Michael Jackson was elected to serve as the District Attorney for Alabama’s Fourth Judicial District, which includes the town of Selma, in 2004 and took office in 2005. On November 15, 2010, Jackson was to begin jury selection in the trial of James Bonard Fowler, a former Alabama State Trooper charged with the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson (no relation to the D.A. Michael Jackson). But the matter came to a close when Fowler pleaded guilty to the lesser charge of misdemeanor second-degree manslaughter, insisting that he had acted in self-defense when he shot Jimmie Lee Jackson. As a result of the plea agreement, Fowler will serve six months in the Geneva County jail and will be on unsupervised probation for an additional six months.

This result comes after forty-five years, two grand jury investigations that failed to produce an indictment, a 2004 confession by Fowler to a journalist, and the eventual reopening of the case by District Attorney Jackson. After nearly three years of determined effort on this case, Jackson noted that this outcome would finally bring some closure to Jimmie Lee Jackson’s family and community. After the proceedings, the District Attorney stated, “[w]e’re pleased we fulfilled [our] three goals: He took responsibility for the shooting; apologized to the family and he will serve some time.” Jimmie Lee Jackson’s family accepted the plea arrangement.

District Attorney Michael Jackson spoke at the Civil Rights & Restorative Justice Project’s 2007 National Conference “Crimes from the Civil Rights Era” in Boston, MA. His remarks focused on the Jimmie Lee Jackson case.
The Killing of Jimmie Lee Jackson

On the evening of February 18, 1965, around 400 people gathered at Zion United Methodist Church in Marion, AL to protest the arrest of James Orange, the SCLC project leader in Perry County, and to rally people to register to vote. Reverend C. T. Vivian, who had just that day been released from jail in Selma, addressed the overflowing crowd. Thereafter, the group left the church and peacefully marched to the jail during a voting rights protest. The group was confronted by city police officers, sheriffs, deputies and Alabama State Troopers. A police riot ensued as the uniformed officers as well as white men dressed in civilian clothing, attacked the protesters. State troopers chased a group of protesters who had left the Church to find safety in the neighboring streets. Some stormed into Mack’s Café and proceeded to hit customers and protesters. The state troopers clubbed 82 year old Cager Lee to the floor and his daughter, Viola Jackson, rushed to Lee’s aid. Viola Jackson’s son, 26 year old Jimmie Lee Jackson, tried to help his mother and was shot in the stomach by the police. He was taken to the hospital and died of his wounds on February 26, 1965. The citizens of Marion were outraged. Shortly after Jackson’s death, civil rights leaders proposed the famed Selma to Montgomery March from Selma, in part to protest the Jackson killing. That March led, ultimately, to passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.
Michael Jackson  
District Attorney, Fourth Judicial District of Alabama  
CRRJ’s National Conference “Crimes from the Civil Rights Era”  
Boston, MA  
April 27, 2007  

The Jimmie Lee Jackson case is the case that led to the Voting Rights Act. It is not as famous as Bloody Sunday because troopers took away the cameras. Reverend James Orange had been sent by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to Perry County and was jailed in Marion, Alabama. A janitor in the jail heard some white men talking about murdering Rev. Orange. He told some members of the Black community and they marched to the jail. The state troopers started smashing cameras and people. While trying to protect his mother, Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot by a state trooper by the name of James Bonard Fowler. People were so angry as a result of the killing, and this led to Dr. King’s march to Montgomery.

The Jimmie Lee Jackson case has never been prosecuted and I think most people thought the state trooper was dead because of all the time that had passed. The state trooper started talking after all these years, laughing and saying he shot Jackson in self-defense. He got cocky. He thought I was a white man when I got elected! Things by then had been stirred up and I was in office as the District Attorney and decided it was time to reopen the case. Sometime later, the state trooper found out I was Black and then he said, “The only reason he prosecuted me is because he’s Black!”

Let me say, these cases are tough. You are pressed for time; they are over 40 years old. People who rush up quickest are the ones who are least helpful. Reluctant witnesses are the most helpful. In smaller towns, the fear factor continues. In the back of peoples’ minds they think they might lose their jobs, even their lives. For some witnesses, it’s like pulling teeth. You have to keep talking to them. I think I finally have enough evidence to make the case stick. We’ll see what the Grand Jury does.