

Response Timeline

The year 1968 was an inarguably turbulent era in American history. As the Vietnam War raged on overseas, our home turf was, too, stained by violence and unrest. While U.S. citizens looked toward new leadership in an election year, their icons of hope were slain. The national news, then, didn't spend much time reporting the tragedy in Orangeburg. The crisis climate of the time overshadowed an event that was already poorly covered on-the-spot, due to the small town's distance from news crews in the state capital, Columbia, and the timing of the massacre, which turned deadly after 9 p.m. on that Thursday night.

February 9th, 1968 Orangeburg Massacre

Orangeburg Massacre shocks locally, has little national impact. At a press conference the next day in Columbia, South Carolina, Governor Robert E. McNair called it "one of the saddest days in the history of South Carolina" and referred to it as "this unfortunate incident." Contrary to evidence, he also said the shooting occurred off campus. He placed blame on "black power advocates;" April 1968

Martin Luther King, Jr. assassinated June 1968

Robert Kennedy assassinated August 1968

Confrontations at Democratic National Convention November 1968

Richard Nixon elected President by thin margin 1969 Troopers acquitted in Orangeburg case

In a federal court more than a year later, a jury took less than two hours to acquit nine troopers charged with imposing summary punishment without due process of law.

- Trial details are highlighted in the book "The Orangeburg Massacre" 1970 Sellers incarcerated

Two and a half years after the shooting, a jury in Orangeburg convicted Cleveland L Sellers, Jr. of "inciting a riot" because of limited activity at the bowling alley two nights before the shooting. Sellers, who had grown up 20 miles from Orangeburg, had returned from the Deep South combat zone of the civil rights struggle as national program director for the militant Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The presiding judge threw out charges of conspiracy to riot and incitement to riot, but the charge of riot stood. He served seven months of a one-year sentence in state prison with early release for good behavior.

- Article from The State

- Article from The Columbia Record

The Orangeburg Massacre published 1977 Cleveland Sellers' The River of No Return published 1984 The Orangeburg Massacre reissued 1993 Sellers pardoned

On July 20, the state's Probation, Pardon, and Parole Board voted unanimously to pardon Sellers after a staff investigation recommended it. On the Sunday after Sellers' pardon, South Carolina's largest daily newspaper, "The State" in Columbia, SC said in its lead editorial that the pardon "was long, long overdue," but represented "a significant step toward reconciliation and the healing process." Link to The State's archive of stories relating to the Orangeburg Massacre. February 8, 2000 Historic Marker Erected on S.C. State campus

Also, a waist-high granite marker near the field where the shooting occurred (which now hosts an administration building) displays the names of each of the three victims, with their respective dates of birth and the February 8, 1968 date of their deaths. The simple inscription on marker reads: IN MEMORIAM TO

THOSE WHOSE LIVES WERE TAKEN ON SOUTH
CAROLINA STATE COLLEGE CAMPUS
ORANGEBURG, SOUTH CAROLINA FEBRUARY 8, 1968
IN PURSUIT OF HUMAN DIGNITY 2001

Governor Hodges speaks at memorial, expresses regret at the 33rd commemoration of the shooting, Governor Jim Hodges said, "We deeply regret what happened here on the night of February 8, 1968." Several survivors and their families attended, as well as state and some national media. Former Governor McNair was extended a formal invitation, but declined.

- Greenville News story

- CNN story

- Brian Cabell CNN story

Jack Bass used the opportunity to interview many of the Orangeburg Massacre survivors for a half-hour "oral history project."

- View the five-minute version of this series of honest and emotional interviews on our home page .

2003

S.C. Governor Mark Sanford issues formal apology for Orangeburg Massacre May 2007

Incident gets renewed exposure after April 07 Democratic debate at S.C. State University
November 17, 2007

Former Gov. McNair dies at age 83
November 29, 2007

FBI declines to reopen Orangeburg Massacre investigation
February 8, 2008

40th Commemoration ceremony
Sources

Sources include *The Orangeburg Massacre* (courtesy of Mercer University Press 2002) and *Nieman Reports* (courtesy of Jack Bass), in addition to news sources linked throughout timeline.

Photos appear courtesy of Bill Barley, Mercer University Press and Cleveland Sellers.