

# The Daily Tar Heel Jail unchanged by Little case

83rd Year of Editorial Freedom



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## Joan Little: Insight for informed opinion

In early September, the story of Joan Little, the murder of a Beaufort County jailer and the subsequent handling of the case by local authorities broke into the national press, nearly a month after the alleged murder and jailbreak had occurred. The case touches upon issues of civil rights, civil liberties, the exploitation of women by men and of blacks by whites, and the status of penal institutions in rural communities.

The Little story reached the front page of the *Daily Tar Heel* with the visit to Carolina of black activist Angela Davis. Davis urged support for Little in her November 19, 1974 address sponsored by the Colloquium on Individual Rights and Liberties.

The case is of particular interest to Chapel Hill because of a general community concern for human rights and because of the role of area residents in supporting Joan Little. Little's attorneys Jerry Paul and Karen Galloway are from the Chapel Hill-Durham area. Little came to Orange County following her breakout from the Beaufort County jail. She has returned to Chapel Hill twice to build public support for her situation.

In the midst of all this rising interest and publicity, two senior *DTH* staff members set out for Washington, N.C. to match their observations with those of other state and national publications. As their stories indicate, the glamor and excitement of national coverage has not rocked Beaufort County or the hometown associates of Joan Little.

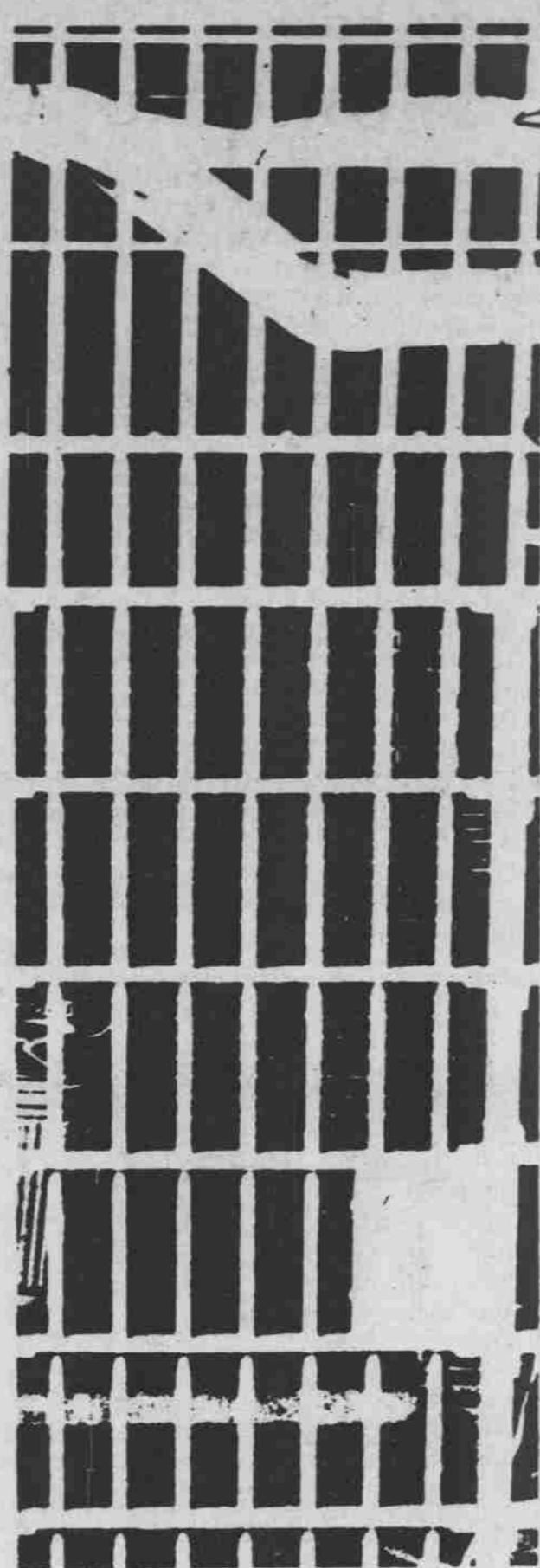
None of this, however, should discount the importance of the Little case and the upcoming April 14 trial. The *DTH* has previously expressed opinion regarding the case and shall not rehash that opinion here. These articles do give a local slant to a local problem. Draw your own inferences and conclusions.

In the future we shall use both the editorial page and occasional "Insight" pages to devote attention to special stories and critical issues. We hope to incorporate news features, interviews and collections of columns to provide perspective on problems ranging from course evaluation and academic reform to the idea of power and responsibility within the university to a summary of the "big news" events of the whole year. Consider, then, the case of Joan Little.

by Jeanie Hanna  
Staff Writer

WASHINGTON, N.C.—Only one man guards the cellblock in the evening. He willingly unlocks and opens the steel cellblock door to talk to visitors and give directions, not asking for identification, even from strangers.

Despite the stabbing death of a white male jailer last summer, the escape of a black female prisoner and the controversy surrounding her upcoming murder trial, the infamous Beaufort County Jail in downtown



Washington is still informally run. Easily visible through the window in the cellblock door is the battery of about two dozen television screens monitoring the prisoners in their cells.

Joan Little, charged with first degree murder in the jailer's death, has complained, while in jail and since, that "there was a camera directly in front of the cell so the jailers could see everything I did, even take showers." The camera was removed only when she blocked it with a bed sheet, she said.

"I was held from June to August in a cell where the conditions were not set up to hold a female," Little told a Chapel Hill audience shortly after her release from prison last month. "I had to ask men jailers for the things a woman needs for hygiene."

Beaufort County sheriff's deputy and radio dispatcher, Beverly King, a young black woman, insisted in an interview last week that men never watched Little's cell on the TV monitor.

Although King stays in the radio dispatcher's office down the hall from the cellblock, she said she has always served as night matron, available to women prisoners if needed and regularly serving them meals. The sheriff's receptionist is day matron, King said.

Little, 20, contends the slaying of night jailer Clarence Alligood on Aug. 27 occurred in self-defense during a rape attempt that was the culmination of months of mistreatment she received in the Beaufort County jail. She had spent 81 days imprisoned there, awaiting appeal of a breaking-and-entering conviction.

The state has charged Little with first-degree murder. Prosecutor William C. Griffin Jr. will attempt to prove that she lured Alligood, 62, into her cell and stabbed him 11 times "during his weak moment" with an ice pick she had stolen from his desk while making a phone call earlier in the evening.

The undisputed facts of the case are: Alligood's body was found at 4:05 a.m., lying face down on the bunk of Little's cell, naked from the waist to the ankles, seminal fluid on his thigh, a bloody ice pick in one hand and his pants in the other. Beneath his buttocks was a woman's decorated, torn handkerchief. A nightgown was on the floor, and a brassiere and night jacket were hanging on the cell door.

Little had fled the jail and lived in hiding for eight days. Her attorneys then worked out an agreement with the State Bureau of Investigation (SBI) whereby Little surrendered on condition that she not be returned to Beaufort County jail.

Despite the apparent lack of security at the jail—the willingness of the night jailer to open the cellblock door to talk to reporters



Joan Little



Beverly King

and King's own frequent absence from the radio dispatch room while being interviewed—King expressed dismay at Little's escape after the slaying. "I was right here that night in the radio room. Nobody knows how she got out."

King openly admits she never saw the 5-foot-3 Little cause any trouble or flirt with any jailers during imprisonment.

"The only thing she ever did was tell us she felt bad, so we took her to the hospital a couple of times," King said.

After her release, Little was temporarily hospitalized for treatment of a chronic thyroid condition.

An SBI investigation into alleged sexual abuse at the jail has not been released, but sources report that the atmosphere at the jail last summer was very casual.

The white male night jailers sometimes sent out for food late at night for certain prisoners, and frequently allowed them to use the phone at the desk where an ice pick, which had been confiscated from a prisoner, was kept.

"There's no question but that they'd gotten chummy," reports quote a sheriff's department source as saying. "This would never have happened if Alligood had stayed where he was supposed to."

But King's defense of Alligood was emphatic—"He was a gentleman, always a gentleman." She described him as "a big man, 200 or 250 pounds."

Refusing at first to have her picture taken—"Don't do that, the sheriff will kill me! I'm not even supposed to talk about it"—King finally consented, after being assured that publicizing her presence in the jail was to the prosecution's advantage. She then warned that the sheriff, O.E.

"Red" Davis, who is responsible for running the jail, is "tired of being bothered by reporters."

A few minutes later Davis refused to let reporters photograph or even enter the cellblock. He then stopped them outside the courthouse after they took a picture of him entering his car.

"You're playing hell!" he shouted.

He then ordered the reporter to give him the film. After being repeatedly refused, Davis continued, "I've got a good mind to take that camera and break it up. In fact, that's what I'm going to do if you don't give me that film!"

He then abruptly stopped and shouted, "You see that road? Get on it and don't ever let me see you in Beaufort County again!"

The short-tempered sheriff has a history of disputes with the press over the Little case.

When he first released the news of the jailer's death, Davis failed to mention the medical examiner's report describing Alligood's unclotted body.

Davis has also been criticized for allowing Little's bloody cell to be cleaned before state investigators arrived.

Another legal irregularity was the temporary "misplacement" of Alligood's trousers. There are no holes in the pants to match the stab wounds in Alligood's leg, eliminating any possibility that his trousers were removed after his death, rather than before.

Whether it was a case of rape or seduction, self-defense or premeditated murder, a jury will have to decide. If convicted, Joan Little faces North Carolina's mandatory death penalty. If acquitted, she has said publicly she will "go anywhere but back to Beaufort County."

## Beaufort County—eye of the storm

by Ellen Horowitz  
Editor, DTH Monthly

WASHINGTON, N.C.— Out-of-town journalists, lawyers and civil rights activists have been swarming through this eastern North Carolina town for seven months, ever since a night jailer was stabbed to death here with an icepick, and prisoner Joan Little lit out the back door into the night.

Much of the resulting nationwide publicity has portrayed "Little Washington" as a backward Southern settlement contorted by bigotry and violence. But if Washington was ever hysterical about the bloodshed in the Beaufort County Jail last Aug. 27, passions have cooled off now and townspeople talk casually about the whole affair.

William Little, 16-year-old brother of the young black woman charged with murdering

jailer Clarence T. Alligood — whom she claims was trying to rape her in her cell — says family life has been quiet. "Nothing's been going on, and people haven't been bothering us much," he said. "I'm not particularly worried about Joan."

National magazine and syndicated political columnists, however, have published impassioned pleas for Joan Little's defense, describing Washington as a town where racial feelings about the incident are "running 'em hot," and where "white people hold the worst sort of prejudices against black women."

One story in *New Times* magazine called the Beaufort County legal system "a modern-day substitute for lynching," and juxtaposed a 30-year-old photograph of a lynch mob with current pictures of the principals of the case.

The day after Alligood's death — when

information about the sexual aspect of the slaying had not yet been released by the sheriff or the county medical examiner — the Washington *Daily News* published an editorial eulogizing the jailer for dying in the line of duty.

But by now, the concerns of *Daily News* editorials are again the traditional local issues, such as soaring electric bills and proposed legislation to ban pay toilets.

City police report no organized local activity related to the case, which civil rights leaders from other parts of the state and nation have pointed to as a gruesome example of the continuing injustices facing Southern blacks. Although Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) president Ralph David Abernathy and North Carolina SCLC leader Golden Frinks have announced plans for a march and other demonstrations in Washington next week.

the police have received no applications for permits and say there has been no evidence of local organizing efforts.

Carolyn Hines, formerly Little's next-door neighbor, said she had heard rumors about an upcoming march. "Maybe I'll go to that, I don't know," she said. "But I don't know that there's anyone around here organizing for it."

A rally held March 13 in Greenville, about 30 miles from here, attracted an estimated 140 persons who listened to speeches by Abernathy and Frinks calling for sustained protest to support Little's defense.

"Most all the black people around here are on her side," William Little said. "But I don't know anybody who went to that march. I don't know anybody around here who's doing anything about it."

"I read in the papers about the march in Greenville," said a white cashier at Taylor's Drug Store. "But nothing's happening around here and I haven't heard about anything that's going to happen."

"Her lawyer seems to be doing a good job," Hines said. "Things seem to be going okay."

### Far from the scene

In Montgomery, Ala., 800 miles away from here, the Southern Poverty Law Center, headed by Georgia legislator Julian Bond, has spent more than \$200,000 mailing out an estimated 2 million letters soliciting funds for the defense.

Other fund-raising committees have been established recently in Boston, Atlanta, Pittsburgh and other cities. In Washington, D.C., street-hawkers are selling "Free Joanne Little" buttons along Pennsylvania Avenue.

(Little spells her first name "Joan," but pronounces it "Jo-ann.")

Like the civil rights organizers and fund-raisers, Little's attorney, Jerry Paul — a Chapel Hill resident with offices in Durham — is centering defense efforts far away from here.

Paul has hired lawyers in Alexandria, Va. to work on pre-trial motions and has contracted with a Research Triangle Park firm to investigate jury-selection practices.

Little herself is currently sequestered at an undisclosed location near Chesapeake, Va. Defense motions to move the trial site away from Washington to the Piedmont, where it is claimed that potential jurors would be less emotional about the case and less prejudiced against a black defendant, may further isolate the town from the impact of the jailhouse incident that put it on the map.

But at the moment, the only people in Washington expressing strong feelings about the affair are Beaufort County Sheriff O.E. "Red" Davis and his staff, who administer the basement cellblock where the slaying occurred.

"Washington is a pretty nice town, not a backwards town at all, except for the law officers," one white resident said. "Red Davis just goes his own way."

Davis has complained about out-of-town reporters "messing where it's not their business." His staff say journalists come by



Beaufort County Sheriff O.E. 'Red' Davis

to question him almost every day.

"It's the newspapers from out of town," one deputy sheriff said. "They're the only ones who are interested — people around here just aren't very excited about it all."

### Small-town progressivism

People in Washington are proud of their town, a 200-year-old seaport with a dogwood-lined waterfront and clean downtown streets.

They are especially proud of the numerous tax-supported civic improvement programs, including sidewalk landscaping along Main Street and a new three-story county courthouse building, where the trial is scheduled for April 14.

An elderly farmer strolling through town, hat on head against the warm March sunshine, gestured toward the modern brick courthouse. "It sure is beautiful," he said. "It takes a long time to pay for, but it sure is beautiful."

Inside the courthouse is computerized radio dispatching equipment and a sophisticated television surveillance system. Washington is the county seat and largest city in Beaufort County, about 100 miles east of Raleigh. Population estimates vary, but the Washington area probably includes close to 20,000 residents, making it more a small city than a rural village.

The downtown business district is a mixture of centuries-old brick storefronts and new office buildings of contemporary design. It is comparable in size and architecture to downtown Chapel Hill.

The school system, the city police force and the Beaufort County sheriff's department are all racially integrated.

Some of the sheriff's deputies now patrolling the county with shotguns are black men. The radio dispatcher and night matron in the cellblock is a black woman, Beverly King.

"I read a newspaper story about the Joan Little case that kept talking about all kinds of racial trouble and a history of racial incidents in the Washington schools," said a white college student who grew up here. "Well, I went to those schools all my life and I never saw anything like they said."

### Civil rights down east

These developments suggest a relatively progressive tone in Washington, which is surrounded by the sandy tobacco land of the coastal plain, the part of North Carolina long known for its strict conservatism, depressed economy and Deep South-style race relations.

Beaufort County is in the heart of eastern North Carolina's black belt, where population has declined steadily over the years as black residents move away to the cities, often to Northern cities.

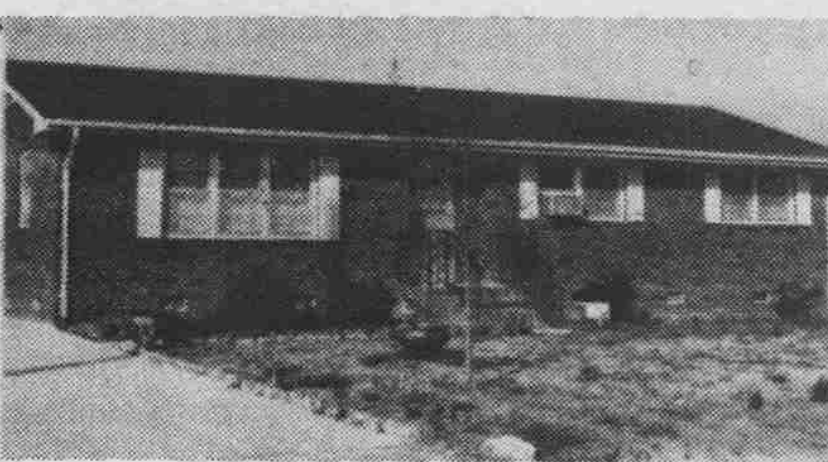
According to census figures, the city of Washington has been losing about 100 residents a year since 1960.

Eastern North Carolina was bypassed by the civil rights activism of the 1960s, which focused its North Carolina organizing efforts on Piedmont cities like Charlotte and Greensboro, rather than on the rural black belt as was done in Alabama and Mississippi. Some say this region's unfamiliarity with grassroots civil rights struggle accounts for the reluctance of Washington blacks to become involved now in support of Joan Little.

Civil rights leaders say the lack of an organized base also explains how conditions at the county jail could be as undisciplined as they were last summer — when prisoners had access to an icepick and jailers may have thought they had access to women prisoners.

But for the people of Washington right now, the Joan Little affair is just another murder case. The people who understand it as a political cause are all many miles away.

## Friends called her 'Moondoggie'



Staff photos by Jeanie Hanna

Top, home of Joan Little's mother in Chocawinity, N.C. Above, house Joan Little rented in Washington before her imprisonment in Beaufort County jail.

CHOCAWINITY, N.C.— Joan Little grew up in this Beaufort County sawmill town alongside the Southern Railway tracks.

She left home at the age of 15, but her mother and younger brothers and sisters still live here, in an air-conditioned brick ranch-style house with a wrought iron plaque in the yard, inscribed, "The Lord is My Shepherd."

"Joan was never very close to the rest of the family," her 16-year-old brother William Little said last week. "But she was never really a troublemaker."

As a teenager, Joan Little did get in minor trouble with the police, including a conviction in nearby Pitt County for shoplifting a pair of socks and a shirt.

She attended Washington High School for a while, across the river from Chocawinity, and apparently played hooky often enough for juvenile authorities to declare her a truant and send her to reform school.

But she went up North instead and spent about a year living with relatives in New York, Connecticut and Pennsylvania. While in Philadelphia she was an honor student and skipped a grade.

Her friends there say she was quiet, polite and often homesick for North Carolina. The yearbook at Simon Gratz High School, where she completed half her senior year, lists her nickname as "Moondoggie" and her career ambition as "private secretary."

Back in Washington, she left school and worked at various unskilled jobs for a year, until a local sheet rock contractor hired her to learn the high-paying craft of sheet rock finishing. Part of her training included instruction in the use of a knife with a 12-inch blade.

In 1974, she and her brother Jerome were arrested on a breaking-and-entering charge related to a rash of burglaries at a nearby trailer park. Jerome Little turned state's evidence and testified against his sister, who was convicted June 12 and held in the county jail under a \$15,000 appeals bond.

"She was a very quiet prisoner and never caused any trouble," said Beverly King, Beaufort County radio dispatcher and night matron in the cellblock.

Carolyn Hines, Joan Little's next door neighbor in Washington for about two months just before her arrest, also remembers her as quiet and polite. "She was a very nice person," she said. "She was very friendly and just a nice person."