



Carmage Walls
Commentary Prize

2018 Entry Form

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What is the subject/title of the entry? Making an impact: Pardon of the Groveland Four

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Is your newspaper under 50,000 circulation or above 50,000 circulation? Under 50,000

Please give a brief explanation of issues discussed and the results achieved. (This space will expand as you type in your comments.)

The ultimate goal of an editorial page is to advocate for an improved quality of life in its community. This editorial illustrates that fact.

The editorial calling for a pardon of the Groveland Four was part of a wave of support statewide that led to the Florida Cabinet's pardon for four men unjustly accused of rape.

Groveland Four deserve full pardon for unjust convictions

By The Florida Times-Union Editorial Board
Posted Dec 4, 2018 at 2:01 AM

It's never too late to do the right thing.

That common-sense statement often applies to Florida's legacy of injustice toward African-Americans.

So it is time for Florida to officially grant pardons to the Groveland Four, the men falsely accused and unjustly convicted of murder in 1949.

That was a long time ago, the days of Jim Crow when blacks were prevented from voting and from taking part in the most basic American freedoms.

On July 16, 1949, a 17-year-old white woman and her estranged husband reported to police that she had been raped by four black men after their car had broken down.

So the racists sprang into action. The Ku Klux Klan burned homes and chased hundreds into the swamps.

Four African-American men were targeted:

- Ernest Thomas escaped from custody and was shot more than 400 times.
- Charles Greenlee was 16. At the time of the rape he was being detained 20 miles away by two retail store night watchmen. The estranged husband said on two occasions that Greenlee was not one of the rapists. Greenlee received a life sentence and was paroled at age 27. He moved to Nashville and died in 2012.
- Two World War II veterans, Samuel Shepherd and Walter Irvin, acknowledged they had stopped by the vehicle to assist but denied the rape.

Greenlee, Shepherd and Irvin were beaten in the basement of the county jail. Greenlee and Shepherd were coerced into admitting guilt.

At the trial, the judge denied the admission of medical evidence in favor of the defendants as well as evidence of the beatings.

Irvin and Shepherd were convicted. Thurgood Marshall, then executive director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, appealed the convictions. The U.S. Supreme Court unanimously overturned their convictions and ordered a retrial.

While being transported to a new trial in 1951, Irvin and Shepherd were shot by Sheriff Willis McCall who claimed the handcuffed men tried to escape. Shepherd died of his wounds. His home had been burned to the ground by a mob.

Irvin was shot twice by McCall, and then a deputy sheriff shot Irvin in the neck.

Irvin pretended to be dead and survived. He was tried a second time and was convicted although a former FBI criminologist testified that he believed forensic evidence was manufactured by law enforcement.

In 1955, Irvin's sentence was commuted to life in prison by then-Gov. LeRoy Collins. Irvin had maintained his innocence throughout, despite beatings and being shot and believing himself to be dying.

Irvin was paroled in 1968 by then-Gov. Claude Kirk and died of a heart attack in 1969.

The story received new prominence thanks to a Pulitzer Prize-winning book by Gilbert King, "Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys and the Dawn of a New America."

In 2016, the city of Groveland and Lake County apologized to the Groveland Four and their families.

In 2017, the Florida Legislature unanimously passed a resolution offering a "formal and heartfelt apology to these victims of racial hatred and to their families," urging the governor and Cabinet to grant full pardons.

Yet the Cabinet meeting as the Board of Executive Clemency has yet to act.

Any member of the Clemency Board — the governor, attorney general, chief financial officer or agriculture commissioner — may place the pardon on the agenda.

The board is scheduled to meet Wednesday.

Local attorney Chris Hand, a member of a bipartisan group proposing the pardon, said that this would be a fine way for Gov. Rick Scott to finish his term as governor.

All it would take is Scott and two other members of the Cabinet to agree and a pardon could be issued.

It has been nearly 70 years since the injustices were done to the four Groveland men.

As the Legislature stated in its resolution, the Groveland Four were "victims of gross injustices and their abhorrent treatment by the criminal justice system is a shameful chapter in this state's history."

It is time for members of the Cabinet, meeting as the Clemency Board, to take action as well.