

## [Clyde Kennard, forgotten martyr of the civil rights movement, died 50 years ago today](#)

On July 4, 2013, in [Clyde Kennard, Medgar Evers](#), by Jerry Mitchell



Clyde Kennard died a half century ago today — the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, which vowed that “all men are created equal.”

Wrongly convicted of stealing chicken feed in 1960, Kennard’s conviction was finally thrown out posthumously in 2006.

Steven Drizin, director for the Center on Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern Law School, who successfully pushed for Kennard’s exoneration, called the case “one of the saddest of the civil rights era because he was silenced by ‘respectable’ people – academics, politicians, lawyers, prosecutors, judges, businessmen – all acting under the ‘color of law.’”

“When these community leaders could no longer persuade Kennard to stop trying to enroll in Mississippi Southern College, they trumped up charges against him, empaneled an all-white jury, convicted him, sentenced him to the maximum penalty under the law, and then affirmed his conviction and sentence to ensure that he would be prevented from trying to enroll for at least seven years.”

Kennard was a Korean War veteran who returned to get his political science degree from the University of Chicago, but when his stepfather died in 1955, he returned home to Hattiesburg to run his family’s chicken farm.

Still desiring to finish his degree, he talked to officials about enrolling at the then-all-white Mississippi Southern College (now known as the University of Southern Mississippi).

When he dared to show up in person to enroll in 1958, constables arrested him and charged him with illegal liquor possession in what even the records of the state’s segregationist spy agency admitted was a set up.

In 1960, Kennard, who insisted on his innocence, went to prison after being convicted on a charge of stealing \$25 worth of chicken feed.

The all-white, all-male jury convicted Kennard, who was immediately sentenced to the maximum seven years in prison.

Mississippi NAACP leader Medgar Evers declared, “Despite the overwhelming evidence in Clyde Kennard’s favor, ... the greatest mockery” of justice took place .... In a court room of segregationists apparently resolved to put Kennard ‘legally away’, the all-white jury found Kennard guilty as charged in only 10 minutes.”

In prison, Kennard worked on the “sun-up to sundown gang,” working the cotton fields. He complained of pains for awhile before being diagnosed with cancer. Evers and others successfully campaigned for Kennard’s release in early 1963.

An investigation by The Clarion-Ledger revealed that Kennard went to prison for a crime he never committed after refusing to abandon his quest to enroll at a local all-white university. The lone witness against him, Johnny Roberts, recanted testimony implicating Kennard.

In response to the revelation, a chorus of people called for the clearing of Kennard's name. Then-Gov. Haley Barbour declined to pardon Kennard, but Circuit Judge Bob Helfrich threw out the conviction.

Today, a building on the Southern campus is now named after Kennard, who was never allowed to attend.

His work has helped lead to something that even he may not have envisioned — Southern's first African-American President, Rodney Bennett.

"Clyde Kennard was an innocent man who should never have been accused, never have been arrested, never have been tried, and never have been convicted," said former National Teacher of the Year Barry Bradford, who along with his students helped to bring about justice. "Exonerating him not only helped sooth the wounds of his family, I believe it helped soothe the soul of Mississippi.

"The state has changed so much over the years. Mississippi has gone from being a state that sent a black man to jail rather than let him go to college to being the state that named a black man the president of Southern Miss – the very school Clyde Kennard died trying to integrate."