The Fantastic Case of the TRENTON SIX

Credit: Wide World

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.
20 West 40th Street
New York 18, N.Y.
This is an alarming story.

If it had happened in Scottsboro, Alabama or in Groveland, Florida — or in South Carolina, Georgia, or elsewhere in the Klan-ridden territory of the South — it would have been branded “outrageous” and denounced as another blot on democracy’s record and another triumph for hate in a section of our country where such grim triumphs are all too frequent.

But it didn’t happen in Alabama. It happened in the “enlightened North” — in Trenton, New Jersey. In the capital of the great liberal state whose Constitution, with its forthright and unequivocal protection of human and civil rights, has been hailed as one of the most enlightened pieces of modern legislation in existence anywhere.

For this reason, the story is not just outrageous — not just deplorable. It is unbelievable and appalling. Appalling even to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which has handled many a fearful case.

It is a story which should arouse every single freedom-loving American out of his “It can’t happen here” apathy. It did happen here.
THE TRENTON SIX STORY

THE central characters in the story are six young Trenton Negroes — Horace Wilson, John McKenzie, Collis English, Ralph Cooper, McKinley Forrest, and James Thorpe — on trial for their lives a second time in one of the most confusing and complicated murder cases of our time.

This is how the story began:

On the morning of January 27, 1948, 73-year-old William Horner was beaten to death with a soda-pop bottle in the back room of his combination junk-novelty shop and home. Mrs. Elizabeth Horner, his wife, knocked unconscious in the front room of the shop, managed to crawl to the front door to call for help.

Frank Eldracher, a cigar salesman, walking from across the street to his car (which was parked in front of the Horner store), saw Mrs. Horner and ran to call the police. He later testified that when he was less than ten feet from the door of the store — and before he noticed Mrs. Horner — he saw two Negroes, both rather light complexioned, come out of the store. Mrs. Virginia Barclay, who lives across the street, said she saw three Negro "teen-agers" run from the direction of the store and jump into a four-door green 1936 Plymouth sedan in which a fourth youth was sitting.

Apparently the two eyewitness stories furnished the premise that six Negroes were involved in the crime. Police began their man-hunt, combing the poorer sections of town and the Negro districts of Trenton and nearby com-
munities. Three days after the murder, the Trenton Times announced that the streets would be patrolled by a “heavily armed motorized bandit squad” and that “all men found on the streets without good reason would be questioned by plainclothesmen.”

On February 6, ten days after the murder, Collis English, 23 — a veteran with malaria and a rheumatic heart — was arrested for driving his father’s two-door black 1938 Ford sedan without a license. Police questioned him about the Horner murder, grilling him continuously for 19 hours until he signed a confession.

When McKinley Forrest, 35, English’s brother-in-law, came to police headquarters the next day to find out why English had failed to return home, he too was arrested. So were four others named by English in his “confession” — John McKenzie, 24; James Thorpe, 24; Ralph Cooper, 23; and Horace Wilson, 37.

All six were kept incommunicado for four days and five nights, denied sleep, subjected to relentless interrogation, and threatened with violence if they did not “confess.” Five of the six signed “confessions.”

Here were the facts when the Trenton Six went on trial for their lives on June 15:

- The two eyewitnesses had described the young men they saw leaving the scene of the crime as light-complexioned. Five of the six defendants have dark skin.
- Thorpe, the only one light in color, had had his arm amputated eight days before the murder. No witness spoke of seeing a one-armed man at the scene.
- Mrs. Horner, while still recovering from her wounds, was taken to Police Headquarters and shown the sus-
pects. She failed to identify any of them. Later, when shown their pictures individually, she "identified" all six of them.

- Neither Eldracher nor Mrs. Barclay would identify any of the six as among the men they saw near the scene of the crime.

- The car English had been driving illegally was a two-door black Ford; the car alleged to have been used by the criminals was described as a four-door green Plymouth.

- Robbery was assumed to be the motive for the murder. Yet police found $1,642 in the dead man’s pockets.

- Three of the defendants claimed they had been given doped drinks and strange-tasting cigarettes which made them blackout before signing the confessions. Wilson, the only one who refused to sign, asserted that he was the only one who had steadfastly refused all offers of drinks and cigarettes during the questioning.

- All six offered witnesses and positive evidence to support their alibis explaining their whereabouts (nowhere near the scene of the crime) at the time of the murder. Three of the six were at work.

- Mrs. Horner identified Forrest as a man who had visited her store previously and signed a receipt with another name. Forrest is illiterate; there is no record of his signature as anything but “X”.

After an eight-week trial, the jury weighed the “evidence” and on August 6 brought back its verdict: GUILTY!!!
"The jury decision," reported the Trenton Times, "... seemed to have stunned the entire city."

The Trenton Times was unduly moderate in its speculation; the jury's conviction of the Trenton Six rocked the entire world.

* * *

Eleven months later, the Supreme Court of New Jersey reversed the lower court decision on three technical counts and ordered a new trial for the Trenton Six. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had filed a brief as friend of the court in the appeal.

On February 5, 1951, three long years after these six defendants were arrested for a crime in which there is no evidence to indicate they played any part, the six are on trial for their lives for a second time.

* * *

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People hopes that the beginning of this new trial is the beginning of the last chapter of the unbelievable story of the Trenton Six. The NAACP, which is defending McKenzie and Wilson, hopes that the last chapter will have none of the grim overtones of the previous ones, and that the whole terrible tragedy of the Trenton Six will end on a bright note of hope for New Jersey, for America and for the world — the acquittal of the defendants.

Your support is desperately needed for the legal defense of these victims of miscarried justice. The New Jersey State Conference of NAACP branches, together with the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., must raise $10,000 to cover legal expenses involved in the trial. Every cent raised in the name of the NAACP
for this purpose will be placed in a separate bank account for the New Jersey State Conference for the sole purpose of the *legal* defense of the men represented by the Association. A careful accounting will be given to the public. (The NAACP will not, as have other organizations previously handling the case, propagandize on the Trenton Six to raise money for other, unconnected, purposes.)

Do what you can today to bring about justice in the notorious case of the Trenton Six. Help the NAACP win the battle against the duplication of a Scottsboro or a Groveland in New Jersey.

Clip the coupon below and send in your contribution TODAY.

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NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.
20 West 40th Street
New York 18, New York

I enclose $________________ as a contribution to help the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., and the New Jersey State Conference of NAACP branches win the acquittal of the Trenton Six.

I understand that I may deduct my contribution from my income tax.

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Make checks payable to Dr. Allan Knight Chalmers, treasurer.

January, 1951