

From: SC News from SCIWAY <sciway-news@sc-news.net>
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Subject: Honoring the 49th Anniversary of the Orangeburg Massacre

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{ SC's February Calendar + Our Featured SC Event }

Hilton Head, February 1-25 | This year's [February Calendar of SC Events](#) is brought to you by [Head Island Gullah Celebration](#), which showcases the rich history and cultural heritage of the people on Hilton Head. The event has been recognized as one of the "Top 20 Events in the Southeast" and provides visitors with an opportunity to enjoy traditional Lowcountry food, traditional African dance, gospel music, and Gullah spirituals. The event lasts throughout the month and includes a variety of tours, concerts, expos, and parties.

[See all the other great South Carolina events coming up in February.](#)

{ Honoring the 49th Anniversary of the Orangeburg Massacre }

February 8th will mark the 49th anniversary of the [Orangeburg Massacre](#), a little-known tragedy in South Carolina's history that preceded the slaughter at Kent State by two years. Martin Luther King, Jr. called it "the largest armed assault undertaken under color of law in recent Southern history," and yet half a century, the State of South Carolina has largely ignored it, refusing to this day to conduct an investigation into the events that led to the murders of three young students.

[All Star Bowling](#) in [Orangeburg](#) served as the starting point for an historic, violent, and traumatic event known as the Orangeburg Massacre. The only bowling alley in a city that contains two historic schools – [Claflin College](#) and South Carolina State University – All Star prohibited African-Americans from entering its premises, even four years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 desegregated public places.

(John Diskes of Summerville, 2014 © Do Not Use Without Written Consent)

Owner Harry K. Floyd refused to integrate his bowling alley, claiming it was exempt from federal desegregation laws. On the evening of Monday, February 5, 1968, several black students marched to All Star as part of an organized protest led by South Carolina State senior John Stroman; as expected, they were met with resistance. Floyd called the police, who arrived and forced Floyd to close the bowling alley for the night. The following evening, between 30 and 40 students, again led by Stroman, returned to the alley. Police arrived along with State Law Enforcement Division head Pete Strom, who was dispatched by Governor Robert McNair to quell the demonstration. Stroman asked the thousands of students to leave in order to protect them from arrest, but 15 young men remained.

(Andy Hunter of North Augusta, 2014 © Do Not Use Without Written Consent)

In the meantime, more students arrived. As the protesters were loaded into waiting patrol cars, they became increasingly unruly, especially after a firetruck entered the parking lot. Firehoses were unleashed on Orangeburg students during a Civil Rights march a few years before, and the students remained raw. Several of those gathered were beaten with bully sticks, including at least two, Emma McCain and Louise Cawley. Over the next two days, agitation escalated among both the protesters and the troops deployed by McNair and Strom. In all, more than 550 national, state, and local law enforcement agents gathered in Orangeburg with tanks, rifles, pistols, and shotguns.

(Andy Hunter of North Augusta, 2014 © Do Not Use Without Written Consent)

Just a year before, Governor McNair – who received 99% of the black vote in his gubernatorial election – claimed, "I intend to use all of the authority and influence at my command to see that the good name of our state is not tarnished." Governor McNair was referring to the unrest experienced by Orangeburg during desegregation and made it his mission to integrate South Carolina as seamlessly as possible. However, there were holdouts – such as Floyd – who made the transition difficult. As then-Orangeburg mayor J. Palmer Gaillard said, "Our biggest problems were not with the blacks, but with whites."

(SCIWAY, 2008 © Do Not Use Without Written Consent)

By the evening of Thursday, February 8, both local black campuses had been placed on lockdown. Nearly 70 armed law enforcement officers lined the main entrance to South Carolina State University. Students had gathered around a bonfire to keep warm. The students held hands, sang protest songs, and chanted. At 10:30 PM, firemen moved in to douse the flames. Frustrated, the students turned back and began to retreat. There were no street lights, and it was almost completely dark. Minutes later, a state trooper was struck in the face by an object. Tensions flared, and some officers later stated they thought their colleague had been shot. Another officer fired a shot into the air, allegedly as a warning to the protesters, which triggered nine other officers to fire their weapons into the crowd. As a result, three students were fatally shot, while 28 others were hit while fleeing the scene. All of the young men were unarmed, and all but a few were shot in their backs or on the soles of their feet. The 28th wound was not recognized until 2008.

(Ammodramus of Wikimedia Commons, 2015)

The following morning the headline on the front page of the local paper, *The Times and Democrat* "All Hell Breaks Loose – Three Killed and Many Injured in College Nightmare." In the wake of the tragedy, there was a federal investigation and two trials, one in which all nine of the white men who ran into the crowd were acquitted and another in which Cleveland Sellers, a native of Bamberg County, South Carolina, was convicted of inciting a riot and sentenced to one year in prison. (Released early for good behavior, Sellers served seven months, during which time his first child was born. The conviction came to light half a year after the event.) All Star Bowling was forced by a federal judge to desegregate.

(Delano Middleton, Henry Smith, and Samuel Hammond, c. 1968)

Despite the federal investigation, to date there has been no state investigation, and Governor McNair was widely criticized following the shootings. In a press conference held the morning after the event, Governor McNair downplayed the event as an "unfortunate incident," placed blame on "black agitators and advocates," and dispensed incorrect information such as claiming that the shootings happened on a nearby campus. While it is now understood that McNair was misinformed on the details before he spoke at the event, many prior supporters of the governor – both black and white – expressed disap

in his statements. As a result, McNair, at one time considered a possible candidate for Presidency, never ran for public office again. However, before he left office, Governor acknowledged that the Orangeburg Massacre was a "scar on our state's conscience." He also took responsibility for the tragedy as governor in his [2006 biography](#).

([John Diskes of Summerville](#), 2014 © Do Not Use Without Written Consent)

Cleveland Sellers, who had formerly been a program director of the national Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, was a participant in the events that winter, though not a leader. Used as a scapegoat because of his fame, he spent his time in prison writing his autobiography, [River of No Return](#). He later received a master's degree from Harvard University and a Doctorate of Education from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The author of several books, Dr. Sellers was pardoned in 1993. After teaching African-American studies at the [University of South Carolina](#), he served as the president of [Voorhees College](#) in his hometown of [Denmark](#) from 2008 until his retirement in the spring of 2016.

([John Diskes of Summerville](#), 2014 © Do Not Use Without Written Consent)

A memorial dedicated to the young men who lost their lives was erected on the campus of North Carolina State in 1969 (pictured in the two above photos). Harry K. Floyd died in 2002, leaving the bowling alley to his son. The bowling alley closed in 2007.

If you are interested in the above story, please [read our detailed account of the Orangeburg Massacre here](#).

[Previous Issues of SCIWAY News](#)

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