



Search for missing man continues

Local authorities continue an investigation into the disappearance of Ashley Hankins (above), a resident of Martin Luther King Drive in Charleston. Hankins, 30, was reported missing by his mother, Laura Hankins, on March 31. She told authorities she has not seen or had contact with her son since he left home on the morning of March 29, accompanied by a friend. Despite several reports that Hankins has been sighted in the area since that date, Charleston police have been unable to turn up any solid leads. Police Chief Jerry Williams said Hankins has been officially entered on the National Crime Information Center's computer as a missing person. A local club, Fifty Strong, has offered a \$500 reward for information leading to his whereabouts. Williams said persons with any knowledge of Hankins' whereabouts are asked to contact either the Fifty Strong club at 647-0031 or the Charleston Police Department at 647-5841.

Missing Charleston tops city board's agenda

Concern over the thoroughness of law enforcement efforts in the month-old case of a missing Charleston man led more than 50 members of the local African American community to attend Tuesday night's regular May meeting of the Charleston Board of Mayor and Commissioners.

Gyrone Kenniel, president of the Tallahatchie County Branch of the NAACP, was chief spokesman for the group.

He said many local residents are concerned that the investigation into the disappearance of Ashley Hankins, a 30-year-old black resident of Martin Luther King Drive who was last seen by his family on the morning of March 29, is feeble.

"We feel the investigation has not been speedy enough, and not enough has been put into it," said Kenniel. "We're asking the board to take some action to get as much outside help as possible to solve this case."

District 5 Supervisor Jerome Little, appearing, he said, only in the role of an NAACP member, also called on city officials to seek more help to find Hankins.

"Let all of us join together and find Ashley Hankins," Little said. "We are not going to rest, we are not going to be patient, until that is done."

Charleston Police Chief Jerry Williams said the Hankins case is his department's top priority.

"My main concern is finding Ashley Hankins," he said. "Some of you may feel we haven't done a



ASHLEY HANKINS
Missing since March 29

lot of work, but I've lost a lot of sleep on this case. Every man I've got is working on it in some way."

Three Charleston policemen have been assigned specifically to the Hankins investigation, Williams added.

Williams said Charleston police also have received help from other agencies in their investigation.

After Hankins' mother filed a missing persons report, Hankins' description and other information were entered on the National Crime Information Center's computer, part of a nationwide law enforcement network, Williams said.

In addition, the week following Hankins' disappearance, agents from the state Criminal Investigation Bureau were called in to search the Gay Street house where Hankins reportedly was last seen

with a white woman. Those agents are now local residents.

Williams said he had contact with the Oxford office of the federal investigators who formed him to find the missing person. "I don't think foul play is apparent," he said.

"They tell us we can't do without a crime scene investigation. We have jurisdiction, but we don't get involved," he said. "If they have suggestions to help us, we'll take them."

When former Mayor Ed Edmonds' presidential election court judge seemed strange to the investigators, Williams said he would go where except for the fact that Williams' reitigation is limited by jurisdiction.

"If you can't find him here, I will," Williams said.

"I can't come, but I will come in here," Williams said.

Police Commissioner Gardner of Washington County's history and unsolved cases are enough to prompt him to join the investigation.

Charleston Police Chief Williams agreed that he would do anything to get the investigators into the case, it should be a priority.

(Please see M1)

Charleston Sun Centeniel May 4, 1995

Police commissioner asks police chief's resignation

At a tense, standing-room-only regular June meeting of the Charleston Board of Mayor and Commissioners Tuesday night, Charleston Police Commissioner Richard Gardner submitted his resignation and asked for the resignation of Charleston Police Chief Jerry Williams.

Both actions came about in response to continuing racial strife resulting from the mysterious disappearance of a black Charleston man who reportedly was last seen March 29 in the Gay Street home of a white man.

Very much resembling the turnout for the board's May 2 meeting, at which the major topic of that evening was the same, some 80 people -- most of them members of the local African American community -- attended Tuesday night's meeting in the Charleston City Hall courtroom.

Seated in the crowd, as she had been a month ago, was Laura Hankins, mother of the missing 30-year-old Ashley Hankins.

Again, Gyron Kenniel, president of the Tallahatchie County branch of the NAACP, was chief spokesman for the group.

"It appears to the community that the Ashley Hankins case has stalled," Kenniel began. "The citizens have become somewhat leery that all is not being done to find Mr. Hankins."

In response, Williams said his department continues to work diligently on the Hankins case.

"I work on this case every day. I talk to somebody somewhere, whether it's here in town, in Batesville or the FBI," Williams noted.

"We check our NCIC (National Crime Information Center) reports and try to gather as much information as we can. Every lead we get, we try to follow up on. The case has not died and it will not die. But we need help. We need you as citizens to work with us and not against us."

Williams said Hankins' case continues to be handled as a missing person's case because of the lack of a crime scene or any evidence to indicate the commission of a crime related to his disappearance.

Kenniel countered that handling the case that way is inappropriate.

"Ashley Hankins is no longer to us just a missing person. You have reduced it to simply no crime," he told Williams.

where," Kenniel added, drawing loud applause and cheers from many in the crowd.

Kenniel, charging that the investigation into Hankins' disappearance has been one-sided, asked for the resignation of Williams and, in the absence of that, for the board to fire him.

Mayor Robert Rowe, trying with some difficulty at times to maintain order, urged those in the crowd to work with authorities in helping to solve the Hankins case.

"I ask you, from the bottom of my heart, let's work together," Rowe said. "I appeal to you for your help and your prayers to help resolve this."

Williams, responding to the charge that his office has not sufficiently investigated the man with whom Hankins reportedly was last seen, said that while he has been investigated, there is no evidence to tie him to any wrongdoing.

"If we could prosecute people on what we think they have done or will do, we could put the whole world away," Williams said. "We can't do that. You cannot prosecute anyone unless you have hard evidence for proof."

In her first statement to the city board about the case, Mrs. Hankins stood gingerly, her voice cracking with emotion, and said, "I want to find my son, if it's any way possible, dead or alive. I think that I, as a mother, have that right."

Late in the meeting, Rowe read a letter submitted by Gardner in which Gardner tendered his resignation from the responsibilities of police commissioner.

In the letter, Gardner cited his "total dissatisfaction" with the local police investigation into the Hankins case and said it seems the position of police commissioner lacks influence and power to effectuate progress in the case.

In offering his resignation as the city commissioner responsible for acting as liaison between the police department and city board, Gardner also demanded the resignation of Williams "due to his conduct in the Ashley Hankins case."

When Rowe pressed Gardner to specify his reasons for resigning, and to further elaborate on the chief's perceived misconduct, Gardner asked that the matter be discussed behind closed doors in executive session.

On a motion by Gardner and sec-

ed into executive session and remained so for over an hour.

When asked about action taken during executive session, from which the public is excluded, Rowe said the board declined to accept Gardner's resignation as police commissioner because board members recognize Gardner as an asset to the police department.

Rowe added that Gardner did not withdraw his letter of resignation.

Gardner, during the executive session, made a motion that Williams be asked to resign, Rowe said, adding that the motion died for lack of a second. Rowe said the board felt that Gardner and Williams had worked well together over the years and believed that any rifts which have developed between them are more the result of poor communications rather than irreconcilable differences.

Rowe said both Williams and Gardner spoke at length during the executive session.

In other board news:

- Commissioners voted to advertise for 17 hand-held beepers/radios for the city's firefighters. Several firemen met with the board Tuesday to lament the poor state of their communications equipment.

- Rowe told commissioners that a letter has been drafted by the city authorizing the Mississippi Department of Transportation to erect three-way stop signs at the intersection of highways 32 and 35 at Clay Street and West Main in an effort to improve traffic flow at the busy intersection.

- The city will seek public input on a request from city businessman Buddy Ross to rezone a piece of residential property on South Clay Street for commercial use so that he may install a car wash and body shop on the site. A sign will be erected on the property in question.

- The city adopted a resolution accepting a \$10,778 one-time grant from the federal COPS program to the Charleston Police Department. The funds come via the Mississippi Department of Public Safety.

- Commissioners voted to request a Waste Management of North Mississippi official to attend the board's July meeting to discuss concerns over commercial garbage fees and the manner in which they are billed to the city.

- The board voted to sell for \$2,100 a parcel of city property lo-

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