

LAKE COUNTY COURTHOUSE



IN MEMORY OF THE GROVELAND FOUR

In July 1949, Walter Irvin, Samuel Shepherd, Charles Greenlee and Ernest Thomas – known collectively as the “Groveland Four” – were accused of crimes in Lake County.

Eyewitness accounts, records, and subsequent investigations revealed that these men were subjected to racially motivated oppression and were never given the opportunity to legitimately defend themselves in a court of law. Evidence demonstrates that Mr. Greenlee could not have been present when the alleged crime was committed. Mr. Thomas was slain before he could receive due process. Mr. Irvin never confessed despite being tortured. Mr. Shepherd was killed by a law enforcement officer before he could be re-tried.

The brutality and injustice that these men endured resulted in the wrongful deaths of Mr. Thomas and Mr. Shepherd, and the unfair incarcerations of Mr. Irvin and Mr. Greenlee. Prominent civil rights lawyers worked on the case, including Thurgood Marshall, who later became the first African American justice to serve on the United States Supreme Court. After the Federal Bureau of Investigation discovered evidence that had been suppressed during trial and other legal irregularities, Florida Governor LeRoy Collins commuted Walter Irvin's death sentence in 1955.

The Groveland Four families never gave up hope for justice. Nearly 70 years later, on January 11, 2019, the Governor of Florida and Cabinet, sitting as the State Clemency Board, issued full pardons to Walter Irvin, Samuel Shepherd, Charles Greenlee and Ernest Thomas.

The pardon was vigorously supported by Lake County residents, Groveland Four family members, the Lake County Board of County Commissioners, Lake County's Constitutional Officers, the Groveland City Council, the Florida Legislature, citizen advocates from Florida and around the nation, and two pivotal authors, Gary Corsair and Gilbert King, who conducted extensive research into the cases. Their books detailed the lack of evidence against the men, manufactured evidence, witness perjury, and systemic racism by then-Sheriff Willis V. McCall.

The Lake County community came together in 2019 to support the pardons of Ernest Thomas, Samuel Shepherd, Charles Greenlee and Walter Irvin, and to make clear that Lake County and its residents condemn racism and injustice, value fairness and compassion, and believe that all people are entitled to equal protection under the law.