



# Alton's Black History: A battle for rights

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ALTON - The entire nation was engulfed in the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s and 1960s, and Alton was no exception.

In fact, a second push for school desegregation was conducted by brick-layer Elijah Conley, who was chased from the area by destruction of both his livelihood and credit, and a cross burning on his front yard. Despite the many obstacles, Conley was able to secure desegregation in the Alton School System in 1949 - under threat of state funding loss - but, schools in Alton will still mostly segregated until the Corridor Plan of the 1970s.

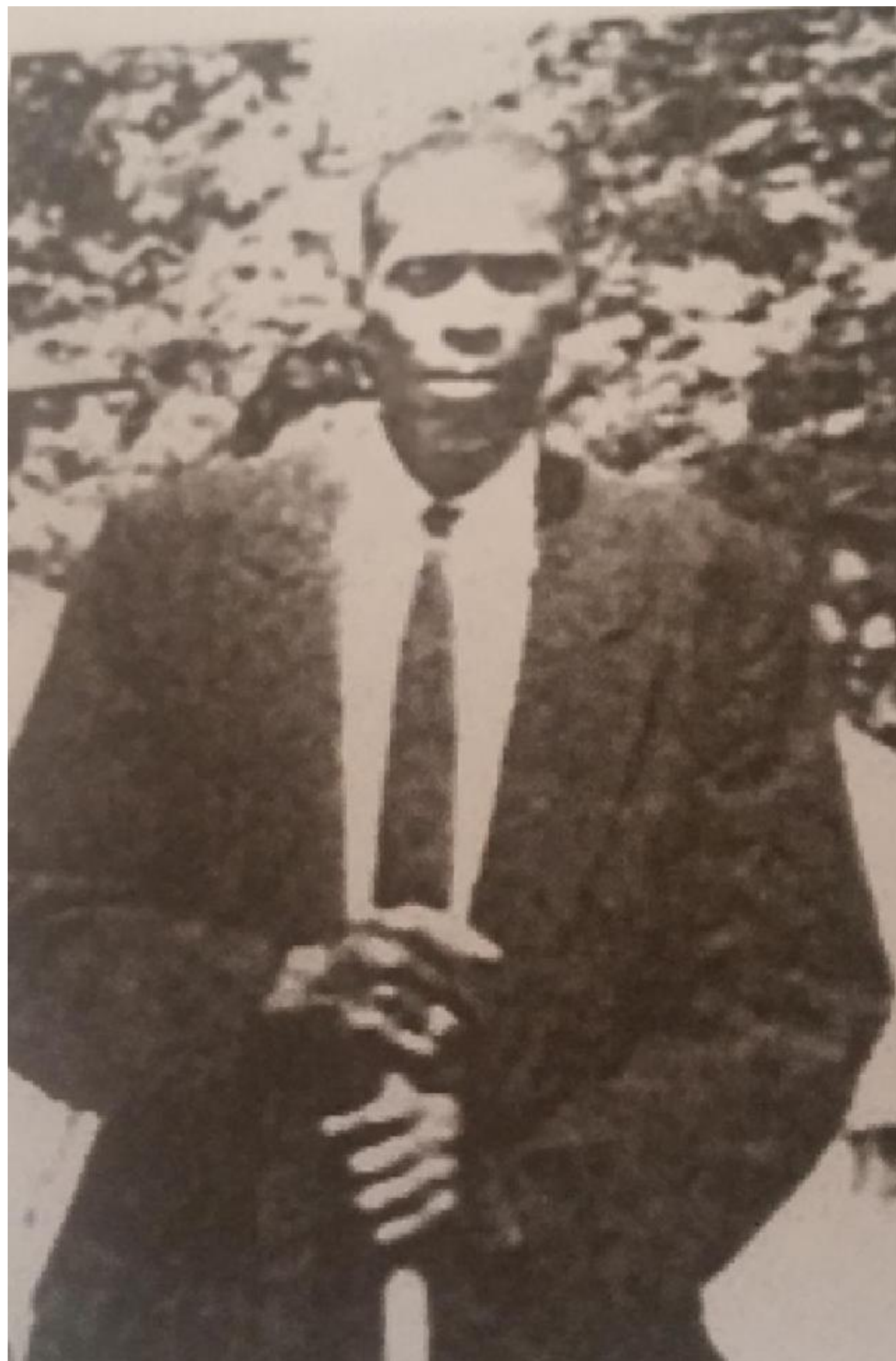
Conley, like Scott Bibb before him who won a case for integration at the Illinois Supreme Court in 1908 after several appeals and 11 years of fighting, had support from many in the City of Alton. During the Civil Rights movement, many Altonians backed causes like Conley's as well as pushes for equal rights and workers' unions.



Josephine Cloto Marley Wilson Beckwith worked extensively with young people and other vulnerable populations. Born in East St. Louis in 1915, and educated at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE), Wilson Beckwith joined the push for school integration in 1945 when she joined a desegregation committee in the Alton School System.

Wilson Beckwith established the first black kindergarten that year, and helped pass a bond issuance for the creation of new Central Junior High School. She also served as chairperson of the Education Committee of the Alton Branch of the NAACP, and taught Sunday school through Allen Chapel AME Church. She established the Mabel and Abe Hickman Scholarship and started an Alton Student Revolving Loan Scholarship Program.

She also participated in marches and sit-ins during that time to integrate Alton's Grand Theater and served in the Madison County Urban League as well as the League of Women Voters. Wilson Beckwith was also the first black person to be employed by Olin-Mathieson, and was the secretary and office manager of the Educational Opportunity Center of SIUE.



While Wilson Beckwith struggled for educational opportunities during the Civil Rights Movement, Alton's Reverend Luther T. Simmons pushed from the pulpit. Simmons was a deacon at Morning Star Baptist Church until he became pastor in 1953. He was responsible for the construction of the current church building in 1962 and the burning of the mortgage in 1980.

During the Civil Rights Movement, Simmons and his congregation took a stand as "an up-front force" in the struggle, according to his entry in *20th Century African American Leaders in Alton*.

In labor movements, Clarence Willis, who was employed by Laclede Steel, took initiative from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. himself and organized peaceful demonstrations against Alton eating establishments, due to their treatment of black people in the city.

Willis also served as President of the Alton Branch of the NAACP from 1962-1965, and became President of the Alton School Board later in his life.

