

# Tom Turnipseed, 83, Who Became a 'Reformed Racist'

By NEIL GENZLINGER

Tom Turnipseed, who after working on the presidential campaign of the segregationist George C. Wallace in 1968 took a 180-degree turn and became a champion of civil rights, died on March 6 at his home in Columbia, S.C. He was 83.

His wife, Judith Davis Turnipseed, said the cause was chronic respiratory failure.

In 1968 when Mr. Wallace, the former governor of Alabama, was the American Independent Party candidate for president, Mr. Turnipseed, a South Carolina lawyer, was the campaign's executive director.

"I liked him," Mr. Turnipseed explained in an interview for Tom Brokaw's book "Boom! Voices of the Sixties" (2007). "He was standing up for the South."

But on the campaign trail, Mr. Turnipseed's thinking began to change, setting the stage for him to become, as he often described himself, a "reformed racist."

"What turned me off was not Wallace, but the crowds," he told *The New York Times* in 1978. Wallace, he saw, was tapping into something ugly, not just in the South but among white blue-collar supporters in the North.

Mr. Turnipseed often mentioned one moment that made a stark impression.

He was in Webster, Mass., arranging to use a Polish-American club's building there for a campaign event. Club officials were such Wallace fans that they told him he could use it at no charge. Then, he said, the club manager asked him to affirm that, if elected, Mr. Wallace would line up all the black people — the man used a racial epithet — and shoot them.

"I realized the man was serious," he said in an interview for the PBS series "Eyes on the Prize."

"And," he continued, "it kind of got to me."

After the 1968 election, in which Mr. Wallace won 13 percent of the popular vote, Mr. Turnipseed established a law practice in Columbia, S.C., and worked for civil rights and other progressive causes. He was part of a coalition seeking utility rate reform in the early 1970s, an experience that he said further solidified his change of heart. Utilities were charging higher rates to low-volume residential users, many of whom were black.



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Tom Turnipseed, above right, was a Green Party official when he spoke to reporters in Columbia, S.C., in 2002 along with two other officials, Badili Jones, left, and Allen Burns. At right, Mr. Turnipseed on the floor of the South Carolina State Senate in 1978. He fought for civil rights causes.

"The rate hike hearings offered an opportunity to bridge the divide between poor blacks and whites," Mr. Turnipseed told *The Easley Progress* of South Carolina in 2010. "Our successful coalition helped me realize how prejudiced I had been against black people."

Mr. Turnipseed also served four years as a state senator, from 1976 to 1980, and ran unsuccessfully for Congress in 1980 and for state attorney general in 1998.

In recent interviews, he was often asked to compare the tactics and emotions of Mr. Wallace's 1968 campaign with those of President Trump during his run for president in 2016.

"Both of them," he told *BuzzFeed* in 2016, "use a lot of the same kind of scare tactics and fear."

Mr. Turnipseed was born on Aug. 27, 1936, in Mobile, Ala. His father, George, was an entomologist, and his mother, Ruby (Bell) Turnipseed, worked for the post office. A grandfather, he told Mr. Brokaw, was a wizard in the Ku Klux Klan.

"When he asked his father about his grandfather's role in the Klan," Mr. Brokaw wrote, "he was

told, 'There used to be a lot of good people in the Klan, and they did a lot of good.' He was about 7 at the time, and he failed to ask exactly how his father defined 'good.'"

Mr. Turnipseed often spoke of the false picture he grew up with, thanks to things like history books

## *A campaign worker who saw that George Wallace was tapping into something ugly.*

with pictures of slave children depicted as dancing and singing.

"Our concept of black folks back in those days was like Uncle Remus and Old Black Joe," he said.

Mr. Wallace, he said, would play to the lie of an idyllic South.

"George Wallace would make people feel proud of their heritage," he said. "And this heritage itself is one of terrible, terrible racism."

Mr. Turnipseed, who served in the Army from 1955 to 1957, went to Lees-McRae College in North Carolina on a football scholarship, then transferred to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, receiving an undergraduate degree there in 1962 and a law degree in 1964. While at the university he met Judy Davis; they married in 1963.

Mr. Turnipseed first came to Mr. Wallace's attention when he was working in South Carolina on a campaign to gain tax-exempt status for all-white academies, where families could send their children to avoid court-ordered school integration.

"We never admitted the race factor," he told Mr. Brokaw. "We claimed we were interested in a lower teacher-pupil ratio — but the real reason was all racist."

After his change of heart, Mr. Turnipseed was a member of the national board of the liberal group Americans for Democratic Action; was founding chairman of the Citizens' Local Environmental Action Network, a South Carolina advocacy group that worked on issues like dealing with toxic waste;

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and had talk programs on various radio stations.

In the mid-1990s his firm was among those that helped the Macedonia Baptist Church of South Carolina sue the Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and some of its leaders for burning the church's building in 1995. The suit resulted in a multimillion-dollar award that, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, transformed the Klan chapter "from one of the most active Klan groups in the nation to a defunct organization."

Race-based intolerance in the South wasn't just a white-black issue to Mr. Turnipseed. In 1985, when President Ronald Reagan sought more aid for the right-wing contras in Nicaragua, Mr. Turnipseed wrote an opinion article in *The Times* saying that Reagan was playing on longstanding Southern fears.

"I grew up in Alabama, Virginia and the Carolinas, and remember how us good ol' boys enjoyed making racial slurs against Hispanics," he wrote. "The Southern white power structure has vigorously supported most of the na-

tion's military interventions in Central America, and deep in the boardrooms and back rooms of the white Southern establishment lies a fear of dark-skinned hordes swarming across the Rio Grande and forming a political coalition with Jesse Jackson and his even darker-skinned soul brothers, together with various white scallwags."

In addition to his wife, Mr. Turnipseed is survived by a son, Jeff; a daughter, Jeny Mathis; and four grandchildren.

In the 1990s Mr. Turnipseed was among those calling on South Carolina to stop flying the Confederate battle flag over the Capitol dome. (The flag was moved elsewhere in 2000.) In an interview included in the 2004 book "Rally 'Round the Flag, Boys! South Carolina and the Confederate Flag," by K. Michael Prince, he explained why.

"It's a lost cause," he said of the flag and the war it represented. "It was the dumbest, biggest mistake in the history of this country, and we made it! We can't own up to making the biggest mistake ever made. And we're still making it."