



**MICHIGAN CIVIL RIGHTS COMMISSION  
STATEMENT ON THE LIFE  
AND THE DEATH  
OF BURTON GORDIN**

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As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, we pause to honor and recognize one of the unheralded giants of the struggle to secure equality for all Michiganders, and to reflect upon one of the great unsolved mysteries in the story of that struggle.

While serving as the first Director of the Michigan Department of Civil Rights, Burton I. Gordin was gunned down as he left our Detroit office on March 20, 1970. His murder remains unsolved, the motive unknown, and the historical implications unanswered.

Upon hearing of the murder, a "deeply shocked" Governor William Milliken declared, "The tragic death of Burton Gordin stills a major voice in the civil rights struggle. He served a great cause with great dedication. His death is a profound loss to that cause and to the public who he so well served."

Burton Gordin was a native of Philadelphia who had served as a captain in the US Army and a reporter for the Philadelphia Record before joining the Philadelphia Fair Employment Practices Commission as a field representative and research associate in 1949. Three years later he joined the newly created and first-of-its-kind Philadelphia Civil Rights Commission where he would rise to become Director.

In 1964, after being created as the first (and still only) such body established within a state constitution, the Michigan Civil Rights Commission conducted a nation-wide search and selected Burton Gordin as our first Director. Under Director Gordin's leadership, the Commission quickly grew in size and in stature, becoming a model other states would follow.

Following Burton Gordin's death, the Michigan Chronicle noted, "Angry militants in the battle for civil rights progress declared him too conciliatory. Antagonists in the battle found him too contentious." The Chronicle concluded, "That speaks more eloquently than any rhetoric that comes to mind for his unswerving determination to conduct himself with both compassion and dignity in a most sensitive spot in these times of strife, turmoil and terror."

Burton Gordin's lifeless body was discovered lying face up in the garage where he parked while at work, just feet away from his running car, his wallet intact, nothing missing, and no apparent signs of a struggle. He had been shot twice at close range, once in the back upper left shoulder (possibly while seated in the car) and once in the chest (likely while already on the ground.) No eyewitnesses were ever identified, and no suspects were ever named.

Theories and suspects were numerous however, and reflected the tumultuous nature of the times. Public reports of the investigation, in which the Detroit Police Department was assisted by the Michigan State Police and the Attorney General's organized crime unit, reflected a wide variety of possible motives. Possibilities included a robbery gone awry (the motive favored by most investigators), but also the possible involvement of angry whites, militant blacks, disgruntled staff, the Weather Underground and Students for Democratic Society, and law enforcement from outside the Detroit area. None of these motives were ever proven or (publicly, at least) completely refuted.

The Michigan Chapter of the NAACP at the time called the killing a "political assassination of a civil rights leader until proven otherwise." More than 40 years later, there remains no firm basis for concluding there was any political motivation for the killing, but neither has it been proven there was not.

The murder of the first Director of the Michigan Department of Civil Rights may yet prove to be a robbery gone wrong - one of those truly tragic coincidences that are so hard for us to accept – or it might have been a deliberate act and thus an event of historic significance.

We may never know who killed Burton Gordin and why. While we may have to accept that the important historical questions of his death will forever be unanswered, we must not allow ourselves to forget the life of Director Gordin. He gave tirelessly to the struggle to ensure equal treatment for all, and he played a vital role in helping Michigan and the nation first to correct course and then to weather the storms of the civil rights era. To paraphrase the words of abolitionist Theodore Parker, Burton Gordin helped to bend the long arc of the moral universe towards justice.

Today we pay tribute to Burton I. Gordon's life's work. His accomplishments were too important, his impact too profound, and his legacy too significant to be forgotten.

We stand on his shoulders.



Adopted on the 9th day of December, 2013, by the  
MICHIGAN CIVIL RIGHTS COMMISSION

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