

Historical Essay for NCCRT Marker at Watts Restaurant, Chapel Hill, NC

Abstract:

The Watts Grill was a former restaurant located just south of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. It operated from the early 1950s until the owners, Austin and Jeppie Watts, sold the property and business in 1965. Watts Grill had been a popular gathering place for students from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; in 1963 and 1964, it had also been the site of protests and demonstrations due to the restaurant's refusal to desegregate. Even after the Civil Rights Act was signed into law in 1964, Watts Grill would not serve Black customers. In fact, Watts Grill was the last place in Chapel Hill to remain segregated.

Protests at Watts turned violent in early 1964, though many protestors responded to the violence with bravery and heroism. Lou Calhoun, a senior at UNC-Chapel Hill, was humiliated by Jeppie Watts, who urinated on him after restaurant staff dragged him to the floor. Austin Watts physically and verbally abused Professors Albert Amon and Harmon Smith from UNC-Chapel Hill and Duke University. College students Quentin Baker and John Dunne threw themselves on Amon to protect him, leaving them susceptible to beatings as well. These brave protestors who had been subject to violence were arrested; those who inflicted violence upon them were left free. Though the blameless were arrested, their courage will not be forgotten. They were selfless. They were heroes. They were brave.

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Written by Rachel Landers (high school student)

"We may have had a few incidents, and I remember at the Watts Motel, they would throw acid and pee out the window, embarrassing. But they just didn't want us to integrate, that was the biggest problem." – Carol Brooks.

"Bravery: the quality or state of having or showing mental or moral strength to face danger, fear, or difficulty: the quality or state of being brave." – Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

The Watts Grill and Motel, a former restaurant located a few short miles from the town of Chapel Hill, was the site of several acts of bravery during the Civil Rights Movement. It opened in the early 1950s and was managed and owned by Austin and Jeppie Watts. In 1957, Watts Grill and Motel was renamed Watts Restaurant but still maintained the motel. It was still often referred to as the "Watts Grill." This popular gathering place for students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the KKK was also the site of protests and demonstrations as the Civil Rights Movement gained traction in the southern states. According to *The Daily Tar Heel*, UNC-Chapel Hill's student-run newspaper, Watts had "complete segregation." (January 1964). Therefore, not all UNC students could step foot onto the premises, and not all regular working parents could enter. Even after the Civil Rights Act was signed into law in July of 1964, Watts remained segregated—one of the last holdouts to do so in Chapel Hill—violating the law and opposing freedom.

Despite Watts continuing to practice segregation in its restaurant, brave men and women defied Austin and Jeppie Watts and protested the racial boundaries that the couple had set up, risking it all for "... life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Carol Brooks, a high school student in Chapel Hill at the time, said this about the protests and demonstrations at Watts: "We may have had a few incidents, and I remember at the Watts Motel, they would throw acid and pee out the window, embarrassing. But they just didn't want us to integrate, that was the biggest problem."

Two protests at Watts occurring in 1964 remained newsworthy for some time. The first event took place on Thursday, January 2. Lou Calhoun, a Methodist UNC Senior, along with various students from high school, UNC-Chapel Hill, and Duke University, entered the restaurant. Some sat in booths while others, including Calhoun, sat on the floor. Watts employees managed to pull Calhoun's body to the floor where the unspeakable, the *unthinkable* to modern-day society, occurred. Jeppie Watts stood over Lou Calhoun and urinated on his head. The customers praised her vulgar actions. According to Calhoun, "I balled up on the floor. Then I felt this stream coming down on me, and I thought, 'God, she's got ammonia.' I was holding my breath, trying to keep from breathing, and then she stopped, laughed...." After this humiliation, the police arrived and arrested the demonstrators. Mrs. Watts, on the other hand, was not arrested, even though she had urinated on and kicked Lou Calhoun.

Karen L. Parker, the first African American undergraduate female at UNC, wrote about the event in her diary: "Five Duke faculty members and one from UNC were arrested at Watts' Restaurant. They were beaten by waitresses and customers. A demonstrator was urinated upon

by Mrs. Watts, the owner's wife. This was so disgraceful. No one really wants to believe it. But that one incident, we feel helped our cause." As documented in the book *The Free Men* by John Ehle, "He [Lou Calhoun] had not, so far as he could recall, heard of anybody being urinated on in the civil rights movement before, anywhere in the country. 'Freedom, freedom,' he thought...."

The second protest at Watts Restaurant took place on the night of Friday, January 3, and proved to be even more violent. Professors from Duke University and UNC-Chapel Hill, including Harman Smith and Albert Amon, were among the protestors. The group also included students Quentin Baker (from North Carolina College at Durham, now named NC Central University) and John Dunne (from UNC-Chapel Hill).

Professor Albert Amon opened one of the glass doors when he arrived at Watts Restaurant and called out, "May we come in?" From the back of the restaurant, a voice (later learned to be Austin Watts) said, "Yes, let him come in." Austin Watts then grabbed Professor Amon by the coat and pulled him into the building, where Amon stood for "twenty to thirty seconds." After those few seconds, Austin Watts and a man known as "Mr. Scott" began beating Albert Amon.

John Dunne and Quinton Baker came into the restaurant and threw themselves on top of Amon in order to protect him, leaving them open for attack. According to Professor Harman Smith, Jeppie Watts joined in the beating of Dunne and Baker, also using a broom as a weapon. During the beating, observers gathered and said, "...Kill them, get the professors." Harman Smith later recounted, "We were abused orally...." When the abuse was over, Amon, Dunne, and Baker were bodily handled and thrown out of the restaurant, where they were sprayed with a garden hose that had been "...aiming at mouths to stop breathing...." Soon the police arrived and arrested Professor Amon, Professor Smith, and others. But like the night before, the Watts and their friends were not.

At a later trial, Professor Amon testified, "... I received five blows, kicks to the head which were large enough to be medically detectable, three of which were severe, one of which opened my hair in a 3 ½ inch patch on the back of my head. I blacked out momentarily twice...." Austin Watts, however, testified that he had not beaten Professor Amon. Soon after the trial, Albert Amon died of an unexpected brain aneurysm, though it was never proven to be a result of the beating he'd endured from Austin Watts or the other men involved.

Returning to the definition of bravery, it is clear that Lou Calhoun, Albert Amon, Quentin Baker, and John Dunne were indeed brave. Along with their fellow demonstrators, they showed mental and moral strength by remaining peaceful when faced with violence. They should be honored for their bravery, courage, and resolve, just like the Greensboro Six and the innocent victims of the Wilmington Coup and Massacre. Lou Calhoun was humiliated and degraded by Jeppie Watts, yet he returned to Watts Restaurant to help his brethren the next day. John Dunne, Quinton Baker, and Albert Amon were abused physically and mentally. Despite threats, beatings, and dishonor, they displayed courage in the face of evil, boldness in the face of wickedness, and valor in the face of vice. It is important for the future of North Carolina to acknowledge and honor the past moral courage in the face of brutal treatment shown by the men and woman who participated in the Watts Restaurant sit-ins in 1964.

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