

THE PAPER AND THE PREACHER: HOW THE SOUTHERN COURIER REPORTED THE KING ASSASSINATION

BY SCOTTY E. KIRKLAND

Something is happening in our world," Martin Luther King Jr. told the crowd assembled at the Memphis Mason Temple Church on April 3, 1968. From South Africa, to Ghana, to the ongoing strike by sanitation workers in the Tennessee city, the civil rights leader saw a continuous quest for freedom that demanded vigilance. "Let us rise up tonight with greater readiness," he said, "and let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge, to make America what it ought to be." King would be killed by an assassin's bullet the following day.

News of King's death reached Montgomery, Alabama, after the weekly edition of the *Southern Courier* had already gone to print. Founded in 1965 by two former editors of the *Harvard Crimson*, the small publication fulfilled the important and sorely needed role of providing African Americans and sympathetic whites with a broader sense of community in the fight for equality. King loomed large within the pages of the *Southern Courier's* 177 issues. Its reporters covered his campaigns in Alabama and throughout the country. The paper published an essay he wrote on the tenth anniversary of the Montgomery bus boycott, the event that transformed him from a young minister into a national figure. Following King's death, the *Southern Courier* produced a fascinating memorial record of his funeral in Atlanta, beginning with its April 13–14, 1968, issue.

In a front-page article written in the paper's popular plainspoken style, executive editor Mary Ellen Gale summarized King's funeral and the long cortege from the church to the cemetery:

From the white-columned Sister's Chapel—where Dr. King's body lay in a glass-covered coffin—an immense line of mourners wove back and forth across the college walks. There were old men in shabby suits, well-dressed middle-

aged couples, college students, and mothers and fathers with their young children tugging at their hands. Most of the people were black, but some were white. All of them stood quietly in uncertain sunshine, beneath flowering trees and ivy-covered red brick buildings.

Editor Michael Lottman summarized King's meteoric career in a full-page article on page two. Lottman filled his piece with lengthy quotes from King's most memorable speeches. To the readers of the *Courier*, it was a reminder of pursued dreams, hard-fought victories, and work unfinished. A photo essay by the *Courier's* principal photographer,





Above: Grim-faced pallbearers T. Y. Rogers (in denim jacket), Andrew Young (behind Rogers, to the right), and Jesse Jackson (right foreground) at the King gravesite. Opposite page, above: A huge crowd gathered across the street from Ebenezer Baptist Church. Opposite page, below: A young boy gazes at a pillow embroidered with “I have a dream.” (All Alabama Department of Archives and History)

Jim Pepler, entitled “In Remembrance of Me,” occupied page three. Six of the ten images showed King in the pulpit, underscoring both his ministerial roots and the fact that the preacher was being laid to rest during the week of Easter.

The paper’s back page described other memorial services in Alabama—and in retrospect serves as a fine example of the kind of community-based journalism that both endeared the paper to its readers and makes the *Southern Courier* such a valuable resource for historians. It described marches in places like Montgomery and Tuscaloosa, where five thousand people participated. The paper covered notable memorials in Selma, Demopolis, and Mobile and an emotional rally in Pike County, where one mourner told a *Courier* reporter, “If tears had been a river, it would have floated Troy.”

Complementing the *Courier*’s King reportage are Jim Pepler’s images. The talented young photographer attended the

funeral in Atlanta, and amidst a throng of more than 150,000 mourners, he captured 500 iconic photographs, all of which are now part of the Jim Pepler *Southern Courier* Collection at the Alabama Department of Archives and History. A week after the initial coverage, the paper’s April 20–21, 1968, edition carried two pages of images from the funeral. Wide-angle shots show a sea of mourners gathered along the funeral procession route. Other images capture civil rights activists and celebrities, including Stokely Carmichael, Wilt Chamberlain, Richard Nixon, and Robert F. Kennedy, who himself would fall to an assassin’s bullet less than two months later.

But for every well-known face captured by Pepler’s sharp lens, there are countless nameless ones, young and old, running the gamut of socioeconomic status. Fifty years later, in the words and images of the *Southern Courier*, these participant-observers capture a pivotal movement in the nation’s history.

For more information about the *Southern Courier* or to view Pepler’s images, please see our extra resources at AlabamaHeritage.com.

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