without discrimination as to race or sex" (p.187). Although the case never made it to trial, a consent order was signed ordering that McIntosh County grand and traverse jurors were to be selected at random. Furthermore, in response to the corrupt electoral system the GLSP prepared two more cases: The NAACP v. The City of Darien and the NAACP v. McIntosh County. Both suits alleged that "...the at large electoral system for electing city and county officers diluted the votes of black citizens" (p.211). After significant deliberation the court ruled that the electoral system in Darien and McIntosh County would be arranged into districts, including a majority-black district. In 1978 under the new electoral system, Thurnell Alston ran for Commissioner of his district and won. In that victorious moment "...he believed in democracy, he believed in the Constitution, he believed in litigation and the rule of law; he believed that he could be intelligent and a good civil servant and a good leader" (p.227).

Alston exhibited leadership in more ways than one. Not only did he administer council, support and guidance when needed but he was a good husband, father and a foster parent. For five years Alston and his wife Rebecca attended foster-parent meetings and he later became vice-chairman of the Foster Parents Association in Brunswick. Alston was a supportive unit for black residents of McIntosh County and as Commissioner "...he brought plumbing and water to people who used wells and outhouses, arranged a renovation assistance program that aided homeowners in adding bathrooms to their cabins and attracted a grant to build a mental health facility out in the county" (p.250). But as much as Alston tried he soon learned he could not appease every one's needs. Alston, after his public life was over commented on himself: "I just irritate both black and white. I have a tendency of irritating, but I am not going to lie for them. It's just every darn day people want something that I'm not going to give, or they want me to do something that I know is wrong" (p.251). Alston was born and lived to be a leader. His ethics and compassion for those within the community were exhibited in everything he participated in. But as the black community began to lose interest in him, and his struggles with the white commissioners increased, he began to feel damaged.

Feeling as if his work meant nothing to the community, Alston slipped into a deep depression. The death of his youngest son Keith and his inability to grieve for him only worsened the situation. As his wife continued to blame him for the death of their child, the bills began to collect. He was no longer receiving disability checks and in search for solace he turned to Black Velvet bourbon and Irvin Brennon, a convicted drug dealer recently paroled from prison. In 1984 Alston was indicted for malfeasance in office. The accusation was that while serving as county commissioner, Alston "...had sent a country bulldozer to clear a woman's private property, and then he privately charged her \$150 for labor and equipment" (p285). Alston, shortly there after was acquitted due to the lack of substantial evidence in the case. While many in the town were shocked by the allegations against Alston, Micheal Froman, Alston's former managing attorney spoke the truth about McIntosh County and its residents when he said: "So Thurnell took a few bribes. That's not really so hard to figure out. You're talking about a man who learned everything he knew about political power in McIntosh County from Sheriff Tom Poppell" (p.286). In 1987, on a downward spiral spinning out of control, Thurnell Alston collided with reality and fell from grace. After conspiring with an undercover Georgia Bureau of Investigation Agent, Alston was arrested and indicted by the grand jury in the Southern District of Georgia "...on one charge of extortion, one charge of conspiracy to distribute cocaine, two counts of possession and distribution of cocaine and two counts of using a telephone to facilitate drug sales" (p.311). He was later convicted of all charges except for the two charges alleging that he possessed, with intent to distribute, cocaine and was sentenced to serve seventy-eight months in federal prison, scheduled to be released in 1993.

In one moment, with a twist of fate Alston's life was changed forever. Through his mistake his wife and children would ultimately suffer, experiencing the harsh realities of judgment and ridicule. Ironically the life Alston worked so hard to change was the life he succumbed to and through his path to destruction he became a product of his environment. The person he sought to exploit at one time was the person he had become and I often wonder what Poppell would have said to Alston when he requested to speak with him but was refused. Maybe he would have warned Poppell not to become like him but whatever it might have been it's too late now.