

Alabama

MARKING HISTORY



Karen S. Doerr Staff

Eleanor Lewis Dawkins, daughter of Rufus A. Lewis, unveils a new historical marker in his honor Thursday at 801 Bolivar St., which has been renamed Rufus A. Lewis Place.

Monument honors activist

By Jannell McGrew
Montgomery Advertiser

Everybody called him "Coach," and he was known the state over for ensuring blacks registered to vote at a time when they were denied the right.

Rufus A. "Coach" Lewis received a recognition Thursday that many who honored the late civil rights pioneer believe was long overdue. About 50 people applauded as his daughter, Eleanor Lewis Dawkins, unveiled a marker in honor of her father.

Gwendolyn Patton, architect at H. Council Trenholm State Technical College, and others have led the effort in getting the marker, which stands in front of Lewis' home. The college's archives holds a collection of more than 20,000 documents provided by Lewis. He died in 1999.

"He saved everything because he knew we were going to continue his dream and his work," Patton said. She called Lewis "the father of Montgomery's and central Alabama's voting rights movement."

Dawkins said although her father did not brag about his work and is not

as well-known as other civil rights icons, "he worked very, very hard to make sure that we had rights."

"Having this historic monument erected ... is truly, truly an honor," she said.



Lewis

Lewis began his voting rights drive in the early 1940s and is credited with registering more than four generations of voters, Patton said. He later established "citizenship schools," which tutored potential black voters. Students learned how to fill out literacy tests, which were often designed to keep blacks from voting.

Various community and political leaders attended the outdoor ceremony.

Rep. Thad McClammy, D-Montgomery, said one of the first role models he sought as a young man was Lewis.

"He was a person who didn't do a lot of bragging and boasting about what he did," McClammy said. "But he was a person who was

RUFUS A. LEWIS

Civil rights pioneer Rufus A. Lewis (1906-1999) was born in Montgomery County. Lewis was a graduate of Fisk University and served as football coach at Alabama State University. Lewis was a partner with the Ross-Clayton Funeral Home. He was one of the founders and the first Montgomery County Chapter president for the Alabama Democratic Conference, the oldest black political organization in the state. He was elected to the Alabama Legislature in 1974 but resigned in 1976 when President Carter appointed him to serve as a U.S. marshal.

respected throughout this community, throughout this state and throughout this nation."

Jerome Gray, state field coordinator for the Alabama Democratic Conference, said he owes his success and career to Lewis.

"You can't go anywhere in this state ... where old-timers don't know and respect Mr. Lewis and his work," he said.

The street just outside

Lewis' home has also been named after Lewis. The house contains many original items, including Lewis' old office space. Lewis also served as football coach at Alabama State University.

Larry Armstead, administrative assistant to Mayor Bobby Bright, paid tribute to Lewis on a personal note.

"I am here as a proud black man thanking Mr. Lewis for what he has contributed," he said. "He was a positive thinking individual who saw darkness and tried to shed light."

Sen. Charles Langford, D-Montgomery, said he will never forget the coach's ability to get blacks in the military registered. Lewis would know before anyone else when black troops were coming home, he said.

"He contacted everybody who had returned to get them to register to vote," said Langford. "He has had a great influence on my life."

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