

The First **50** *Years*
1968-2018



Urban League of
Lexington-Fayette County

Empowering Communities
Changing Lives.

Culvert McCann photographs, University of Kentucky Special Collections Research Center



Photographer Culvert McCann captured University of Kentucky student Nieta Dunn sitting in the all-White section at a Lexington lunch counter in the 1960s.

Affiliate Established

by Jacalyn Carfagno

A news release issued on February 11, 1968 announced that fundraising "will be launched officially" the next day — of the Urban League in Lexington, Kentucky.

The immediate goal was to raise \$25,000 for the first year's staff and operating expenses. The larger goal was to found an organization that would follow the model of the national Urban League, a group that then-University of Kentucky President John Oswald said in the release, "rolls up its sleeves and goes to work on problems."

And problems there were.

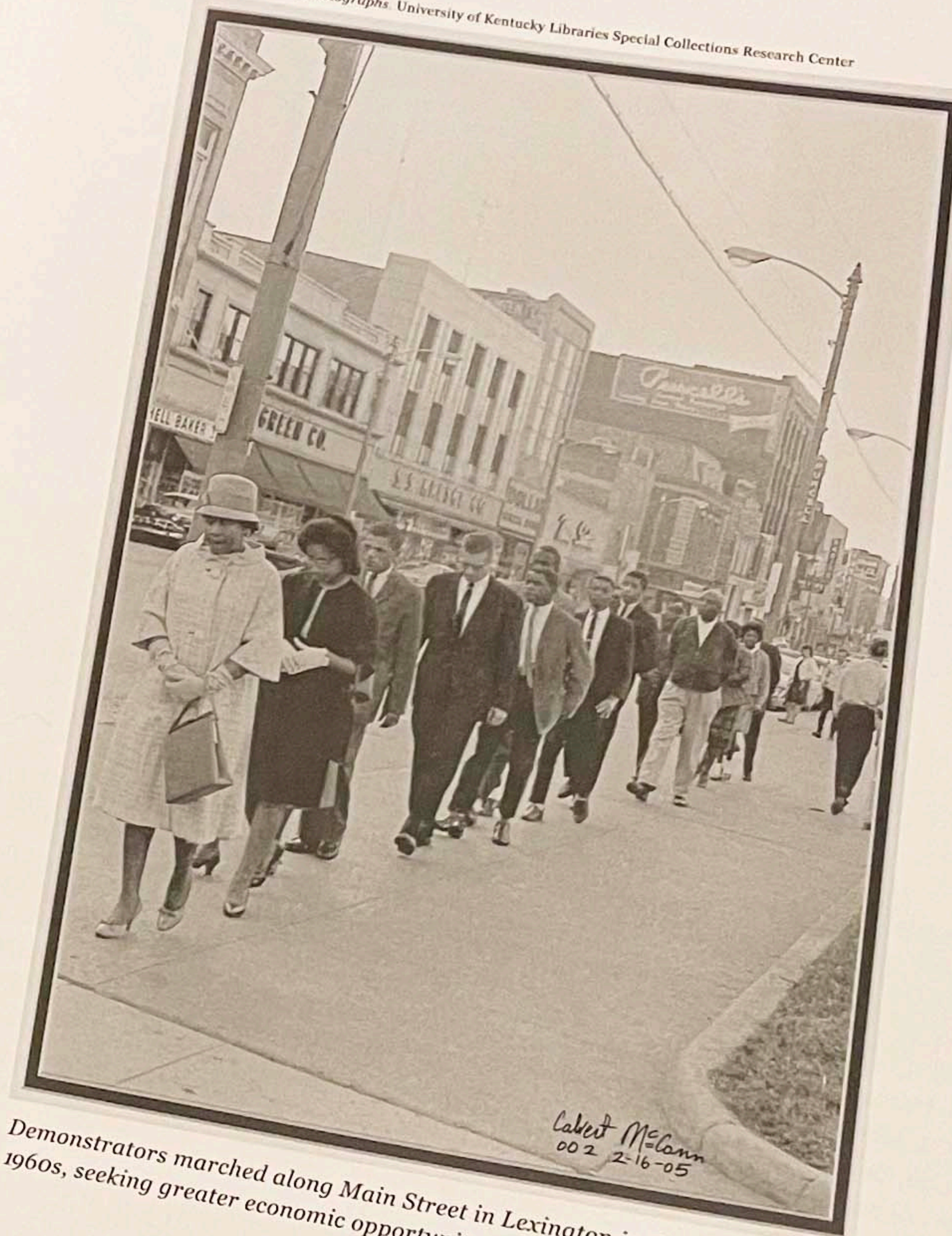
The Civil Rights Act of 1964 had outlawed segregation in public places and employment discrimination but the legacy of decades of entrenched racism, reinforced by Jim Crow laws, had taken its toll. Relying on research that a regional officer of the Urban League had presented in December 1966, the founding group laid out the bare statistics of inequality in Lexington and Fayette County. Although non-Whites made up about a quarter of the population, they accounted for 48 percent of school dropouts and only 8 percent of vocational school students. The unemployment rate of Whites was

5.5 percent, that of Blacks 7.1 percent, and among those non-Whites who were employed, one out of three worked either "in a private household or as a service worker." No surprise, then, that median income for non-White families, \$3,218, was 43 percent lower than that for White families, \$5,640.

As compelling as the case was, this was the 1960s when segregation, even if no longer sanctioned by law, was still widespread, racism was common, and many in the White power structure were alarmed by the upheaval and violence that accompanied demands for racial equality in other cities. The path to founding Lexington's Urban League wasn't either straight or easy.

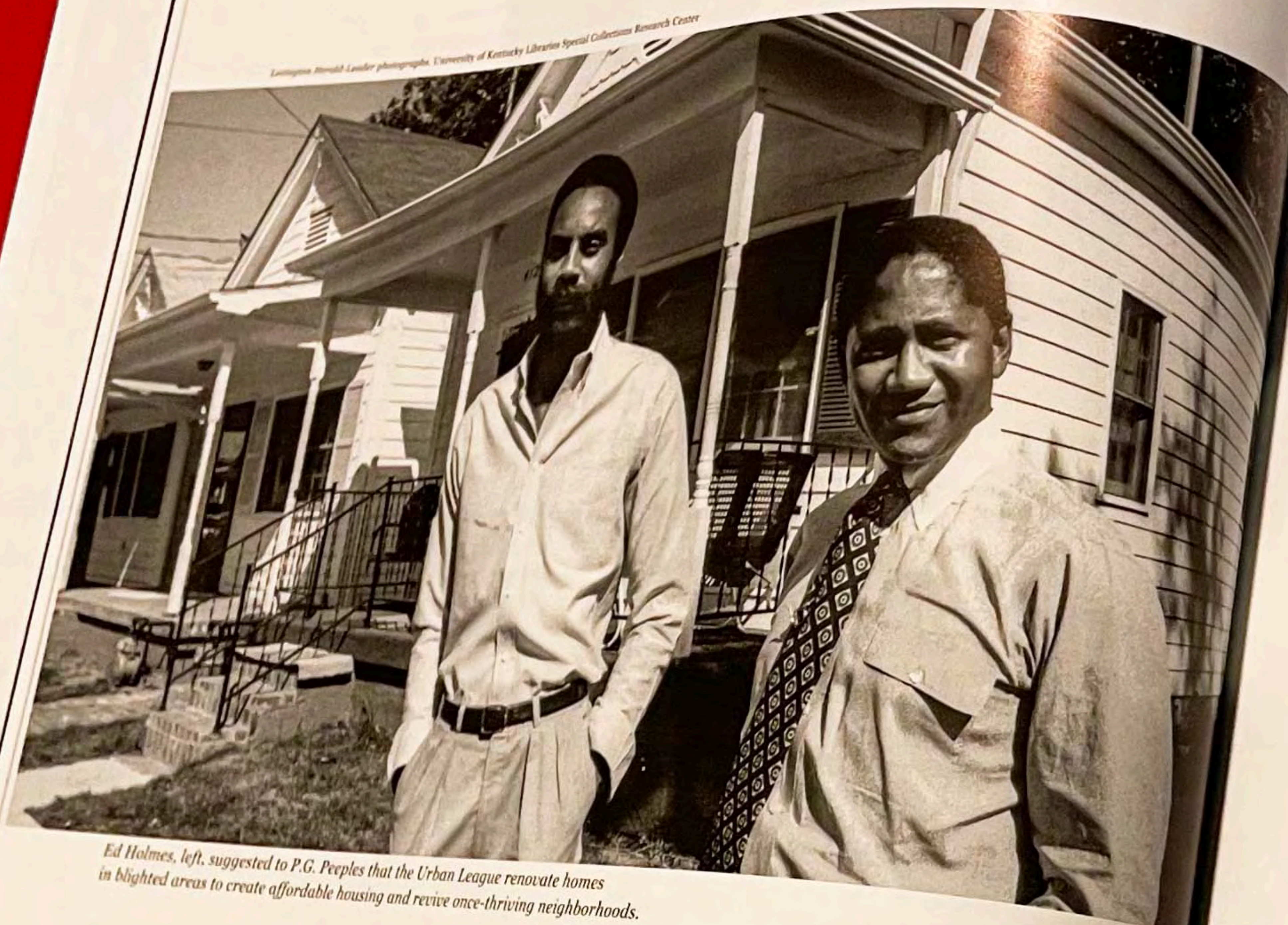
In the mid-'60s, advocating for minorities was still a tricky business in Lexington. "Say 'civil rights' and people started getting an attitude," Harry Sykes, who in 1963 was elected as the first Black city commissioner in Lexington, recalled in a 1992 oral history interview. But he knew the realities in many Black neighborhoods: no sanitary sewers; no sidewalks leading to the all-Black Dunbar High School, forcing kids to walk in the street. He worked on those issues

*"We went
down Main Street and
knocked on doors..."
— Mattie Biggerstaff
1992*



*Calvert McCann
002 2-16-05*

Demonstrators marched along Main Street in Lexington in the 1960s, seeking greater economic opportunity and equal access.



Ed Holmes, left, suggested to P.G. Peeples that the Urban League renovate homes in blighted areas to create affordable housing and revive once-thriving neighborhoods.

Building Affordable Housing

by Jacalyn Carfagno

In 1966 a regional Urban League officer described the reality of housing for African Americans in Lexington. In "Why — An Urban League for Lexington, Kentucky?" he wrote that the central city was home to 98 percent of non-White residents and 49 percent "of the housing therein is substandard."

Throughout the decade of the 1970s the problem only worsened as many middle class Black families moved to the suburbs, which had opened to them since desegregation. Houses that had been family homes became rentals, others that had long been marginal were neglected.

By the 1980s once-thriving neighborhoods suffered as abandoned houses became dangerous eyesores. About that time a young urban planner who had moved to Lexington and bought a home on Chestnut Street began talking to Urban League Executive Director P.G. Peeples about a model he'd seen used other places to revive structures and neighborhoods. Established as a nonprofit, the organization could

solicit grants from governments, businesses and individuals to acquire and rehabilitate houses. The proceeds from the sales would be plowed back into the nonprofit to underwrite more projects. Soon, the Fayette County Local Development Corporation was created as an affiliate of the Lexington Urban League.

The FCLDC's first project got underway when it bought four dilapidated houses on Chestnut Street in 1984 for \$18,000. "They were just rundown shotguns that no one would want to live in," recalled Ed Holmes, the planner who came to Peeples with the idea of creating the nonprofit.

It was an ambitious undertaking for a new organization with very little seed money and no track record with banks to borrow it. Plus, people in the East End neighborhoods who'd lived in shotgun houses had few good memories of them. They were a symbol of poverty, Holmes said, there was no privacy, as one room led into another, and

