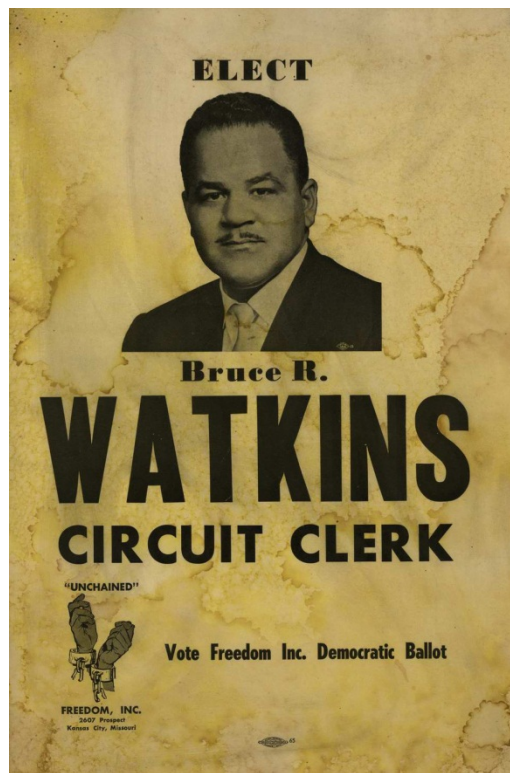


XI

Freedom Inc. Grows into a National Force, 1966-1970

In 1966 Charles E. Curry, a local businessman who had been successful in real estate and who was a friend of Harry Truman, decided to reinvigorate his Committee for County Progress party, which had not done well in 1964. He brought in professional political organizer Matthew Reese, who had worked for John F. Kennedy. The strategy was not to confront the factions directly, but to play to the silk stocking community with the white hat reform issue and at the same time to build on the resurgent racial pride of the black community, in effect to grow the budding coalition that



had passed the controversial 1964 public accommodations act. Bruce Watkins, then a city councilman, was key to the latter half of this strategy. He joined the CCP as a candidate for County Clerk opposing the incumbent John J. Mc Fadden, a close associate of Louis Wagner. Watkins insisted that the black community was as interested as anyone else in effective community leadership, but he clearly saw enduring faction control as the principal barrier: “The factions, which control the County won’t do it. If they better the Negro they’d lose control of him. So they have exploited him.”

Melba J. Marlow later reviewed the significance of Bruce Watkins' service as Jackson County Circuit Clerk. She credits Watkins' election to the City Council and Jordan and Holliday's election as state representatives to setting "Freedom solidly on the power track. . . .So while common folk were buying color TV's, ranch houses, and new cars, Freedom's boys were flexing their muscles wondering where to make their next assault." After much discussion that led only to a quandary, all of Freedom's leaders went home to bed, "all but Harold L. Holliday, who sat before the fire and thought and thought. Like a bolt from heaven, the idea struck him. . . .A COUNTY OFFICE, ONLY A COUNTY OFFICE WOULD DO! Then a more wrenching thought, What office?. . .along came full revelation. . . .THE CIRCUIT CLERK OFFICE!

"It was not 2 o'clock in the morning, but to Holliday it was a day not to bother with time. He called Leon Jordan, the President of Freedom; he called Bruce Watkins, for along with his revelation was the vision of Bruce Watkins who could bring it off. The idea was viewed, tossed around and plotted before the day got off to an official start.

"When Watkins declared his candidacy for the circuit clerk office the announcement was met with disbelief, derision and extreme doubt. Even among his own organization consternation prevailed, and voices were heard protesting that things were moving too fast. To no avail, Jordan, Holliday, and Watkins remained stubborn in their decision. . . .Freedom's successive victories made possible by the solid voting black bloc had begun to demand respect among political circles. Because of their avowed battle against the factions, the factions knew they were off-limits to any overture they might make.

"Therefore CCP, badly in need of solid support could send out feelers and make conversation with Freedom, Inc., and eventually add the name of 'Watkins' to their team."

Watkins adopted a straightforward platform that he continued to maintain in 1970: Better Operation of the Circuit Clerk office; Better Custodial Care of Records; Better Safe-guarding of Public Moneys; Better Public Relations; and Equal Opportunity in Employment. Noted as a strong speaker, Watkins deliberately was unusually quiet during the 1967 campaign, and many feared his name and face would be forgotten on election day. When his chances seemed most dismal, a story broke in the *Kansas City Star* charging some employees in the county clerk office with embezzlement. Watkins refused to make this a public issue. “At the end of the day when victories were certain, the Watkins name had moved from the shadow of the question mark into the brilliance of a halo. He had become the first Negro county office holder.”

In August the *Call* triumphantly announced that the joined forces of Charles Curry’s Country Progress Committee and Leon Jordan’s Freedom, Inc. had made “a clean sweep of Jackson County, defeating the Democratic factional organizations in eight out of nine major offices [in the Democratic primary]. For the first time in history, a Negro, Bruce R. Watkins, was elected to a county-wide position. Watkins, 42 year old city councilman, virtually did the ‘impossible’ by defeating John J. McFadden, incumbent city clerk of Jackson County, by the overwhelming majority of 48,455 to 37,429. . . .

“Watkins himself was surprised that he defeated McFadden by the margin of 11,000 votes. He had expected to win in the central city districts but was not certain how he would fare in the outlying districts of Jackson County where the population is mostly white. ‘I was astounded and highly pleased,’ Watkins said the day after the elections.” Watkins’s and Freedom’s triumph dramatically extended Freedom’s political authority into Jackson County politics. In that same primary election J. McKinley Neal, with total backing of the factions, tried

to reclaim the state legislative seat he had held for eighteen years before Jordan defeated him two years earlier. But Jordan crushed Neal by 2,593 votes to 629, a four to one margin.

In 1966 Stokely Carmichael and other young militants were raising the banner of Black Power, and in many areas of the nation there was a notable white backlash. But Watkins's election in November caused the *Call* to express relief that "The 'white backlash'—which took various forms around the country from the near-election of Lester Maddox, the fried chicken king in Georgia, to the solid defeat of George P. Mahoney, Maryland segregationist—was not felt here. In electing Bruce R. Watkins to the office of Jackson county circuit clerk, the voters of our local community turned a deaf ear to the 'white backlash' as we thought they would. Democrats by and large refused to cross their party lines for racial reasons. Watkins was part of the County for Progress team with which he swept to victory in the August primary. The team stayed together, with ability and personality being the dominant factors, not race."⁸⁵

Also in 1966 the federal district court of western Missouri directed the Missouri General Assembly to reapportion itself to achieve more equal representation of the residents of the state. Harold Holliday was one of the successful complainants. As a result of the court order Kansas City was able to elect one more Negro member of the House of Representatives. St. Louis was able to elect four additional Negro members. At the end of the legislative session in July, 1967, Holliday wrote, "without question the Negro delegation in the House of Representatives was more effective than it has ever been in the past." The unity of the Negro representatives was particularly significant in passing Congressional redistricting legislation, which resulted in St. Louis gaining a Negro representative in the United States Congress.

⁸⁵ *Kansas City Times*, July 20, 1966; *Kansas City Call*, Mar. 20-26, April 3-9, 1970; Aug. 12-18 & Nov. 18-24, 1966; Larry E. Ruby, "The Campaign for a County Government: the 1966 Jackson County Primary," pp. 2-3, 41-42.

Holliday also claimed credit for the black representatives in passing a bill reorganizing the Kansas City School Board which should result in at least two Negro members joining the Board. But he acknowledged that on many issues there were different opinions within the black legislators and that even when they were united they were not always successful. In February, 1967, Marjorie King, a Kansas City activist who had won a position on the state Human Resources Board, organized significant public support for a bill which would allow mothers on Aid to Dependent Children rolls to receive payments when fathers were unemployed and remained at home. Freedom provided six busses to take people to Jefferson City. Father Renee of St. Aloysius Catholic Parish provided three more. Despite the strong show of public support that bill along with several others died in the Senate.⁸⁶

1967 was a year of simmering civil unrest in the nation. Inner cities were seething with activity and resentment. Campuses were inflamed with anti-Vietnam War protests. Martin Luther King and others were linking the two issues. President Lyndon Johnson was caught in a painful political straddle. The year, however, was also notable for the appointment of Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court in October.

In February, 1968, Leon Jordan was invited to speak to Sally Steinbach's class in American Government at the Metropolitan Junior College. The students questioned him on the catch-phrase of the day, Black Power. Jordan dismissed the phrase as "rhetoric." "Black Power, per se, is nothing new. Freedom, Inc. is Black Power, but 'Burn Baby Burn' is out of line! I'd be willing to throw gas bombs if I thought it would get better schools or better jobs for Negroes. But it won't." When asked if Kansas City Negroes were too apathetic, he responded, "I'd say complacent. The worst thing is for men of good will to say nothing! When that happens, the guy with a scheme gets his way—then we have an explosion."

⁸⁶ *Kansas City Call*, Feb. 26—March 2, July 14—July 20, 1967.

Jordan's appearance in the class was arranged by Mrs. Irene Vernell, a student in the class who had begun working for Freedom, Inc. Jordan helped Vernell and her two daughters move out of the home she shared with an abusive husband, Fezell Vernell, in December, 1967. He found her an apartment at 39th and Prospect. She was in the process of getting a divorce that was completed in June, 1968. Fezell Vernell had introduced himself to Jordan in 1965 and secured Jordan's help in getting a barber's license. Jordan also cosigned a loan Vernell received to start his barber shop. Fezell admitted Jordan gave him good advice about running his business and investing his profits. But Vernell became outraged when he learned that his wife and Jordan were having an affair.

According to Irene, Fezell was an embarrassingly suspicious husband prone to outrageous accusations. He indeed did describe his wife as a common prostitute when later telling his story to FBI agents, even telling them that he had once planned to take her to Alaska to make money for him on the street. The agents interviewed him because he had threatened Jordan's life. Vernell's threats were dramatic gestures of bravado that few, including the FBI agents, took seriously. However, he was apparently acquainted with Maynard Cooper, Doc Dearborn and Robert and Jimmy Willis, three of whom later were indicted for Jordan's murder. Irene openly acknowledged her relationship with Jordan to the FBI. She believed that Orchid did not know of their affair. Orchid, however, told another agent after her husband's murder that she had heard of Jordan's relationship with Irene Smith [Vernell] but had no definite knowledge of it.⁸⁷

A week after Jordan's appearance at the Junior College there was a significant election within the Jackson County Democratic Committee. Six of the nine Negro members of the

⁸⁷ *Call*, March 8-14, 1968; O. Brown to Major E. L. Willoughby, July 25, 1970, Interview with Irene (Vernell) Smith, July 29, 1970; Interview with Fezell Vernell, July 16, 1970; Interview with Orchid Jordan, August 7, 1970, FBI File, LJC.

committee voted with the Curry-Watkins Committee for County Progress to elect Thomas R. Slaughter chairman of the committee. They ousted Garrett Smalley, the former chairman and candidate favored by the factions.

Then a rapid series of dramatic national events hugely influenced life in Kansas City. On March 31, Lyndon Baines Johnson announced he would not be a candidate for the presidency in 1968. The public turmoil over his failed Vietnam policy had taken its toll. The following week Martin Luther King was assassinated on April 4th at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Riots broke out in many cities of the nation, including Kansas City. Locally the national guard was quickly mobilized and the police action was swift and repressive. The official reaction sparked a notable public conflict between Freedom, Inc. and Gov. Warren Hearnes. Their relationship had not been friendly to begin with.

The week before the state Democratic convention to be held on June 1, Freedom released a statement opposing Hearnes' favorite son candidacy and the imposition of the unit rule on Missouri delegates to the national convention. Freedom criticized the governor for being "totally unresponsive to the concerns and aspirations of the black citizens of the state." Hearnes responded by immediately firing four Freedom employees of the state government and then was reported to have said that these employees belong to an "organization that did not believe in law and order." Freedom had strongly criticized police acts that resulted in the deaths of black citizens during the riots in Kansas City.

Hearnes' support was solid in the conservative rural areas of Missouri, so he came into the state convention in substantial control. However, when he got up to speak thirty-five Freedom delegates walked out. They were joined by some of the black delegates from St. Louis and some of the white supporters of Gene McCarthy. Hearnes paled in anger. When he finished

speaking the delegates returned to the convention. The governor was forced to compromise on his call for the unit rule controlling the state delegation at the national convention. The compromise agreed that the unit rule could only be effected by a two-thirds vote of the delegation held at the national convention.

In September Jordan was elected chairman of the Fifth Congressional district Democratic committee. He deeply felt the honor of the occasion, “Heretofore in no place in the history of the state of Missouri has a Negro been elected to such a high office in the state Democratic party structure. It has jarred me, moved me and touched me, to know that the Democratic party has moved to this new position. It is an honor to Kansas City and the Democratic party.” He spoke at the county courthouse where he was elected unanimously by the committee that had now come under the control of the Committee for County Progress. Charles E. Curry attended although not a member of the committee. Committee members representing the North Side political factions did not attend. Harry Jones, who reported the meeting for the *Times*, also described Jordan as “a member of the third generation of his family to be born in Kansas City.” It seems very likely that Jordan mentioned this proudly in his talk and felt that he was now living up to the legacy of his father and grandfather.⁸⁸

Richard Tolbert, Jordan’s protégé, wrote the article in *The Call* describing Freedom’s actions at the state convention. He would assume Leon Jordan’s seat at the raucous Democratic convention in Chicago. Robert Kennedy was murdered a few days after the Missouri state convention on June 6. The cross currents were strong in the city and the state.

Freedom, Inc. carried its campaign against Hearnese into the general election in November. It publicly announced its opposition to him in the primary and refused to be swayed

⁸⁸ *The Call*, June 1, 14, 19, 1968; *Kansas City Times*, September 4, 1968.

by pleas from Curry's Committee for County Progress, with whom it otherwise worked closely, to drop its opposition to Hearnese.

But Thomas Eagleton's candidacy in the Democratic primary that year was another significant Freedom story. There were three strong candidates: former Senator Edward V. Long, Thomas Eagleton, and True Davis. Long had been in the Senate for eight years and had a strong record of voting for civil rights legislation. True Davis had by far the best financed campaign. Tom Eagleton was the newcomer and underdog. Many years later in another campaign Richard Tolbert tells a colorful story of True Davis coming into Kansas City in 1968 and successfully buying political support in the black community until he came face to face with Leon Jordan. Davis with his henchmen supposedly walked into a meeting with Jordan, threw \$10,000 on the table and said "Leon, I need your support." That was big money in those days and there were many eager to take it. "But finally Leon said, 'Look here, True: I can certainly use the money—but I can't take it. I gotta go with Tom Eagleton. He doesn't have your money, but he's been right for the black community.'

"Leon felt that Eagleton had proven himself a friend, and on that basis he turned down the highest bidder. That was Leon Jordan. And that's what I represent," claimed Tolbert.

Whether Tolbert's story is literally true or not, Freedom did choose to support Eagleton in the primary. Eagleton did win that primary, and Freedom's support was unquestionably crucial. Eagleton became a dependable friend of Freedom's, and more particularly of Leon Jordan's. Eagleton was much more responsive to local politics and politicians than Richard Bolling. He gave a particularly warm tribute to Jordan at the latter's funeral, remembering how they shared their passion for politics as they sat down together in the backroom of Jordan's Green Duck tavern.

That Democratic primary provided Freedom with other key victories. Dr. William Bryan, Freedom candidate, was elected as the first black County Coroner. Leon Jordan easily beat back the factions' effort to defeat him by choosing the popular great black pitcher, Satchel Paige, to run against him. Bruce Watkins was elected Democratic committeeman in the second ward, until this time a faction stronghold. And Herman Johnson, a Freedom candidate, was nominated as state representative for the thirteenth ward. Harold Holliday senior failed to win his nomination to the Senate, but after the dust settled, he returned to his post as representative.

Despite the fact that Charles Curry stepped out of his leadership role in the C. C.P. just before the November vote, the 1968 general election was seen as a big victory for the C.C.P. and Freedom over the factions. Hearnese was, of course, reelected, but Bruce Watkins declared, "I can hardly tell you what a great victory Freedom Inc. scored. The Negro community has voted against Governor Hearnese and Edgar Keating and overwhelmingly for Hubert Humphrey in a superb demonstration of ticket splitting that shows Hearnese we mean business." Leon Jordan added in a lower, but still determined, voice, the vote was "a significant victory against a racist governor." These claims were supported by some impressive statistics. Freedom's support for Roos drew 3,196 votes against 1,035 for Hearnese in Jordan's own ward. At the same time his voters supported Tom Eagleton, the Democratic candidate for the U. S. Senate by 4,773 to 328. A similar pattern could be seen in other Freedom strongholds.⁸⁹

Freedom had demonstrated its power to deliver a strong black vote in Kansas City. It had increased its power in the state legislature, and it had played an important role in keeping the

⁸⁹*Call*, Oct. 25-31, Nov. 1-7, 1968; *K.C. Jones*, "Richard C. Tolbert, Other Voices," September, 1990; *Kansas City Star*, July 15, 1970; Thomas Eagleton's funeral tribute to Leon Jordan, LJC; interview with Richard Tolbert, September 1, 2004; *Call*, August 9, 1968; Amy Hart, "The Founding of Freedom," p. 133. In May, 1968, Alvin Brooks, who had served in the police department for eleven years without rising above the rank of corporal and who had been serving his third term as Chair of Kansas City CORE, was appointed Director of Human Relations for Kansas City.

careers of Richard Bolling and Tom Eagleton, two significant national leaders, on track. It was now gaining state and national recognition.

But what was Freedom? How did it work? And what in particular was Leon Jordan's leadership role? Bruce Watkins gave a very revealing interview to Sgt. Lloyd DeGraffenreid on these matters after Jordan's murder. He said that prior to Leon's death, he [Watkins] "had little or nothing to do with making political deals or meeting with any of the top people of other political organizations, such things as picking what offices Freedom would try for and who would run for these offices, what other political organizations that Freedom would become allied with during an election year, which candidates of other political organizations that Freedom would endorse, how much money would be spent, how the money would be raised was all done by Leon." Watkins's "specific job was to make speeches."

Orchid Jordan was equally emphatic: "She stated that Leon was the sole boss of Freedom, Inc., and made the final decisions in all matters that came up. This included what offices that Freedom would try to win, who would run for these offices, what other political organizations they would become allied with, and what candidates of any other political organizations that Freedom would endorse. He also had the final say in how much money would be needed, how it would be raised, and how it would be spent. If any problems arose within the organization, or with any other organization, Leon was the one who would handle it."

Howard Maupin, officially the Treasurer of Freedom told a detective after Leon's murder, that "he was called upon to handle only small sums of money." And a check of deposits in Freedom's account since January 1, 1970, revealed that the largest deposit was \$350.00. Maupin said he had "no knowledge of the alleged large sums of money coming into Freedom,

Inc., from various political factions or candidates. These statements suggest strongly that Leon Jordan held the growing strands of Freedom's political power tightly in his own hands.

However, Freedom had grown to include a large number of elected officials, many of strong independent minds, known to express their beliefs on public platforms, as well as a great number of volunteer workers, including a whole cadre of young supporters with lively ambitions and a generationally different understanding of their problems and their future. Melba Marlow's description of how Freedom came to extend its power into Jackson County politics probably gives an accurate portrait of how, in fact, such decisions were made in Freedom. Jordan talked with, listened to, and cajoled his followers with extraordinary effectiveness. He had some patronage positions to offer, and he loaned money to needy patrons on occasion. He offered business and financial advice to others. But while apparently well off, he did not have a large personal fortune. It seems clear that he somehow generated an extraordinary personal trust in his leadership decisions. And that trust grew with Freedom's success. As Freedom's power grew, Leon Jordan became more and more a political legend within the black community.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Interview with Bruce Watkins, July 21, 1970, p. 902; interview with Orchid Jordan, July 18, 1970, p. 529; interview with Howard Maupin, July 23, 1970, p. 1125, KCPD file on Jordan Murder, copy in LJC.