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J. Herbert Leverett, Hackensack's first black councilman, dies at 87



RECORD FILE PHOTO/DANIELLE P. RICHARDS

In this 2001 file photo, J. Herbert Leverett and his wife, Jean, are shown in their Oakland home.

BY JAY LEVIN

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THE RECORD

J. Herbert Leverett, the first African-American on the Hackensack City Council, died Saturday at the New Jersey Veterans Memorial Home in Paramus. He was 87.

The 1965 election of Mr. Leverett, a civically involved mechanical engineer and a Navy veteran of the Korean War, electrified Hackensack's black community, which then accounted for 15 percent of the city's population. Hundreds of African-Americans had worked on his campaign and sparked a massive voter registration drive. The municipal election occurred at the height of the civil rights movement, three months before President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law.

"It was a community effort which will allow the Negro to take his place beside the other ethnic groups of this city," a victorious Mr. Leverett told *The Record*. "The Negroes can no longer be ignored."

The Rev. James P. Coleman, at the time pastor of Mt. Olive Baptist Church, added: "We made history here. Negroes are entering the mainstream of life the only way we really can — by voting."

Mr. Leverett's victory, however, was historic more for the county seat than for Bergen County. Two towns away, Englewood had elected the first African-American to its City Council 12 years earlier.

Walter Fields, former political director of the New Jersey NAACP and a family friend, was a child when Mr. Leverett, a leader in the Neighborhood Civic Association, ran for office on a slate that included Deputy Mayor Walter Nowakowski.

"There was a real sense of excitement in the black community, and I distinctly recall how the community pulled together, especially the churches, to support his candidacy," Fields said.

"It was quite a feat for him to be elected. Herb was sort of the perfect candidate for that era, not unlike what we saw with Obama [in 2008] — an extremely bright man with a beautiful family. There was nothing negative to say about Herb. He was the perfect person to break that barrier in Hackensack."

As a councilman, Mr. Leverett helped derail a planned urban renewal project, contending that some black homeowners, especially older ones, would be uprooted. Seeking reelection in 1969,

he finished in the middle of a 17-candidate field and lost his seat. But another African-American, Howard Gregory, won one of the five seats up for grabs.

Mr. Leverett and his family moved to Oakland the following year. They wanted a house with as few steps and stairs to climb as possible and found one in the rustic town, said Mr. Leverett's daughter, Anita Jones.

That made Hackensack's first black councilman a pioneer in a different sense — an African American in a nearly all-white community. "There were a lot of people in Oakland who'd never seen or encountered black people, and my parents felt it was important for them to understand that not every black person was like how they were portrayed on TV," Jones said.

Mr. Leverett, a Newark College of Engineering graduate, worked for the Atomic Energy Commission and companies such as Otis Elevator and Becton Dickinson during his engineering career.

He did not become involved in Oakland politics after moving from Hackensack, but worked to preserve the local wetlands. Through their church, Mr. Leverett and his wife, Jean, also volunteered at the Bergen County Jail, making sure inmates had Christmas services and dinners and necessities such as socks and toiletries.

Fields said that Mr. Leverett kindled his interest in politics and public policy.

"Herb was a stoic individual and I think he accepted the challenge to run in Hackensack as an opportunity to serve, knowing what it meant to the city and the black community," he said. "But he wasn't the type driven by personal ambition. It wasn't his nature to say, 'I have to run again because I lost.'"

Mr. Leverett had a major stroke in his 50s and moved to the Veterans Home 10 years ago. "He recovered from the stroke and hung in there for 33 years," his daughter said. "How he did that, I don't know. He was a strong man."

In addition to his wife and daughter, Mr. Leverett is survived by two other children, Camellia Fleishman and Dwayne Leverett; a sister, and five grandchildren.

Burial will be Friday at Brigadier General William C. Doyle Memorial Cemetery in Wrightstown in Burlington County, and the memorial service will be Saturday at 11 a.m. at Wyckoff Assembly of God. Arrangements are by Heaven's Touch Funeral Services, New York.