

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • ACTIVIST

Unless the Black Man Attains Economic Independence

Floyd McKissick and Soul City

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Contribution Track • ERA VI–VII • Asheville & Warren County, North Carolina

Who He Is

Floyd Bixler McKissick was born in Asheville, North Carolina, in 1922. He fought a segregated law school to get his own legal education, ran the Congress of Racial Equality through the moment the movement split over the word "nonviolence," and then spent the last two decades of his life trying to build, from bare Warren County farmland, an entire self-sufficient Black-led town. He is buried in the town he built.

Asheville to Chapel Hill

After high school, McKissick enrolled at Morehouse College in Atlanta in 1940; World War II interrupted his studies, and he served as an Army sergeant in the European theater before returning to finish his degree at Morehouse in 1948. Barred from the University of North Carolina's law school by its segregation policy, he pursued his legal training at North Carolina Central College instead — but did not let the UNC door stay closed. In 1949 he joined a lawsuit, filed as Epps v. Carmichael and later styled McKissick v. Carmichael, alongside fellow plaintiffs Harold Epps, Solomon Revis, and James Lassiter, represented by NAACP counsel Thurgood Marshall and Durham attorney Conrad Pearson. A federal district court ruled against them in October 1950; the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals reversed on March 27, 1951; the U.S. Supreme Court declined UNC's appeal on June 4, 1951. McKissick, Lassiter, J. Kenneth Lee, and Harvey Beech began classes at UNC School of Law on June 22, 1951 — among the first Black students admitted, a cohort victory rather than a solo one.

CORE and Black Power

McKissick became CORE's national chairman in 1963 and succeeded James Farmer as National Director on January 3, 1966. His outlook hardened that June, after police attacked marchers during the Meredith March Against Fear in Canton, Mississippi. He declared that nonviolence had "outlived its usefulness" and became one of the era's most visible advocates of Black Power — economic and political self-determination, not integration into structures that hadn't earned trust.

"Unless the Black Man attains economic independence, any political independence will be an illusion." — Floyd McKissick

Soul City

In 1969 McKissick announced Soul City, a planned new town on roughly 1,800 acres of former ranchland near Norlina in Warren County — envisioned eventually across 5,000 acres, home to 44,000 people by 2004. Harvey Gantt, who would later become Charlotte's first Black mayor, designed the master plan of three villages. It was one of thirteen "New Communities" projects under the 1970 Urban Growth and New Community Development Act, and the only one led by a Black developer. Federal backing followed: an initial HUD grant in 1969, then a HUD letter of commitment for a bond guarantee reaching roughly \$14 million by 1972, formalized in February 1974. What actually got built was real: the Kerr Lake Regional Water Treatment Plant, sewer and road systems, a 52,000-square-foot industrial building called Soul Tech I, a health care center, a day care center, and a recreation complex dedicated in 1977.

The Collapse

The Raleigh News & Observer ran a series alleging financial mismanagement; Senator Jesse Helms seized on the coverage to demand a federal audit and repeatedly attacked the project as a "gross waste." A General Accounting Office audit released in December 1975 found no significant wrongdoing, but the credibility damage and financing delays it caused were already done — HUD's own restrictions held up bond issuance until December 1976. Real economic headwinds compounded the political ones: the 1973 OPEC oil embargo blew up cost projections, Warren County's distance from Durham and Raleigh and its low-skill labor pool deterred employers, and at least one recruited manufacturer failed quickly after arriving. HUD cut off further funding in 1979 and assumed control of the property around 1980. Historian Thomas Healy, whose 2021 book *Soul City: Race, Equality, and the Lost Dream of an American Utopia* is the fullest account of the project, put the underlying funding gap in perspective: Soul City received \$14 million in HUD loan guarantees against \$50 million for The Woodlands, Texas, a comparable new-town project led by white developers. "If they really wanted Soul City to succeed," Healy said, "they would have given it more than \$14 million." He has also said the project "was targeted with a smear campaign and was largely cleared of the charges that were levied against it" — while economic historians place real weight on the oil shock and the site's isolation as well. Both were true at once.

Legacy

Peak population reached only around 300, far short of the plan. McKissick stayed anyway, retaining a residual 88 acres after HUD's takeover. He was appointed a North Carolina state district court judge in June 1990 and died of lung cancer on April 28, 1991, at age 69, buried in Soul City. The site today includes Warren Correctional Institution, whose prison manufacturing operation now occupies the former Soul Tech I building, and the Green Duke Village affordable-housing complex built in the mid-1980s. In 2025 his son, Floyd McKissick Jr., a former North Carolina state senator, voiced hope for the site's revival as a Research Triangle bedroom community.

NC Local Lens

This is a statewide North Carolina story — Asheville, Chapel Hill, Warren County — not a Cumberland County one. No Fayetteville or Cumberland County connection is documented for McKissick, and none is claimed here.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

"First Black student" framing: McKissick was one of four plaintiffs admitted together, not a sole first — any future copy should say "among the first," not "the first."

Denial date: some sources reference a 1948 UNC denial while the lawsuit was filed in October 1949 — not fully reconciled here; likely he applied around 1948–49 and then joined a suit already underway.

HUD funding figures: sources cite \$14 million, \$10 million, and \$19 million at different points — these figures likely describe different slices (guarantee vs. grants vs. total) rather than contradicting each other, but original HUD documentation was not directly consulted.

Cause of collapse: politically contested — this entry presents both the political-sabotage and economic-headwinds accounts rather than adjudicating between them.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. BlackPast.org, "Floyd B. McKissick (1922-1991)," accessed September 13, 2026, <https://blackpast.org/african-american-history/mckissick-floyd-b-1922-1991/>.
2. "Law School First — The African Americans Who Integrated UNC-Chapel Hill: Lawsuits," University of North Carolina School of Law, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://integration.law.unc.edu/lawsuits/>.
3. "Soul City, North Carolina," Wikipedia, last modified 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soul_City,_North_Carolina.
4. Sarah Weinberg, "Revisiting the Black Power Dream of North Carolina's Soul City," Facing South, Institute for Southern Studies, March 2021, <https://www.facingsouth.org/2021/03/revisiting-black-power-dream-north-carolinas-soul-city>.
5. Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, "Doing Development Differently: Soul City," Econ Focus, Q3 2017, https://www.richmondfed.org/publications/research/econ_focus/2017/q3/economic_history.
6. North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, "Floyd McKissick and Soul City," NC DNCR Blog, November 9, 2016, <https://www.dncr.nc.gov/blog/2016/11/09/floyd-mckissick-and-soul-city>.
7. Thomas Healy, *Soul City: Race, Equality, and the Lost Dream of an American Utopia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2021).

Prepared by the Two Americas research process. Verify all figures against primary sources before publication if stronger originals become available.