

In Loving Memory of
Marion Overton White



Sunrise: April 16, 1935 ♦ Sunset: July 5, 2019

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments
of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of
challenge and controversy.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Mohorn Missionary Baptist Church
219 Cosay Road, Opelousas, Louisiana 70570
Reverend Nicholas Thomas, Sr., Pastor
Friday, July 12, 2019, 6:00 p.m.

Obituary

Marion Overton White was born April 16, 1935 to the union of Rosella Sam and Valery White in the Plaisance community. Overton, as he was usually known—or “Sue,” as childhood friends knew him—entered into Christian fellowship at the Mohorn Missionary Baptist Church, under the pastorate of Reverend Sam A. Crowder. He remained a member and good Baptist until his death, although he did indulge a deep curiosity for a number of other religious and spiritual traditions.

A graduate of Plaisance High School, Overton received a degree in political science from Southern University in Baton Rouge, where he also competed on the track and field team and was active in the men’s choir. After college, he served two years in the United States Army. Overton often spoke of how this service helped to broaden his horizons. But he also noted how the Army helped to develop in him a life-long skepticism of the role of government in society and its use of violence as a means of advancing national interests and policies. After his honorable discharge from service, Overton returned to Baton Rouge and earned a law degree from Southern University Law School. He was admitted to the Louisiana State Bar in 1963 and began practicing law in Opelousas that same year.

Several years later, Overton was joined in marriage to Doris Marie Morein, notwithstanding Louisiana law, which, at the time, prohibited interracial marriage. To their union were born four children.

After six years’ residence in Opelousas, Overton and Doris relocated their family to a farm in Plaisance. There, nestled among many close relatives and friends, in a home he constructed a half mile from where he was born, Overton lived out his days.

An avid debater who also appreciated the value of crafty pranks, good-natured teasing, and clever jokes, Overton was an engaging presence among family, friends, and professional peers. He was equally renowned for his work ethic and ambition.

As a lawyer, Overton elevated a concern for clients and a social vision premised on equality and fairness above all else. His work as a civil rights lawyer earned him great respect and distinction, even as it also inspired the resentment and antagonism of powerful people. In the course of his legal career, Overton served as lead counsel in some of the state’s most important civil rights cases, including more than a dozen lawsuits aimed at ending racial segregation in entire public school districts, as well as a multitude of other cases involving voting rights, public accommodations, employment rights, and civil liberties.

Among the highlights of Overton’s career were his efforts on behalf of teachers and other school employees, impoverished agricultural workers, as well as immigrants persecuted for their religious and political views. Although his clients included distinguished individuals and well-known organizations, the mainstay of Overton’s law practice was his faithful representation of ordinary people from all walks of life. Working people, small farmers, senior citizens, and indigent people who visited the office he shared for

some forty years with his nephew, the late Attorney Joshua Pitre, found themselves in a welcoming environment where their troubles counted at least as much as those of the affluent and well-heeled.

Overton's legal practice was entwined with political service. In the course of his career, he worked on behalf of organizations such as the NAACP, of which he was state president in the 1960s; the NAACP Legal Defense Fund; the J.K. Haynes Foundation; the Southern Mutual Help Association; and the Islamic Republic of Iran. He was appointed as an advisor to the United States Commission on Civil Rights and was a delegate to the 1972 Democratic National Convention. Work with these and similar entities took him to every corner of the state, all over the country, and, on occasion, far overseas.

Even as his health began to fail, Overton embraced hard work. He worked long hours as a professional man and yet he seemed to welcome the sweaty and dirty work required by his successive family enterprises in soybean and cattle farming. It was not uncommon for him to climb atop a tractor in the evening, still wearing his business suit.

In his last years, Overton was an avid vegetable gardener, working hard at this, too, until his failing health sadly drove him inside. Of course, hard work was not everything to Overton. He very much enjoyed visiting family and friends, following the news of the world, and, especially in his declining years, watching classic television. Early in his life, Overton was a Mason and a member of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, although by the time of his death these commitments had long become casualties of other obligations.

Overton was a devoted family man to the last. He took a quiet pride in the years he lived back in his home community, repaying friends and family for the love, support, and sacrifices, without which, he always felt, he would have achieved little in the world. In this regard he felt a special obligation to his oldest sister, Selina.

Overton was preceded in death by his parents; by five sisters: Gustavia White, Selina Pitre, Florence Pitre, Flora Durgan Cluff, and Dorethel Pitre; and by four brothers: Persley White, Sr., Lawrence Pitre, Morris Pitre, and Vernon White, Sr. He is survived by his adoring wife, Doris, and by four children: John (Jocelyn Cortez), of Henderson, Nevada; Lia White-Allen (the late Troy Allen), of Baton Rouge; Ahmed (Teresa Bruce), of Boulder, Colorado; and Ismail (Corrine McConnaughy), of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He is survived as well by four loving sisters: Ethel Woods, of Lake Charles; Helen Calhoun, of Houston, Texas; Winona Thomas, of Plaisance; and Levonia Thomas (Joseph), also of Plaisance. Overton leaves to mourn nine grandchildren as well as three sisters-in-law, three brothers-in-law, and a host of nieces and nephews, cousins, and friends.