

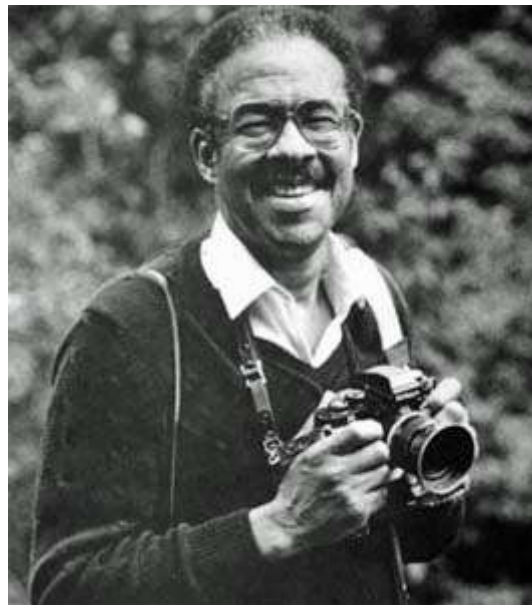
Moneta John Sleet, Jr.

(1926-1996)

By Jerry Long
c.2026



From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia ([wikipedia.org](https://www.wikipedia.org))



Moneta J. Sleet Jr. (February 14, 1926 – September 30, 1996) was an American press photographer best known for his work as a staff photographer for *Ebony* magazine. In 1969 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography for his photograph of Coretta Scott King, Martin Luther King Jr.'s widow, at her husband's funeral. Sleet was the first African-American man to win the Pulitzer, and the first African American to win the award for journalism.

Sleet was born in Owensboro, Kentucky. He was editor of the school newspaper at Western High School, his alma mater. He graduated cum laude from Kentucky State College (now Kentucky State University), a historically black college, in 1947 and went on to obtain a master's degree in journalism from New York University (NYU) in 1950. He also studied at the School of Modern Photography where he furthered his photography skills. During this same time Sleet served in an all-African American unit in World War II and was an assistant at a commercial operated studio. After his education at NYU he was a sports journalist for the *Amsterdam News* in New York and then John P. Davis' magazine *Our World*.



Sleet's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of Coretta Scott King and Bernice King at Martin Luther King's funeral

Sleet began working for *Ebony* magazine in 1955. Over the next 41 years, he captured photos of young Muhammad Ali, Dizzy Gillespie, Stevie Wonder, Emperor Haile Selassie I, Jomo Kenyatta, former ambassador Andrew Young in a blue leather jacket and jeans in his office at the United Nations, Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, Liberia's William Tubman and Billie Holiday. He gained the affection and esteem of many civil rights leaders, many of whom called on him by name. When Coretta Scott King found out that no African American photographers had been assigned to cover her husband's funeral service, she demanded that Sleet be a part of the press pool. If he was not, she threatened to bar all photographers from the service. Besides his photo of Coretta Scott King, he also captured grieving widow Betty Shabazz at the funeral of her husband Malcolm X. A collection of his photographs in book form, *Special Moments in African-American History, 1955-1996: the Photographs of Moneta Sleet, Jr., Ebony Magazine's Pulitzer Prize Winner*, was published posthumously in 1998. In 2018, the artist Theaster Gates created an archive of photographs by Sleet and fellow Johnson photographer Isaac Sutton work entitled *Black Image Corporation*. The archive was exhibited at the Osservatorio of the Fondazione Prada.

During Sleet's 41 years at *Ebony*, he also worked by Martin Luther King Jr.'s side for 13 years, capturing historical moments of the civil rights movement. A famous image of Rosa Parks, MLK, Ralph Abernathy, Ralph Bunche, and Coretta Scott King leading marchers was captured by Moneta. He also captured images of MLK's I Have a Dream speech at the Lincoln Memorial, the march from Selma to Montgomery, and the Montgomery bus boycott.

Sleet's work was included in the 2025 exhibition *Photography and the Black Arts Movement, 1955–1985* at the National Gallery of Art.

Sleet married his wife Juanita in 1950 and had two sons and one daughter: Gregory M. Sleet, a judge who used to be on the United States District Court for the District of Delaware, Lisa, and Michael Sleet. He had three grandchildren: Ashlee Evertsz, Moneta Sleet III, and Kelsi Sleet. Sleet was also a member of Sigma Pi Phi, the oldest African-American Greek-lettered

organization, along with MLK. He was a part of an overseas press club so he took a lot of pictures of international world leaders.

Sleet, while a resident of Baldwin, New York, died of cancer at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center on September 30, 1996.



Daviess County, Kentucky: Celebrating Our Heritage, 1815-2015,
Daviess County Bicentennial Committee
(Evansville, IN: M. T. Publishing Company, Inc., 2015)

“Daviess County Bicentennial Chronology: 200 Historical Events”, by Jerry Long, p.13:

1926, 2-14 Moneta J. Sleet, Jr. (1926-1996) was born in Owensboro. He worked for *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines as photojournalist for 41 years. His photos documented the African American struggle for independence and the American civil rights movement. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for photo of Coretta Scott King at funeral of Martin Luther King.

“Arts & Culture in Daviess County”. by Tracey McQueen, p.152:

Moneta Sleet Jr. (1926 -1996) won the 1969 Pu Prize for his photograph of widow Coretta Scott King at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral. Sleet was the first African-American to win a Pulitzer for journalism. The Owensboro native and Western High School graduate began working for *Ebony* magazine 1955. For more than 40 years, he captured photos of Muhammad Ali, Dizzy Gillespie, Stevie Wonder, Billie Holiday and others. *Special Moments in African American History: The photographs of Moneta Sleet Jr. 1955-1996* was published posthumously in 1999. His work is exhibited in museums across the nation, including the Owensboro Museum of Fine Art.

“An Unfinished History – Daviess County’s Black Citizens”,
by Wesley Acton & Aloma Dew, p.164:



The Community Drum and Bugle Corps was sponsored by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. Moneta Sleet Jr., at far right, went on to become the only Pulitzer Prize winner from the Daviess County area.



Kentucky Commission on Human Rights – Hall of Fame:



Moneta J. Sleet, Jr. (1926 - 1996) - In 1969, Moneta J. Sleet, Jr. became the first black American to win a Pulitzer Prize in photography. His major contribution to photojournalism was his extensive documentation of the Civil Rights movement. Born in Owensboro, Kentucky, Moneta Sleet's interest in photography began as a child. He pursued photography at Kentucky State College and received his master's degree in Journalism from New York University in 1950. He later joined Ebony Magazine as staff photographer. In 1956, Moneta Sleet met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., just as he was emerging as the leader of the civil rights movement. He later covered Dr. King's acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 and the Selma to Montgomery march in 1965. When Dr. King was assassinated in 1968, Moneta Sleet covered the funeral, resulting in the Pulitzer winning photograph of Dr. King's grieving widow Coretta and youngest daughter Bernice. His early career covered the period of African national independence in the 1950's. Sleet photographed in Liberia, Libya, Sudan and he photographed Kwame Nkrumah at the moment of Ghana's independence. This gained Moneta Sleet an Overseas Press Club Citation in 1957. He often photographed children who tagged alongside him as he worked. The father of three children himself, these portraits were the most rewarding. Moneta Sleet received numerous awards including the National Urban League in 1969, and the National Association of Black Journalists in 1978. Over the years, his work has appeared in exhibitions at museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Moneta Sleet's work reveals a warmth of understanding and empathy with the subjects who passed before his camera.



NOTABLE KENTUCKY
AFRICAN AMERICANS
DATABASE



<https://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/2146>

From NAAA, Notable Kentucky African Americans Database:

Sleettown (Perryville, KY)

Sleettown was an African American community developed after the Civil War on 96-acres near Perryville, KY. During the war, the land had been used as a staging ground for the Confederate Army during the Battle of Perryville, the largest Civil War battle in Kentucky.

The history of Sleettown was collected and written by Perryville Mayor Anne Sleet and Mary Q. Kerbaugh. The Sleet Family's earliest known ancestors were Warner and Octavia Sleet. Their sons Henry, Preston, and George led in the development of Sleettown. Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer Moneta Sleet was a member of the Sleettown family.

The community had a general store, eating places, and a cemetery. As younger residents began leaving for employment in the city, the population steadily decreased until the last person left Sleettown in 1931; only one old house remains standing.

In 2007, the Kentucky Parks Department purchased the land where Sleettown had existed. The site will be used to tell the history of both the Battle of Perryville and Sleettown.

For more see "Sleettown, Kentucky," *Kentucky Atlas and Gazetteer*; "*The Sleets and Sleettown*"; "*Sleettown*," at sites.rootsweb.com; A. Jester, "Sleettown tells a part of the tale," *Lexington Herald-Leader*, 9/30/2001, KyLife section, p. J3; G. Kocher, "Perryville's next mayor - Anne Sleet adds new chapter to family's proud history in Boyle County," *Lexington Herald-Leader*, 11/27/2006, Main News section, p. A1; "Sleettown to become part of historic site," *Lexington Herald-Leader*, 6/5/2007, p. B3; and "Our uncommonwealth - Man reunites with Kentucky roots thanks to documentary filmmaker," *Lexington Herald-Leader*, 12/13/2016, Features section, p. C1.

See also the Sleettown genealogy and history in the online publication (.pdf) *Kentucky Ancestors: genealogical quarterly of the Kentucky Historical Society*, vol. 43, no. 1, Autumn 2007.



Moneta John Sleet was born in Owensboro, Daviess County, KY on 14 February 1926. He is listed with his parents at their residence 714 West 7th Street in the 1930 & 1940 censuses of Owensboro, KY. He was the son of Moneta John Sleet, Sr. (1893-1958) and Ozetta L. Allensworth. Moneta, Sr., had been an insurance agent, a school professor, and manager of the Kentucky Vocational Training School. At his death in 1958 he had been a resident of Owensboro 33 years. He was a native of Perryville, Boyle County, KY. He died in Owensboro, KY, at his residence, 714 West 7th Street. He and his wife, Ozetta, were buried in Owensboro's Elmwood Cemetery (section N). He was survived by his wife, son, M. J., Jr. of New York City, daughter, Emmy Lou Wilson, of Detroit, MI and three grandchildren. Moneta, Sleet, Jr. was the grandson of Simon Sleet (1861-1939) & Lucinda Clark; great-grandson of Henry Brown Sleet (1842-1923) & Catherine Thompson; and great-great-grandson of Warner & Octavia Sleet.

Moneta Sleet, Jr. on his graduation from Western High School in Owensboro on 29 May 1942 he delivered the valedictorian address. He was inducted into the U.S. Army in March 1944. He received a degree in business administration from the Kentucky State College in Frankfort, KY on 10 June 1947; he had the highest ranking in his graduating class.

Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Tuesday, 15 May 1956, p.5:

**Business Manager Of West
Kentucky Is Cited By KTA**

M. J. Sleet, Owensboro citizen who is business manager of the West Kentucky Vocational School at Paducah, has been awarded a citation by the board of directors of the Kentucky Teachers Association in recognition of the work which he has done in the educational field.

The citation reads in part: "For your educational accomplishments and services rendered in the various schools of Kentucky and especially for the outstanding services you have given as business manager at the West Kentucky Vocational School at Paducah: you are to be commended.

"Recognition is given to your many years of service as a member of the board of directors of the Kentucky Negro Educational Association. Especially noteworthy has been the more than 20 years of services which you have rendered as the auditor of KNEA and KTA financial records. In addition, you have, over the period of years, been most ardent in your promotion of the interests of these associations. Always you have sought to have the most efficient persons elected to the various offices."

Prof. Sleet has been business manager of the West Kentucky Vocational School and its predecessor, the West Kentucky Industrial College, since 1934. Before that time he had served as an insurance executive in Owensboro.

His son, Monita J. Sleet Jr., who holds an M. A. degree in journalism, is on the New York staff of "Ebony." A daughter, Miss Emma Lou Sleet, who has an M. S. degree in library science, is a librarian at West Virginia State College Institute.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 10 March 1957, p.6D:

**Former Owensboroan
Traveling With Nixon**

M. J. Sleet Jr., son of the business manager of West Kentucky Vocational School, Paducah, is traveling with the official party of Vice President Nixon on a goodwill tour to Africa.

Young Sleet resides in New York and is one of the top photographers for the Johnson Publishing Company, whose publications include Ebony and Jet. He is married and has two sons and a daughter. Sleet was born in Owensboro. He is a graduate of Western High School, Owensboro, received a bachelor's degree in business administration at Kentucky State College, Frankfort, a Master's degree in journalism from New York University and holds an advanced degree in photography from the New York School of Photography.

At present, he is working toward a Ph.D at Columbia University.

The party will be on tour about 20 days.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 25 May 1969, p.8A:

Owensboro Native Wins Pulitzer Prize



Moneta Sleet, Jr.

Moneta Sleet Jr., a native of Owensboro and a staff photographer for Ebony magazine recently received the Pulitzer Prize for feature photography.

Sleet won the award for his widely used photograph of Mrs. Martin Luther King Jr. and her daughter, Bernice, at the funeral for Dr. King in Atlanta, Ga., on April 9, 1968. He is the first Negro to win the Pulitzer Prize in the news field since its inception in 1917 and the second Negro in history to win the prize.

Born in Owensboro on Feb. 14, 1926, Sleet is the son of Mrs. Ozetta Sleet, who now resides in Paducah, Ky., and the late Moneta Sleet Sr. He began his photographic interest as a hobby at Western High School, now Western Elementary School, and gives credit to "my chemistry teacher there, Ernest Thruston, who fixed up a makeshift darkroom and started a few of us out in it," states Sleet.

Sleet, who was valedictorian of his graduating class at Western High School, graduated cum laude from Kentucky State College. While in college he used his photographic knowledge to defray college expenses by working in the Frankfort campus' photo studio.

A World War II draftee, Sleet served with the 93rd Engineers in India and Burma. Upon his discharge from the Army with the rank of a staff sergeant, he went to New York, where he graduated from the School of Modern Photography and obtained a master's degree in journalism from New York University.

Prior to joining Ebony magazine in 1955, Sleet worked a photography instructor at Maryland State College and for Our World magazine.

Sleet and his wife, Juanita, a school teacher, live in Baldwin, L. I. N.Y. They have three children, Gregory, 18. Michael, 16, and Lisa, 12.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 17 March 1988, p.6C:

**Owensboro native
has state display**

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

FRANKFORT – When some people pull out their slide projectors, visitors start looking for an exit.

But when Moneta Sleet Jr. pulls out his, people sit spellbound.

The 62-year-old Owensboro native chronicled the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s with his camera for Ebony and Jet magazines.

In 1969, he became the first black photographer to win a Pulitzer Prize. That photograph is engraved on the conscience of America.

Coretta Scott King sits on a church pew in a black veil with tears in her eyes. Her young daughter, Bernice, lies with her head in her mother's lap, staring toward the camera.

It was the funeral of the slain civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, 20 years ago next month.

That and 125 other Sleet photographs are touring America in a show organized by the New York Public Library.

Through April 25, Sleet's photo show is on exhibit in the corridors of the Capitol and in the Jackson Hall Art Gallery at Kentucky State University.

Wednesday, Sleet returned to KSU, where he graduated in 1947 with a degree in business administration.

For an hour, he showed slides of his work and talked about one of the most dramatic eras of American history through the eyes of one who was there "as part of the woodwork."

"A 6-year-old can learn to operate a camera," Sleet said. "But you have to know how to make people respond to you. You have to become part of the woodwork."

He started taking pictures as a child in Owensboro with an old box camera. As a teenager, Sleet belonged to the photography club at the old Western High School.

But it wasn't until he left home for college in 1942 that he really developed an interest in photography, Sleet said. In 1950, he completed a master's degree in journalism at New York University and became a photographer for Our World magazine. He moved to Jet and Ebony in 1955 when Our World folded.

And that began a career that has taken him around the world with extensive work in Africa.

His exhibit includes color portraits of Jesse Jackson, Muhammad Ali, Redd Foxx, Stevie Wonder, Lena Horn and other celebrities.

But it's the stark drama of his black-and-white civil rights work that captures an audience.

"Tragic events don't come over as well in color," Sleet said. "Color makes the scene more pleasant than it is."

He began photographing King in 1956 during the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycotts. "I was always amazed at how calm they (the Kings) were" despite the threats on their lives, Sleet said.

There are photographs of the Selma to Montgomery 50-mile march that led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. News coverage of that march, Sleet said, "caused the country to be outraged and forced passage of the Civil Rights Act."

He talked about a car parked by the road with "nigger" and "coon" painted on it, of a truck parked to display rifles in its bed and showed photos of policemen watching the march with hands on their guns.

The final King photo is of the thousands who followed the drawn wagon with his coffin through the streets of Atlanta.

"It was a stroke of genius to use those mules," Sleet said. "It showed his touch with the common people."

At the funeral, he said, the news media had to send in pool photographers who would allow body to use their film.

No black photographers were selected. So Sleet went to Kin sociate Andrew Young for permission to get in. He said Mrs. King said unless black photographers could come in, no photographers would.

And then an FBI agent almost prevented him from getting inside to take the picture for which he will always be known.

Sleet remembers the perpetual Southern rains on the freedom marches. And he remembers the heat. But even more he remembers the courage of a people who stood up for their rights regardless of the consequences.

Sleet, who now lives in Baldwin, N.Y., doesn't have any family in Owensboro these days. And he doesn't get back much anymore.

But he's never forgotten what his father told him when he decided to become a photographer: "That's fine, son. But what are you going to do to make a living?"



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 31 March 1989, p.3C:

**Owensboro
native named
to hall of fame**

LEXINGTON – Three candidates, including an Owensboro native, will be inducted into the Kentucky Journalism Hall of Fame in ceremonies April 28 at the University of Kentucky.

The 1989 honorees are:

- Moneta J. Sleet Jr., a native of Owensboro, staff photographer for Johnson Publishing Co., publisher of Ebony, Jet and EM magazines. Sleet was the first black American to win a Pulitzer Prize for photography for a picture of Coretta Scott King at her husband's funeral in 1969.

- John Herchenroeder, named the nation's first news ombudsman in 1967 at The Courier-Journal and The Louisville Times.
- Milton Metz, veteran broadcast personality at WHAS-Radio and WHAS-TV in Louisville, who created the "Metz Here" public opinion phone-in program on WHAS-Radio in 1959.
Following the induction, Dan Rather of CBS Evening News will give the 12th annual Joe Creason Lecture.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Wednesday, 2 October 1996, pp.1A & 2A:

Pulitzer-winning photographer, Owensboro native Sleet dies



Moneta J. Sleet Jr.

Moneta J. Sleet Jr., an Owensboro native who was the first black to win a Pulitzer Prize in photography, died Monday at a New York hospital.

Sleet, 70, was diagnosed with cancer in August when he returned to his Long Island home after covering the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta for Ebony.

In 1969, Sleet won the Pulitzer Prize in feature photography for a picture he took of the veiled, grief-stricken Coretta Scott King holding her daughter Bernice at the funeral of her slain husband, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

The Owensboro Museum of Fine Art planned an exhibit of Sleet's photography for August 1997 that would have included a visit from Sleet. The exhibit will be held as scheduled, but Museum Director Mary Bryan Hood said she regretted that some Owensboro residents would never get to meet Sleet.

"We'd planned on taking him into the schools," Hood said. "What he has done should be a role model for any young person."

The museum also won a grant this summer that will help them buy two pieces of Sleet's work for the permanent collection.

Although he spent the bulk of his career documenting America's slow march toward racial equality, Sleet himself was almost denied the chance to take the King photograph.

He had to ask Andrew Young to personally intervene with King's widow to get inside the church.

"They said they were going to pool it," Sleet recalled later. "Normally the pool meant news service, Life, Time, and Newsweek. When the pool was selected, there were no black photographers from the black media in it.

After Young approached Coretta Scott King, "she said if somebody from Johnson Publishing (Ebony's parent company) is not on the pool, there will be no pool. Since I was with Johnson Publishing, I became part of the pool.

"We had made arrangements with AP that they would process the black-and-white film immediately after the service and put it on the wire. Later, I found out which shot they sent out," Sleet said.

Sleet later described being inside the church, face to face with the leading figures of 1960s America.

"It was so dramatic; everywhere you turned the camera - Daddy King, Vice President Humphrey, Nixon, Jackie Kennedy ... Dr. Ralph Bunche reading the program with a magnifying glass. I considered myself fortunate to be there documenting everything. If I wasn't there I knew I would be somewhere crying," Sleet said in 1986 while preparing a one-man show for the New York City Public Library.

In January 1995, Sleet was awarded the Mayor's Award for Excellence in personal achievement at a ceremony in Owensboro. The annual awards are presented to people who bring national recognition to Owensboro and who succeed in their fields.

"Though I have been gone many years, Owensboro has been a tremendous part of who I am, both personally and professionally," Sleet said at the ceremony. "It is where as a little boy growing up I learned the true meaning of the words family, neighbor and community.

"Every parent looked out for every child, and every teacher taught every student as if the quality of their life depended on it. And as I have found out many times since I left, it did."

Addie C. Talbott of Owensboro kept in touch with Sleet after he moved to New York. The two graduated from Western High School and attended Kentucky State College together, Talbott said.

"We were all just very, very proud of him," Talbott said. "He was a fine person. I was looking forward to him coming to the museum."

Sleet, a member of the Kentucky Journalism Hall of Fame, first learned about photography in a closet at Western High School that served as a makeshift darkroom.

A tall, willowy man who played tennis when not traveling the world for Ebony and Jet magazines, Sleet was born Feb. 14, 1926, the son of a college administrator.

He earned a master's degree in journalism from New York University in 1950 after completing a business degree at Kentucky State in 1947 and helping set up the photography department at Maryland State College the next year.

He went to work as a sportswriter for the Amsterdam News, then joined the staff of Our World, a popular black picture magazine.

When the magazine folded in 1955, he was tapped by the Johnson Publishing Co., where he worked at the time of his death.

His 41-year career with the black-oriented publishing company took him all over the world - from dirt-road hamlets in Georgia to the glittering streets of Paris' Latin Quarter - and spanned a critical era in the history of the African diaspora.

In 1956, an assignment brought him in contact with a 28-year-old minister from Atlanta who was on his way to becoming the nation's most renowned civil rights leader. His association with King flourished, and Sleet traveled with him when King visited Sweden to receive the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize.

In 1957, when Africa was reaching toward independence from its colonial rulers, he traveled there with Vice President Richard Nixon. The pictures he took, including an image of Kwame Nkrumah at the moment of Ghana's independence, earned him an award from the Overseas Press Club.

His colleagues said the pictures Sleet liked best were of ordinary people. His favorite photograph was one he took of a woman, clapping her hands with her eyes tightly closed, as she walked in the 1965 civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala.

His work has been exhibited at museums, including the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Sleet, who lived on Long Island, is survived by his wife of 46 years, Juanita; a daughter, two sons, a sister and three grandchildren.

Editor's note: Newsday and The Associated Press contributed to this story.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 5 September 1997, pp.1D & 4D:

**Owensboro native's photographs
chronicled civil rights movement
Moneta Sleet Jr. won Pulitzer Prize**

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

His photography began with neighborhood pictures taken with a box camera his parents gave him when he was a boy in Owensboro in the 1930s. And it culminated with a Pulitzer Prize in photojournalism in 1969.

He didn't live long enough to see it, but Moneta Sleet, an internationally known photographer, is being recognized in his hometown this month with an exhibition of his works at the Owensboro Museum of Fine Art.

"Moneta J. Sleet Jr.: Pulitzer Prize Photojournalist," an exhibition of 126 of his photographs, will open at the art museum Sunday at 1 p.m. A preview gala is scheduled for 6 p.m. Saturday.

The show, sponsored by the Messenger-Inquirer and the A.H. Belo Foundation of Dallas, runs through Oct. 19.

Sleet, a member of the Kentucky Journalism Hall of Fame, was born on Valentine's Day 1926, the son of a college administrator. He died at his Long Island home last October at age 70 - two months after being diagnosed with cancer.

His last photo assignment turned out to be the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, which he covered for Ebony.

This month's exhibit was already planned. Sleet had been scheduled to speak at Saturday's opening.

"We'd planned on taking him into the schools," Mary Bryan Hood, director of the art museum, said at the time. "What he has done should be a role model for any young person."

Life was a struggle for Sleet in the early years. And he was almost prevented from taking the photograph that made him famous.

At Owensboro's old Western High School, Sleet learned the rudiments of photography as a member of the school's photography club. But it was at Kentucky State College in 1942 that he began thinking of photography as a career, Sleet said in a 1986 interview.

He recalled his father's words: "That's fine, son. But what are you going to do to make a living?"

A decade would pass before photography became a career.

Sleet earned a master's degree in journalism from New York University in 1950 after completing a business degree at Kentucky State in 1947 and helping set up the photography department at Maryland State College the next year.

He went to work as a sportswriter for the Amsterdam (New York) News, then joined the staff of Our World, a popular African American picture magazine.

When the magazine folded in 1955, Sleet was hired by Johnson Publishing Co., whose publications include Jet and Ebony. He continued to work there until his death.

His 41-year career with the black-oriented publishing company took him all over the world.

In 1956, an assignment introduced Sleet to a 28-year-old minister from Atlanta who was on his way to becoming the nation's most renowned civil rights leader. His association with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. flourished. And Sleet traveled with King when he visited Sweden to receive the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize.

In 1957, when many African countries were nearing independence from their colonial rulers, Sleet traveled to Africa with then Vice President Richard Nixon. The pictures he took earned him an award from the Overseas Press Club.

But it was King's funeral in 1968 that made Sleet famous.

The news media had to send in pool photographers who would allow everyone to use their film.

But no black photographers were chosen for the pool. Desperate to get in, Sleet approached Andrew Young, one of King's associates, for permission.

Coretta Scott King, the slain civil rights leader's widow, said unless black photographers were admitted, no photographers would be admitted.

And even then, an FBI agent tried to stop Sleet at the church's door.

But he persisted, made his way to the front of the church and squatted in the aisle.

The photograph he took that day remains engraved on the nation's conscience. It shows Coretta Scott King sitting in the pew, a black veil over her face, tears in her eyes. Her young daughter, Bernice, lies with her head in her mother's lap, eyes staring into the camera.

The following year, that picture won the Pulitzer Prize in photojournalism. It was the first time the prize was awarded to an African-American photographer.

"A 6-year-old can operate a camera," Sleet said in an interview once. "But you have to know how to make people respond to you. You have to become part of the woodwork."

His colleagues said the pictures Sleet liked best were those of ordinary people. His favorite photograph was one he took of a woman, clapping her hands with her eyes tightly closed, as she walked in the 1965 civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala.

"In the end, empathy with his subject - anonymous or renowned - is the dominate quality of his work," says Julia Van Haaften, a curator of photographs at The New York Public Library.

Sleet's work has been exhibited in New York City, Harlem, St. Louis, Detroit and Frankfort among other places.

He never got the chance to speak at the opening of his exhibit in his hometown. But if he had, Sleet may have used the words he spoke in 1995 when he was presented the Mayor's Award for Excellence.

"Though I have been gone many years," he said that night, "Owensboro has been a tremendous part of who I am both personally and professionally. It is where, as a little boy growing up, I learned the true meaning of the words family, neighbor and community.

"Every parent looked out for every child, and every teacher taught every student as if the quality of their life depended on it. And, as I have found out many times since I left, it did."



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Sunday, 13 December 1998, p.6F:

Black history recorded through Sleet's camera lens

Hundreds of photos
by Owensboro native
included in book

By Herbert G. McCann, Associated Press

As blacks battled fire hoses and police dogs to gain their share of the American dream, one man with a camera recorded it all on film.

From the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott in 1956 to the messy Poor People's March on Washington shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Moneta Sleet Jr. photographed the travails and triumphs of civil rights workers for Ebony and Jet magazines.

But Sleet's recording of black history was not limited to civil rights battles. He and his camera roamed widely to photograph blacks in a variety of settings attending independence ceremonies of colonial Africa, participating in the arts, sports and political campaigns, and celebrating at home.

Sleet's work for Ebony Jet, where he spent most of his career, is reverently shown in "Special Moments in African-American History, 1955-1996: The Photographs of Moneta Sleet Jr." (Johnson, \$49.95).

It is a huge book, filled with hundreds of pictures and text that explains the events that led to them. Each picture is succinctly captioned for content and context. Photographer Gordon Parks wrote the introduction, and Sleet's eloquent comments are found throughout the book.

Sleet is best-known for his 1968 picture of Coretta Scott King comforting her daughter at her husband's funeral. It earned him a Pulitzer Prize for feature photography, the first black so honored.

Sleet grew up in comfort in Owensboro. His father was the business manager of a Paducah vocational school, and his mother a teacher who gave up her career to raise a family.

His early interest in photography was encouraged at Kentucky State College. After serving in the Army during World War II, he attended New York University, where he obtained a master's degree in journalism.

After brief stints teaching and as a sportswriter for The Amsterdam News in New York, Sleet concentrated on photography.

Because of Ebony's emphasis on achievement, there are few pictures illustrating the distressed lives of blacks during most of the period covered in the book.

Instead, most are of people in action:

Celebrities arriving for the 1963 March on Washington. A passionate Stokely Carmichael, later known as Kwame Ture, briefing congressmen about conditions in 1964 Mississippi. A woman, eyes closed, singing and clapping as she made the 50-mile voting rights march from Selma, Ala., to Montgomery in 1965. King receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in Stockholm.

There are celebrity photos – Nat King Cole with Tallulah Bankhead, Sammy Davis Jr. performing at the second Reagan inaugural, Bill and Camille Cosby celebrating 30 years of marriage.

And there are mundane photos of fashions and food, and travel pictures of Atlanta students in Russia.

Sleet's eye for a good picture is evident in his portrait of blues singer Billie Holiday. The famous picture shows the singer in a pensive mood, her hands up to her face and the tracks from cocaine abuse clearly showing on her arms.

"He was a sensitive photographer," said Doris Saunders, who compiled the photos and edited the text. "Sleet was the kind of person you would feel comfortable with. Sleet was not going to get in the way of the action."

His last pictures were of the 1996 Olympic games in Atlanta. He died later that year at age 70.



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Friday, 25 February 2000, pp.1A & 2A:

'Sleet would be so proud'

City dedicates
marker to 1969
Pulitzer winner

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

Sonny Sleet's spirit came home to Owensboro on Thursday. You could see it in the smiles and teardrops of his family and friends.

The world knew him as Moneta Sleet Jr., the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize for photojournalism. And that's what the new bronze historical marker across from his childhood home on Seventh Street calls him.

But in Owensboro's Baptisttown neighborhood, the college professor's son was always known as Sonny.

Emily Holloway graduated from Western High School in 1941, one year ahead of Sleet.

As she watched her friend's widow and oldest son unveil the marker at Seventh and Walnut streets, Holloway remembered a summer day long ago when the young basketball player was in her backyard, his shirt full of apples and a smile on his face.

"That's my favorite memory of Sonny," she said.

Thursday was "Moneta J. Sleet Jr. Day" in Owensboro. And St. Paul AME Church, 624 Elm St., was filled to capacity and beyond by those who came to honor the man Mayor Waymond Morris called "one of Owensboro's most famous citizens."

Sleet was a photographer for Ebony and Jet magazines from 1955 until his death in 1996 at age 70. His photographs, which have been displayed in museums across the country, chronicled the civil-rights movement, beginning in the 1950s.

He won his Pulitzer in 1969 for his photograph of Coretta Scott King and her daughter, Bernice, at the funeral of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Those achievements are documented on Kentucky Historical Highway Marker No. 2036. But only a few of those who stood in what is now Max Rhoads Park on Thursday afternoon for the ceremony realized the irony of the location.

This was Walnut Street Elementary School when Sonny Sleet was a boy – a white school that denied him admittance.

And now, his marker stands on the corner. Times have changed in Owensboro.

St. Paul AME Church was overflowing with people – black and white, young and old – by the time the ceremonies began with hand-clapping gospel music by the Owensboro Mercy Health System Choir.

Morris told the crowd that Sleet "left us and made us proud."

"We are so grateful for the privilege of knowing him when he was here," the Rev. R.L. McFarland, a former Owensboro mayor pro tem, said in his invocation. "He walked among those who were great, but he never lost the human touch."

McFarland, who knew Sonny Sleet as a child, said because of the marker, Sleet "though he be dead, yet he speaketh."

Sleet was a member of Fourth Street Baptist Church, McFarland said, but St. Paul was used for the ceremony because it was closer to the new marker.

City Commissioner Olive Burroughs told the crowd, "We are here today to make sure Owensboro never forgets Moneta Sleet."

When his widow, Juanita Sleet, rose to speak, the crowd stood in a prolonged ovation.

"As you may know, I'm overwhelmed," she said, trying to keep her voice from breaking. "Sleet loved growing up in this town. He talked about playing tennis all day long."

Memories played across her face.

"What a wonderful husband," she said. "We were married 46 years, had three children and three grandchildren. Owensboro will stay in my memory forever."

Later, as she stood beside her late husband's marker, Juanita Sleet said, "Sleet would be so proud. He should be living to see it himself."



Juanita Sleet wipes away a tear during the Rev. R.L. McFarland's invocation Thursday during the historical marker dedication service for her late husband, Moneta J. Sleet Jr., at St. Paul AME Church.

U.S. District Judge Gregory Sleet of Delaware said his father could travel the world taking pictures but still find time to give his children the guidance that "continues to lead us today."

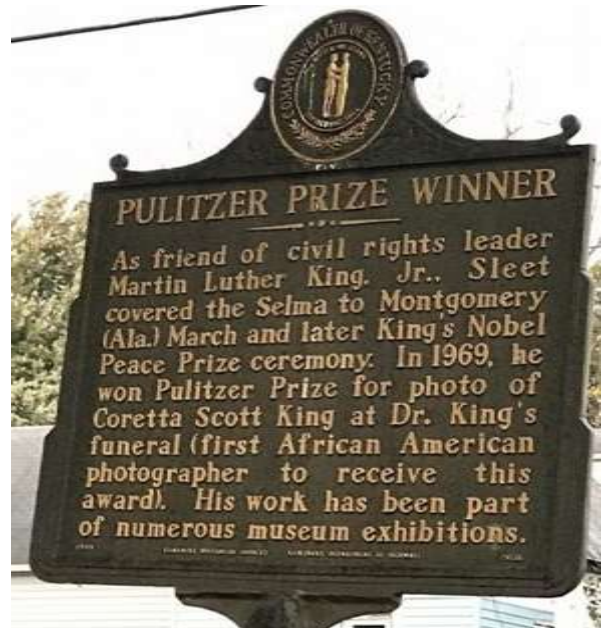
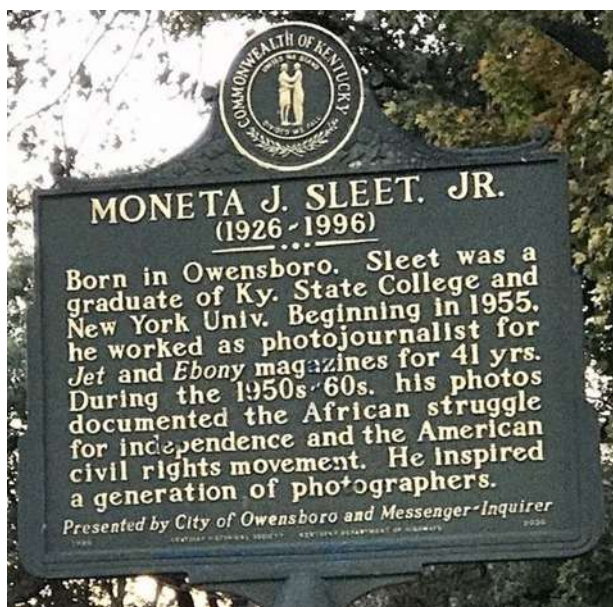
As he stood by the marker, Judge Sleet said, "It's important to let our children know our history."

After the ceremony, Holloway walked back to the church and picked up a copy of the 1940 Western High yearbook.

There, on the page for the sophomore class, she pointed to Sonny Sleet's picture – and then to the text that predicted that someone in the class would win a Pulitzer Prize.

And a smile spread across her face.

Sonny Sleet fulfilled the prophecy.



Side 1 – Moneta J. Sleet, Jr.

Born in Owensboro. Sleet was a graduate of Ky. State College and New York Univ. Beginning in 1955, he worked as photojournalist for *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines for 41 yrs. During the 1950s-60s, his photos documented the African struggle for independence and the American civil rights movement. He inspired a generation of photographers.

Side two – Pulitzer Prize Winner

As friend of civil rights leader Martin Luther King. Jr.. Sleet covered the Selma to Montgomery (Ala.) March and later King's Nobel Peace Prize ceremony. In 1969, he won Pulitzer Prize for photo of Coretta Scott King at Dr. King's funeral (first African American photographer to receive this award). His work has been part of numerous museum exhibitions.

Historical Highway marker was erected 1989 by the Kentucky Historical Society and Kentucky Department of Highways (Marker Number 2036). Located in Owensboro, KY, in the Max Rhoads Park at the intersection of West 7th Street and Walnut Street, on the right when traveling west on West 7th Street. Marker is across the street from Sleet's childhood home, 714 West 7th Street.



Moneta Sleet childhood home –
714 West 7th Street, Owensboro, KY



Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Thursday, 18 November 2021, pp1.A & 2A:

Owensboro plans to honor native son
County donates \$50K to Sleet project

By Keith Lawrence, Messenger-Inquirer

Sonny Sleet's spirit still lives in Owensboro.

The world knew him as Moneta Sleet Jr., the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize for photojournalism.

But in Owensboro's Baptisttown neighborhood, the college professor's son was always known as Sonny.

Now, 25 years after Sleet died of cancer, the community is making big plans to honor him as a native son.

Wednesday evening, a crowd gathered in Max Rhoads Park at Seventh and Walnut streets for the unveiling of a large portrait of Sleet, painted by Owensboro artist K.O. Lewis.

It features Sleet with his camera around his neck in the foreground and images of two of his most famous photographs in the background.



Artist K.O. Lewis, left, stands next to his painting of 1969 Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist and Owensboro native Moneta Sleet Jr. on Wednesday as he talks with Emmy Woosley of Leadership Owensboro at a portrait unveiling at Max Rhoads Park.

Emmy Woosley, a 2021 Leadership Owensboro graduate who came up with the plan to honor Sleet, said the portrait will hang in the H.L. Neblett Center at first and then rotate to other places in the community.

And she said that a festival — “Through Sleet’s Eyes” — is being planned for 2023.

Judge-Executive Al Mattingly announced that Daviess Fiscal Court is contributing \$50,000 toward plans to honor Sleet and is challenging others to contribute to the fund “to honor a native son.”

The Rev. Rhondalyn Randolph, president of the local NAACP, called it “a wonderful project.”

“He is part of Owensboro,” she told the small crowd.

Lewis said he had been working on the painting for almost a year.

“I paint portraits of people who stand for something that resonates with me,” he said.

Sleet, Lewis said, “is a national treasure.”

Twenty-one years ago, the city dedicated an historical marker on the corner of Seventh and Walnut streets to honor Sleet.

Few remembered that when Sleet was a boy, the property was Walnut Street Elementary School — a white school that denied Sleet and other African Americans admittance.

But the times have changed.

Sleet is now in the Owensboro High School Hall of Fame, the Owensboro Hall of Fame and the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights' Hall of Fame.

He was a photographer for Ebony and Jet magazines from 1955 until his death in 1996 at age 70.

His photographs, which have been displayed in museums across the country, chronicled the civil-rights movement, beginning in the 1950s.

He won his Pulitzer in 1969 for his photograph of Coretta Scott King and her daughter, Bernice, at the funeral of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

In 2000, when the historical marker was unveiled, Sleet's widow, Juanita Sleet, told the crowd, "As you may know, I'm overwhelmed. Sleet loved growing up in this town. He talked about playing tennis all day long."

Later, she said, "We were married 46 years, had three children and three grandchildren. Owensboro will stay in my memory forever. Sleet would be so proud. He should be living to see it himself."

U.S. District Judge Gregory Sleet of Delaware said his father could travel the world taking pictures but still find time to give his children the guidance that "continues to lead us today."

As he stood by the marker that day, Judge Sleet said, "It's important to let our children know our history."

And that's what the latest project is all about.



Moneta Sleet Jr. Park at 616 Walnut Street in Owensboro. The 1.21 acre park is on the site of the former Lower Ward School built in 1871. The school was enlarged in 1893 and became the Walnut Street Elementary School. The name of the school was changed to Woodrow Wilson School in 1926. The school was closed in May 1958 and became the central office for the Owensboro school system. During 1973-1976 the building sat empty. The land was

purchased from the Owensboro Board of Education by the city of Owensboro. In 1976 the building was razed and was replaced by a mini city park. On 31 March 1982 the park was named the Max Rhoads Park in honor of Rhoads, who served as Owensboro city manager, 1959-1980. On 24 February 2000 a Kentucky Historical Highway marker honoring Moneta Sleet was dedicated on the site. The park was renamed the Moneta Sleet Jr. Park on 19 April 2022. (photo from Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, 7 April 2026, p.2A).



Calverton National Cemetery
Calverton, Suffolk County, New York



**See also following articles in the
Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY:**

- 1995: 1/18 p.1C (“7 honored for excellence”)
- 1997: 9/5 p.5D (“Sleet's photographs come home for exhibit”)
- 1997: 9/7 pp.1C & 4C (“Exhibit shows prize moments - Pulitzer Prize winning Sleet photos on display”)
- 1997: 9/7 pp.1F & 9F (“Moneta Sleet, Jr. - Owensboro native made more than a living with his photography”, copies of 5 of his photos)
- 1997: 9/19 p.1A (“Four honored by Human Relations Commission”)
- 1997: 10/19 pp.1A & 2A (“The little girl from Blue Heaven - Moneta Sleet’s photos, memories are all that remain of coal camp”)
- 1997: 10/19 p.2A (“Tracking down girl was no easy task”)
- 1998: 6/19 p.2C (“Art museum to unveil acquisitions”)
- 1999: 1/17 p.1B (picture of Sleet home, 714 West 7th Street, in Owensboro)

- 1999: 1/17 p.4B (“Fund drive under way to honor Sleet”)
- 1999: 3/16 p.3D (Gregory M. Sleet, son of Moneta Jr., is attorney general of Delaware)
- 1999: 6/1 p.1C (“Historical marker to honor Sleet on the way”)
- 1999: 11/28 pp.1A & 2A (“Natives honored as ‘hometown heroes’”; inducted into the Owensboro-Daviess County Tourist Commission Hall of Fame on 27 November 1999)
- 2000: 2/22 pp.1A & 2A (“City will dedicate memorial to photographer Sleet”)
- 2000: 2/14 p.7A (editorial – “Marker honoring Sleet well justified”)
- 2001: 8/29 p.2C (inducted into Owensboro High School Hall of Achievement)
- 2001: 11/18 p1A (“Owensboro plans to honor native son” – Moneta Sleet)
- 2003: 1/3 p.1D (“Reflections in Black – Traveling exhibit showcases Black photography”)
- 2004: 9/21 Connections pp. 43 & 80 (“Civil Rights Movement – Sleet’s photographs earned Pulitzer”)
- 2014: 2/23 pp.1A & 2A (“Leaving Their Mark – Hometown heroes make history”)
- 2022: 2/25 pp.1B & 3B (“Sleet portrait to travel across town – Painting of Pulitzer Prize winning photojournalist available for display”)
- 2022: 3/25 pp.1B & 3B (“Board recommends renaming Max Rhoads Park for Sleet”)
- 2022: 4/20 p.3B (Owensboro City Commission “Approved an municipal order to rename Max Rhoads Park as Moneta Sleet Jr. Park”)
- 2023: 1/5 p.1B (“Sleet to be honored with festival”)
- 2023: 1/10 pp.1B & 3B (“‘Through Sleet’s Eyes Festival’ announces schedule, events”)
- 2023: 2/25 pp.1A & 2A (“Tribute to photojournalist continues today”)
- 2023: 11/29 pp.1A & 2A (“Officials dedicate Moneta Sleet Jr. Park playground”)
- 2025: 4/17 pp.1A & 2A (“Sleet's life story told through story panels at namesake park”)
- 2026: 4/7 p.2A (“Sleet Park added to African American Heritage Trail”)

See also [*Notable Black American Men*](#), by J. C. Smith; [*Who's Who of Pulitzer Prize Winners*](#), by E. A. Brennan and E. C. Clarage; "Moneta J. Sleet" at the [Kentucky Commission on Human Rights Hall of Fame website](#); and "Moneta J. Sleet, Jr. at [ExploreKYHistory](#).



Painting of Moneta Sleet by K. O. Lewis