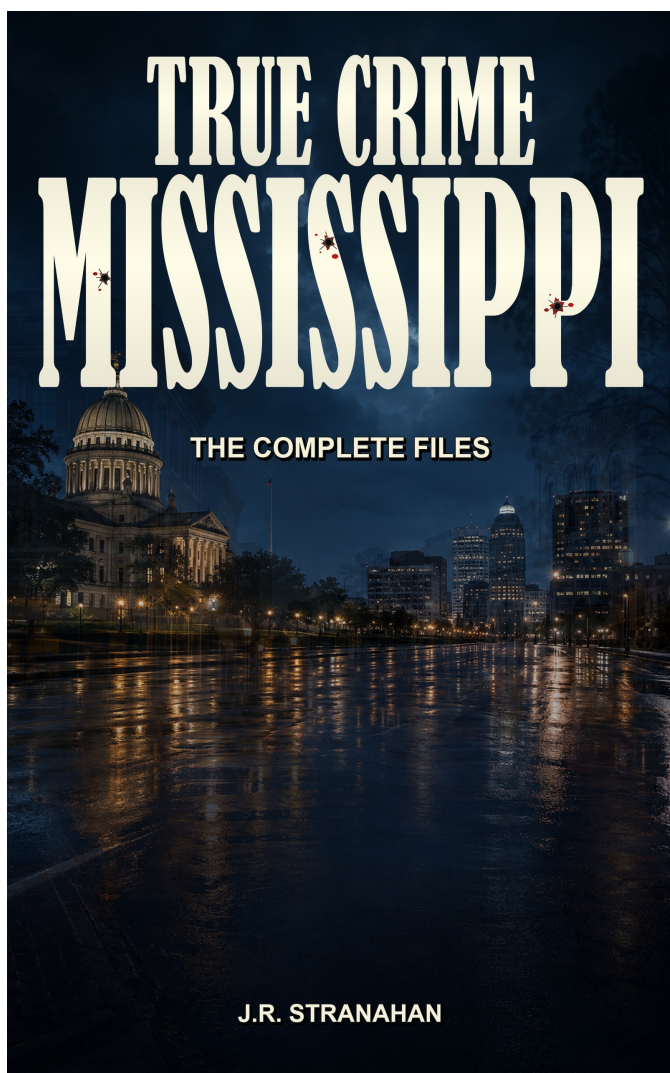


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Chapter One: The Driveway on Guynes Street

The Evers children knew where to go if gunfire came through the windows.

Their safest place was the bathroom, where a heavy cast-iron tub offered more protection than the walls of the ranch house. Medgar Evers taught them to get low and crawl to it. Mattresses were placed on the floor so sleeping bodies would rest below the window line. The family did not use the front door in the ordinary way. The danger attached to Medgar's work had reached the home long before a rifle shot did.

The house stood in Elraine, a Jackson subdivision built for middle-class Black families. Medgar and Myrlie Evers bought it in 1956. From the street, it had the modest horizontal lines common to thousands of postwar homes. Inside, it carried the demands of a growing family and a civil rights office that never really closed. Calls arrived. Organizers met. People threatened elsewhere in Mississippi sometimes found shelter there. Myrlie handled correspondence, helped prepare speeches, and kept the practical machinery of the state NAACP operation moving while raising the couple's children.

The National Park Service history of the property records how completely activism and home life overlapped. It also records the precautions. Guard dogs stayed in the backyard. On May 24, 1963, someone threw a Molotov cocktail onto the carport. Police dismissed the attack as a prank. The family did not have that luxury. They lowered their mattresses and lived with the possibility that the next attempt would be more effective. **National Park Service, Evers Family Home**

Medgar Wiley Evers had been living with risk for years. Born near Decatur, Mississippi, in 1925, he entered the United States Army during World War II and served in Europe. He returned to a state where military service did not protect a Black veteran from the humiliations of

segregation. After studying at Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College, he worked in the insurance business and traveled through Mississippi communities where voting rights often existed more clearly on paper than in practice.

In 1954, Evers applied to the University of Mississippi law school and was rejected. The application became part of an NAACP effort to challenge segregation. In January 1955, he moved to Jackson to become the organization's first salaried Mississippi field secretary. The job made him a statewide organizer, investigator, recruiter, and public target. He worked on voter registration, school desegregation, boycotts, and investigations of racist violence. He traveled constantly, listening to families who had learned that reporting an injustice could bring another one to their door. [National Park Service, Medgar Evers](#)

Myrlie was not standing outside that work. She and Medgar had met at Alcorn and built their public lives together. She ran the Jackson office, typed, organized, hosted, and made it possible for the work to continue across a state designed to obstruct it. Later accounts sometimes turn her into the widow who waited for a verdict. That description begins too late. Before June 1963, she was already a civil rights worker managing the same pressure that placed her husband in public view. [National Park Service, Myrlie Evers-Williams](#)

By the spring of 1963, Jackson had become the center of an escalating campaign against segregated public accommodations and discriminatory hiring. Medgar was prominent in that campaign. Threats came by telephone and mail. The firebomb landed on the carport. The family discussed danger because refusing to discuss it would not make it disappear.

On June 11, President John F. Kennedy addressed the country about civil rights. Myrlie and the children watched from home. Medgar had reminded them to see it, but his meetings kept him out late. Shortly after midnight, now June 12, he drove into the carport.

He stepped from the car carrying white shirts printed with a message against Jim Crow. A shot fired from a wooded area across the street struck him in the back and passed through his body. The children heard it. Myrlie ran outside. Neighbors came to help, and Medgar was placed on a mattress and taken to the hospital in a station wagon rather than waiting for an ambulance. He died within the hour.

The Mississippi Supreme Court's later account preserves Myrlie's description of the last morning she saw him leave and the repeated embrace he gave the family. It also describes the scene Jackson officers encountered and the effort to reach the hospital quickly. The opinion is valuable because it does not arrive as a legend polished by time. It records what witnesses told a jury in 1994 about a night they had carried for more than three decades. **Beckwith v. State**

The physical investigation began at once. Officers found an Enfield rifle near the scene. It had been fired. A fingerprint recovered from its telescopic sight was sent to the FBI, which connected it to Byron De La Beckwith. He was a white segregationist from Greenwood, about a hundred miles north of Jackson. The inquiry also produced witnesses who placed a man matching him in Jackson before the murder and described questions about where Evers lived.

The rifle mattered, but the eventual prosecution was never based on a single dramatic object. Jurors heard about Beckwith's weapon, the print on the scope, his movements, his car, his expressed racial hostility, and statements in which witnesses said he later claimed responsibility. That cumulative structure is important. A fingerprint can place a person's hand on an object without establishing when it was touched. Ownership can explain why a print is present. The prosecution therefore had to connect the rifle, preparation, location, motive, and later admissions into one account.

Beckwith was arrested on June 23, 1963. The state brought him to trial twice in 1964. Both juries were all white. Neither reached a unanimous verdict. Both proceedings ended in mistrials, not acquittals. The

distinction kept another prosecution legally possible, but possibility was not the same as momentum. In 1969, the old indictment was formally set aside through a nolle prosequi order. Beckwith remained free.

A hung jury leaves the criminal accusation undecided. Because neither 1964 jury returned a verdict, the protection against double jeopardy did not convert those proceedings into acquittals. Mississippi remained legally able to try Beckwith again. The later nolle prosequi order ended the pending prosecution, but it was not a judgment that the evidence had failed or that Beckwith was innocent.

That procedural distinction mattered in 1990. Prosecutors were not asking a court to undo an old verdict. They were asking a new grand jury to authorize another prosecution after the earlier trials had ended without verdicts. Beckwith could still challenge the extraordinary delay, lost evidence, faded memory, and any tactical advantage the state had gained. What he could not claim was a prior acquittal.

For the Evers family, the distinction was both narrow and consequential. The open legal door did not cause officials to walk through it for more than two decades. It preserved possibility while Myrlie and the children lived with no conviction. Procedure made the third trial lawful. People, evidence, and renewed institutional will made it happen.

The failed trials sat inside the political order of their time. Mississippi had spent years using law and state power to resist civil rights enforcement. A Black family asking an all-white jury to convict a white segregationist for killing the state's best-known NAACP organizer did not enter a neutral room. The evidence had not vanished, but the will and social conditions needed to weigh it fairly were plainly in doubt.

For the Evers family, the end of a trial did not end the consequences of the killing. Myrlie moved to California with the children in 1967. She completed a degree, built a career, and continued public work. She also continued asking what had become of the case. Her persistence is often described as a long wait for justice. It was more active than waiting. She kept the name, the evidence, and the unanswered prosecution in public

view.

Time changed the case in difficult ways. Memories faded. Witnesses died. Physical evidence had to survive years of storage and institutional indifference. Delay can prejudice a defense, and the Constitution does not permit the state to ignore that problem simply because a crime is notorious. When prosecutors later revived the case, Beckwith argued that the passage of time made a fair trial impossible.

Delay also changed the social conditions around the evidence. People who had once remained silent became willing to speak. Records could be reviewed by officials who did not share the assumptions of the first prosecution. The public mythology surrounding Beckwith could be tested against testimony rather than accepted as local knowledge.

Myrlie pressed Hinds County District Attorney Ed Peters to look again. Assistant District Attorney Bobby DeLaughter became a central prosecutor in the reopened case. Investigators searched old files, located witnesses, and reconstructed what could still be proved. In December 1990, a Hinds County grand jury returned a new indictment.

The renewed case immediately raised a serious legal question. Could Mississippi prosecute a man almost thirty years after two mistrials when much of the delay belonged to the state? Beckwith challenged the indictment and later raised the issue on appeal. The courts examined why time had passed, what prejudice he could show, and whether the state had deliberately postponed trial to gain an advantage.

The record showed a case that had gone dormant, but it also showed the defendant's own role in frustrating accountability. Witnesses said Beckwith had boasted that his influence would protect him. The Mississippi Supreme Court ultimately rejected his delay claim. That ruling did not announce that delay never matters. It held that, on this record, the delay did not require dismissal.

The 1994 jury heard evidence that the two earlier juries had not heard in the same form. Witnesses described statements Beckwith allegedly

made over the years. Mark Reiley, who had guarded Beckwith during an unrelated Louisiana imprisonment, testified that Beckwith admitted killing Evers. Other witnesses described similar claims. The defense challenged those accounts, their timing, and their credibility.

Much of the old physical case remained. Beckwith owned the rifle found near the Evers home, and his fingerprint was on its scope. Witness evidence added a white Plymouth Valiant consistent with his car and an account of Beckwith seeking directions to Evers's home before the shooting. Prosecutors joined those details to motive evidence and the alleged admissions.

The trial also forced a question about how to prove motive without turning ideology itself into a crime. Prosecutors introduced Beckwith's writings and statements about race, the NAACP, and civil rights leaders. The defense argued that some material was too remote and unfairly prejudicial. The Mississippi Supreme Court later held that the evidence was relevant because it offered an explanation for why Beckwith would target a man he apparently did not know personally. The jury was not asked to punish segregationist beliefs in the abstract. It was asked to decide whether those beliefs helped explain the charged murder when considered alongside the rest of the evidence.

On February 5, 1994, the jury found Beckwith guilty of murder. He received a life sentence. The verdict arrived more than thirty years after Myrlie and the children heard the shot from across the street.

A delayed verdict can invite an easy ending. The family persevered, a new generation listened, and justice finally prevailed. Every part of that sentence contains some truth, but it leaves out the cost of the interval. Medgar did not watch his children grow. Myrlie built a life while repeatedly returning to the worst night of it. Witnesses carried knowledge through decades in which a public admission could be safer for the killer than a truthful accusation was for the person who heard it. A 1994 conviction could punish Beckwith. It could not return the years taken from the family.

Beckwith appealed. On December 22, 1997, the Mississippi Supreme Court affirmed both the murder conviction and the life sentence. Its lengthy opinion reviewed the evidence, the delay, jury selection, challenged testimony, documents showing motive, and the trial court's instructions. The opinion closed with an acknowledgment that the final result depended on people who found the courage to state the truth in court. That language matters, but so does the procedural line beneath it: conviction and sentence affirmed.

Beckwith remained incarcerated until his death in 2001. There would be no retrial and no later release. The legal case had reached its end.

The house on Guynes Street followed a different path. Its address became Margaret Walker Alexander Street. Tougaloo College acquired and maintained it. Congress authorized a national monument, and the site entered the National Park System in 2020. The home now honors both Medgar and Myrlie. **National Park Service, Medgar and Myrlie Evers Home National Monument**

Preservation changes how a visitor understands the crime. A person can see the low ranch profile, the carport, the windows, and the distance to the place from which the shot came. More important, a visitor can see that the building was a home before it was a crime scene. It held children's routines, a marriage, meals, arguments, phone calls, paperwork, and plans. The security precautions did not make the family less ordinary. They showed how far public hatred had intruded into ordinary life.

The monument also corrects an imbalance created by courtroom storytelling. Trials naturally concentrate on the accused. They ask what he did, what he intended, what evidence can be admitted against him, and whether the procedure was fair. Those questions are necessary. A criminal conviction cannot be legitimate without them. Yet the legal focus can leave a family standing at the edge of its own story.

At the Evers home, the center moves back. The person who lived there is not introduced as a body in a driveway. Medgar's work, Myrlie's work,

and the children's lives fill the rooms before the visitor reaches the night of June 12. The house explains what the bullet interrupted.

It also explains why the case endured. Evidence survived in files and storage rooms, but the demand to use it survived in people. Myrlie Evers-Williams did not allow two hung juries to become the final public meaning of her husband's death. The prosecutors and witnesses who acted later did not erase the failures of 1964. They proved that failure did not have to remain permanent.

That is the first lesson in the Jackson files. Time can destroy a case. Time can also expose the bargain that once kept a case closed. The difference is rarely time alone. It is what people choose to preserve, what institutions become willing to confront, and whether a family can make the rest of the country keep looking at a house it would rather pass by.

Medgar's life before Jackson helps explain why the family accepted such risk. He had grown up in a Mississippi where racial violence was not hidden from children. On the road outside Decatur, the clothing of a Black man who had been lynched remained on display for months. The sight taught a lesson that segregation depended on more than signs and separate facilities. It depended on fear that could be made public and left in place.

Military service gave Medgar a second frame of reference. He entered the Army in 1943, trained in a segregated force, and served in the European theater. He participated in the Normandy campaign. He returned home after fighting a government built on racial supremacy and found Mississippi still denying Black citizens the vote. When Medgar and other Black veterans attempted to vote in a local election, armed white men turned them away.

That experience did not make him reckless. It made the contradiction plain. Citizenship was honored when the country needed a soldier and restricted when the veteran came home. Medgar carried that contradiction into his education at Alcorn and into the organizing work

that followed.

At Alcorn, he studied business administration, competed in athletics, edited the yearbook, and sang. He met Myrlie Beasley there. The fuller list matters because famous victims are often written backward from death. Every youthful activity is treated as preparation for martyrdom. Medgar was not preparing to be assassinated. He was building the range of an ordinary ambitious life.

After college, Medgar and Myrlie moved to Mound Bayou. His insurance work sent him through rural communities and placed him in conversation with Black families about money, land, health, and security. Insurance sales and civil rights organizing could travel the same roads. Both depended on trust built face to face.

When he became the NAACP field secretary, his assignments ranged across Mississippi. He investigated violence, encouraged local branches, recruited members, and helped people attempt to register. He also learned the practical cost of being the person whose telephone number families called after an attack. Public statements were only one part of the job. Much of it consisted of listening, verifying, traveling, and persuading frightened people that creating a record still mattered.

The work affected the household even when Medgar was away. Threatening callers reached Myrlie and the children. Strangers could watch the house. A schedule change could mean safety or signal trouble. Myrlie later described the family's decision not to keep the children ignorant. The precautions were taught because the threat was real, not because the adults wanted fear to govern the home.

The spring 1963 boycott in Jackson increased the exposure. The NAACP and local organizers pressed white-owned businesses to hire Black workers and treat Black customers fairly. Demonstrations and arrests followed. Medgar spoke publicly while coordinating people behind the scenes. The city knew his name, and so did segregationists elsewhere in the state.

President Kennedy's civil rights address on June 11 was nationally significant, but it also entered the Evers living room as family routine. Medgar told Myrlie and the children to watch. That small detail survived because Myrlie remembered it and later testified. It connects two scales of history: a president speaking from the White House and three children waiting for their father in a Jackson ranch house.

The shirts Medgar carried when he was shot carried the words JIM CROW MUST GO. In a courtroom, they helped establish what he was doing and why he might be targeted. At home, they were work brought in from the car. The distinction is slight and important. The evidence of motive was woven into the family's daily life.

After the killing, Medgar's funeral drew thousands. He was buried at Arlington National Cemetery with military honors. National recognition followed, but national attention did not guarantee a verdict in Mississippi. The first two juries heard substantial physical evidence and still failed to agree.

The courtroom itself reflected the state's power structure. Governor Ross Barnett appeared during the first trial and shook Beckwith's hand where jurors could see. Former Army Major General Edwin Walker also sat with the defendant. Those gestures communicated social approval without entering the evidentiary record. They showed jurors that powerful white men did not regard Beckwith as someone to avoid.

The 1994 trial took place in a changed room, but not a room free from history. Prosecutors had to present old evidence under current rules. The defense was entitled to challenge whether witnesses remembered accurately, whether documents were relevant, and whether the delay had made response impossible. Fairness to a defendant does not compete with respect for a victim. It is the condition that makes a guilty verdict worth trusting.

On appeal, Beckwith raised numerous arguments. He challenged the use of his writings, testimony about admissions, photographs, jury selection, and language in the instructions. The Mississippi Supreme

Court addressed the claims rather than treating the case's moral importance as a reason to overlook procedure. That review strengthened the final judgment.

One challenged category involved letters and statements expressing violent racial hostility. Such evidence can be dangerous because a jury might punish a person for repellent beliefs instead of deciding whether he committed the charged act. The court found the material relevant to motive, particularly because there was no evidence of a personal relationship between Beckwith and Evers. The prosecution's theory was that Evers was chosen for what he represented and the work he performed.

Another category involved Beckwith's alleged admissions. Witnesses came forward at different times and under different circumstances. Jurors had to consider whether each person had heard what was claimed, why the person had waited, and whether the account fit the physical evidence. A confession reported by another person is powerful, but it is not self-authenticating. Credibility remained the jury's work.

The combination of old physical proof and later testimony allowed the case to survive. If the rifle and fingerprint had disappeared, the late admissions might have seemed unanchored. If no witness had added evidence after 1964, the third trial might have repeated the first two. The reopened prosecution worked because preservation and change met in the same record.

Myrlie's role also changed the public understanding of persistence. She did not need to pretend the verdict repaired her life. She could welcome the conviction and still name the decades the system had taken. Justice in this case was neither meaningless nor complete.

The National Park Service designation reflects that dual legacy. It names Medgar and Myrlie together. The choice recognizes that the civil rights work inside the home was shared and that the campaign for accountability after 1963 became part of Myrlie's own public life. Visitors encounter a partnership, not only an assassination.

The street names around the property carry further layers. Guynes Street became Margaret Walker Alexander Drive, honoring the writer and Jackson State professor. Delta Drive became Medgar Evers Boulevard. A neighborhood map now places Black Mississippi history into the language residents use to give directions. That kind of recognition came after a period when asking for Evers's address could be part of planning his death.

There is no need to claim that Mississippi redeemed itself through one conviction. The state that prosecuted Beckwith in 1994 was the legal successor to the state that failed to convict him in 1964. Both belong to the story. The later verdict demonstrated change while leaving the earlier protection visible.

The best measure of the chapter is therefore not whether the reader reaches a satisfying ending. It is whether the reader can hold the satisfaction of a lawful conviction beside the fact that the Evers family had to build three decades of life before it arrived.

The reopened case also changed how Jackson understood old evidence. An object preserved in a property room is not automatically usable. Prosecutors have to establish where it came from, who handled it, and whether it remains what the state claims. Witnesses must explain records created by people who may no longer be alive. Defense lawyers must have a meaningful opportunity to test the chain.

The rifle survived that scrutiny. So did the fingerprint evidence. The state did not ask the 1994 jury to accept the objects because earlier prosecutors had believed them important. It called witnesses and rebuilt the foundation required for admission.

Memory presented a different problem. A witness speaking after thirty years may sound compelling precisely because the story has become polished through repetition. Jurors needed to consider whether the account had remained consistent, whether the witness had a reason to alter it, and whether another part of the record supported it. The passage of time could explain silence without guaranteeing accuracy.

This is why Myrlie's persistence and the prosecution's burden should not be placed in opposition. She had every moral reason to demand another trial. The state still had to prove the case under rules designed to prevent a demand for justice from becoming a demand for conviction at any cost.

The jury's verdict gained meaning from that burden. Beckwith was represented, allowed to challenge the evidence, and judged by a jury that returned a unanimous decision. The state did not merely announce a correction to history. It obtained a criminal judgment.

The trial also became part of Jackson's own institutional history. Bobby DeLaughter's role later attracted attention because he became a judge and years afterward pleaded guilty in an unrelated federal corruption investigation. That later misconduct does not invalidate the Beckwith verdict, which survived appellate review based on the record created in court. It does caution against building a redemption story around a prosecutor. Institutions and attorneys perform necessary work, but the chapter belongs to the evidence, the jury, and the Evers family.

Myrlie continued public work after the trial. She served as chair of the NAACP and helped preserve the couple's legacy through the institute bearing both names. Her life demonstrates why widow is an inadequate permanent title. The assassination altered her path, but it did not define the full range of her contribution.

The children also grew beyond the night described in the opinion. Their safety drill in the hallway is powerful because it is concrete, yet repeating it without the rest of their lives can trap them inside childhood fear. The monument's interpretation places the drill within a home that also held achievement, affection, and political purpose.

That balance offers a standard for every chapter that follows. Threat should be described where it shaped choices. Violence should be described where it explains loss or evidence. Neither should occupy all the space that once belonged to a person's work and relationships.

The Beckwith judgment answered the criminal question the state put to the jury. It did not answer why the first juries could not act, why officials displayed support for the accused, or why one family had to supply so much of the momentum for a public prosecution. Those are historical and civic questions. The preserved home keeps them open after the criminal docket has closed.

Sources for Chapter One

- FBI, Medgar Evers
- Mississippi Supreme Court, Beckwith v. State
- National Park Service, Evers Family Home
- National Park Service, Medgar Evers
- National Park Service, Myrlie Evers-Williams
- Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Medgar Evers House nomination
- FBI Vault, Medgar Evers files

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