

BEYOND

THEBOOK

ALABAMA
AFRICAN
AMERICAN
HISTORY

Three years after publishing *The Future Emerges from the Past: Celebrating 200 Years of Alabama African American History and Culture*, alafricanamerican.com continues to honor and highlight past, present, and future Alabama African American history makers.

BEYOND THEBOOK

Because Alabama African American history can't be taught in a single month, we will continue to share short articles along with links to videos, photos, reference material, and additional information for all to enjoy on a monthly basis. The website's goal is the same as the book's: To inspire the young and young at heart to dream big and celebrate Alabama's rich African American history and culture.

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IN 1959, ATTORNEY J.L. CHESTNUT JR.

became the first Black attorney to practice law in Selma, Alabama. He was the second Black attorney to practice law in the state of Alabama.

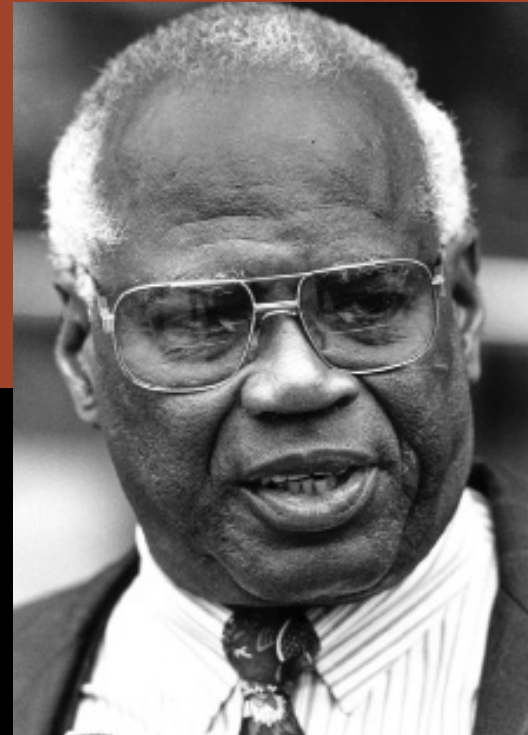


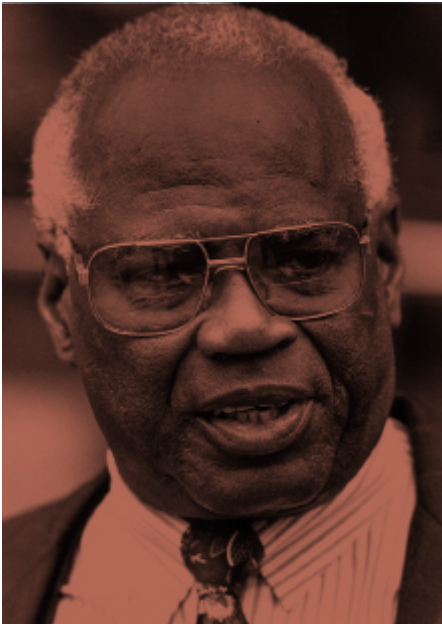
Photo courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, Alabama Media Group Collection

He practiced law for more than a decade before founding the law firm of Chestnut, Sanders & Sanders, which would become the largest Black law firm in Alabama.

A well-known, pioneering figure for Blacks in the legal field, Mr. Chestnut was also an underpublicized, critical figure in the civil rights movement.



Attorney J.L. Chestnut Jr. began his career as a young lawyer working in Alabama’s Black Belt as a lawyer for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. He was tasked by the NAACP to implement the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in Alabama, where he and other attorneys faced lawsuits in virtually every school district across the state. Chestnut and the other attorneys would eventually sue the entire state on behalf of Brown rather than the individual school districts.



Because when, as a group, we decide to think up, to see up, to read up, to get up and stand up – we can make mountains move, trees tremble, rivers stand still, angels sing and devils cry.

—J.L. Chestnut, Jr., 1990



Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, there were many people who qualify as heroes. However, there is one hero who has accomplished many things during the Civil Rights Movement and throughout his lifetime that the world now knows about it. That hero is Attorney J.L. Chestnut, Jr. He has taught us many, many timeless lessons on how to treat and love your sister or brother, no matter what color he or she is.

During the 1960s, Chestnut represented the civil rights marchers and civil rights leaders, including **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Dick Gregory, Rev. C.T. Vivian, Joseph Lowery** and **Dr. Bernard LaFayette**. Chestnut was very instrumentally involved in the efforts that led to “Bloody Sunday”, which was the catalyst for the passage of the **Voting Rights Act of 1965**.



I don't know what would have happened to us in Selma if it wasn't for Chestnut. Selma was a vicious place, vicious. I don't know how he survived there, I really don't. He used the law to help liberate the Black folk of Alabama. He was a lawyer, but he was also a foot soldier. He was a brave and courageous man.

—John Lewis



He was also involved in cases that led to the right of Blacks to serve on juries in Dallas County, Alabama for the first time in 100 years.

Chestnut later distinguished himself as one of the greatest trial lawyers in Alabama history and a prominent national attorney.

Chestnut was part of a successful national class action team that garnered millions of dollars for clients during the 1990s. He would later become class counsel in the Black Farmers' Class Action Litigation (*Timothy Pigford et al. v. Dan Glickman, Secretary, United States Department of Agriculture, 1999*), which was the largest class action lawsuit in United States history.



Above: Timothy Pigford and his sons.



The characteristics of a hero are personified in this man because of his undying will and commitment to rid this country of injustices for all mankind. J.L. Chestnut, Jr. has been likened to Abraham Lincoln, a great American hero. Just as black slaves fought for freedom, J.L. fought to give blacks in Selma, Alabama the right to vote.

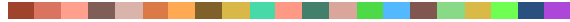
In March 2009, Jeff Davis Avenue was renamed J.L. Chestnut, Jr. Blvd. in his honor. Chestnut is a hero because he lived to help others. He was true to his vision and mission and he spent his life dedicated to every American he thought he could help. He believed in the power of community by which society could improve and flourish. He was a living example of what we all should strive to do ... to be.



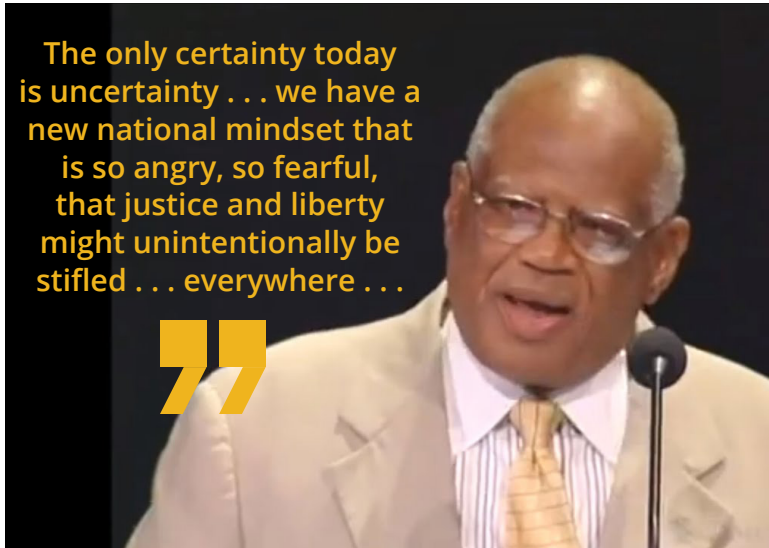
Left: J.L. Chestnut Jr. Blvd. street sign.

Above: In 2021, the Dallas County Commission renamed their courthouse annex the J.L. Chestnut–Bruce C. Boynton Judicial Building to honor Chestnut and fellow Selma civil rights attorney Bruce C. Boynton.

Photo: John Zippert/Green County Democrat



“
Racism has a stranglehold on the throat of this democracy!



The only certainty today is uncertainty . . . we have a new national mindset that is so angry, so fearful, that justice and liberty might unintentionally be stifled . . . everywhere . . .



Above: Chestnut speaking in 2000 (left) and 2001 at Bioneers, a nonprofit organization that highlights and supports innovative solutions for pressing environmental and social challenges.



Above: Chestnut and wife Vivian. (Courtesy of the Chestnut family)

The biggest focus of Chestnut’s life was his family for he was devoted to his entire family. He also loved God and was a lifelong member of the First Baptist Church.

Often Chestnut was asked, what legacy will you leave your children and your family. Chestnut always replied: “Because I have been blessed to be married to my best friend for almost all of my adult life, most of the time I am happy and my wife’s love has taught me how to love unconditionally. Thus, I will leave my six children and my family the aspects of my character. My family knows that I love them all unconditionally, so the rest is in the details.”

“I have had the chance to look back over thirty years. And I’m not displeased with what I see.”

—J.L. Chestnut, Jr.





Left to right: Ralph Paige, Rev. Joseph Lowery and J.L. Chestnut in Washington DC in the early 2000s at a rally in support of the Black farmer lawsuit. (Photo by Heather Gray)

A R D E S I O T U I R O C N E A S L

J.L. Chestnut Jr., Early Leader in Civil Rights Movement, Is Dead at 77

<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/01/us/01chestnut.html>

When Black Farmers Took on the USDA

<https://bioneers.org/when-black-farmers-took-on-the-usda-bioneers-raised-the-profile-of-the-largest-civil-settlement-in-history-zmaz1801/>

Chestnut Jr., J. L / Encyclopedia of Alabama

<https://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/j-l-chestnut-jr/>

Black in Selma: The Uncommon Life of J.L. Chestnut Jr.

J.L. Chestnut and Julia Cass. January 1990. Publisher: Farrar Straus Giroux

The Legacy of J.L. Chestnut, Jr. Raising Hell in the South

<https://justiceinitiativeinternational.wordpress.com/2017/08/03/the-legacy-of-j-l-chestnut-jr-raising-hell-in-the-south/>