

The Florida Senate
BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Committee on Judiciary

BILL: SB 694

INTRODUCER: Senators Bracy Davis and Smith

SUBJECT: Compensation of the Descendants of Charles Greenlee, Walter Irvin, Samuel Shepherd, and Ernest Thomas

DATE: January 26, 2026

REVISED: _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	<u>Bond</u>	<u>Cibula</u>	<u>JU</u>	<u>Pre-meeting</u>
2.	_____	_____	<u>ATD</u>	_____
3.	_____	_____	<u>AP</u>	_____

I. Summary:

SB 694 provides that the Legislature may appropriate monies to pay compensation to the descendants of the Groveland Four. That term refers to the four black men who were wrongfully accused of raping a white woman in 1949 in Groveland, Florida. All four are now deceased. A prior legislature passed a concurrent resolution apologizing and acknowledging that the men “were the victims of gross injustices.” The trial court subsequently set aside the convictions and the state has issued a posthumous pardon to each of the men.

The bill does not specify a total sum to be appropriated, who qualifies as an heir, nor how the funds are to be distributed among the qualified heirs. The bill, however, provides that the Department of State is the administrative agency that is responsible for making payments to the descendants of the Groveland Four.

The bill is effective upon becoming law.

II. Present Situation:

The bill addresses the Groveland Four incident of 1949.

The Initial Incident

In July of 1949 a white married couple were travelling through Lake County, Florida when their car broke down near Okahumpka, a small town near Groveland, in Lake County, Florida. They claimed that four black men approached the car, hit the husband, stole the man’s wallet, and raped the wife.¹

¹ Norma Padgett was 17 years old at the time of the incident. She was married to Willie Padgett. She never recanted the rape allegation. She died in Georgia in 2024 (age 92).

Local law enforcement officers named four young black men as suspects in the felony sexual battery. A mob gathered, houses were burned, shots fired, the National Guard was called up.² Many of Groveland's black population fled, some never returned.³ Three men were arrested, a fourth was killed days later in a distant county. Those men became known as the "Groveland Four." They are:

- Charles Greenlee who was 16 years old at the time of the incident. He was paroled in 1962 and lived peacefully until his death in 2012 (age 78). Greenlee far outlived the other three men.
- Walter Irvin who was 22 years old at the time. He was convicted for the rape and sentenced to death. The sentence was overturned on appeal to the United States Supreme Court. He was tried and sentenced to death again. The Governor commuted the sentence to life imprisonment. He was granted parole in 1968. Irvin was found dead in his car in 1970 while visiting Lake County.
- Samuel Shepherd who was also 22 years old. He was convicted for the rape and sentenced to death. The sentence was overturned on appeal to the United States Supreme Court. In 1951 he was shot and killed while awaiting retrial.
- Ernest Thomas who was 26 at the time, was killed in 1949 by law enforcement officers participating in an armed posse looking for him. The officers found Thomas in Madison County, Florida,⁴ where he died of gunshot wounds.⁵

Summary of Key Events Regarding the Groveland Four

In July of 1949, a travelling couple reported to law enforcement in Lake County, Florida that four black men attacked them and raped the wife. Shortly thereafter, Greenlee and Irvin were arrested. They were taken to the basement of the Lake County Jail and severely beaten.⁶ Greenlee, Irvin, and Shepherd were found guilty of sexual battery. At that time, Florida law provided that sexual battery was a capital offense. The two adults (Irvin and Shepherd) were sentenced to death, the third, a minor (Greenlee) was sentenced to life imprisonment.

The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund assumed the defense of the men convicted to death. The Fund employed Thurgood Marshall to file the appeal and argue the case before the United States Supreme Court.⁷ The convictions were overturned by the Supreme Court in April of 1951.⁸

Of course, overturning a conviction does not automatically lead to release in most instances. Instead, the defendant is held over for a new trial. In November of 1951, Lake County Sheriff Willis McCall was transporting Irvin and Shepherd from the Florida State Prison at Raiford to

² *Shepherd v. State of Florida*, 341 U.S. 50, 53 (1951) (concurrency by J. Jackson).

³ EJI.org, *White Mob Brutally Lynches Ernest Thomas, Member of the So-Called Groveland Four*, <https://calendar.eji.org/racial-injustice/jul/26> (last visited Jan. 21, 2026).

⁴ Lake County is in Central Florida. Madison County is in the Panhandle region and is approximately 190 miles from Lake County.

⁵ Some news reports claim that he died of 400 gunshot wounds, although that many seems implausible.

⁶ Statement of Walter Irvin, at https://www-tc.pbs.org/harrymoore/terror/images/irvin1_lg.gif.

⁷ King, *Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America* (2012).

⁸ *Shepherd v. State of Florida*, 341 U.S. 50 (1951).

Lake County for a pretrial hearing. He stopped the car on a dirt road in Umatilla,⁹ supposedly to deal with a flat tire. The Sheriff claimed that Irvin and Shepherd attacked him in an attempt to escape. The men were shot by the Sheriff who claimed self-defense. Shepherd died, but Irvin survived the shooting.

Irvin was retried in Lake County, and once again was convicted and sentenced to death.¹⁰ In 1954, Governor Leroy Collins commuted the sentence to life.¹¹

The story of the Groveland Four was the subject of a 2012 nonfiction book by Gilbert King entitled *Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America*. The author of the book was awarded the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction.¹²

The 2017 Legislature passed a concurrent resolution acknowledging that the Groveland Four “were the victims of gross injustices and that their abhorrent treatment by the criminal justice system is a shameful chapter in this state’s history.”¹³ The resolution urged the Governor and Cabinet to expedite review of the matter.

A petition was filed with the Florida Clemency Board seeking to overturn the convictions and sentences. With the concurrence of the Florida Clemency Board, the Governor issued full pardons on January 11, 2019.¹⁴

In November of 2021, the Circuit Court of Lake County Florida entered a final order that dismissed all of the indictments and set aside all judgments and sentences imposed against the Groveland Four related to the July 1949 incident.¹⁵

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

The bill declares the facts stated in the preamble to be true. The bill states that a sum will be appropriated from the General Revenue Fund to the Department of State for the relief of the descendants of the Groveland Four. The bill also declares that the descendants are ineligible for any further compensation.

⁹ The drive from the prison to Lake County would have been a little over 100 miles. This was long before the Interstate Highway System, and they would have likely driven much of the trip on State Highway 19. Umatilla is in Lake County, is on Hwy 19, and is a little more than 10 miles from the county seat Tavares, where the jail and the courthouse were located.

¹⁰ See *Verdict of Jury*, In the Fifth Judicial Circuit in and for Lake County, Florida, Case Nos. 1949-CF-1369 (Feb. 14, 1952) which is accessible through the case search option at <https://courtrecords.lakecountyclerk.org/> and then selecting docket number 101.

¹¹ CS/HCR 631 (2017), lines 95-100.

¹² The Pulitzer Prizes, Gilbert King, the 2013 Pulitzer Prize Winner in General Nonfiction, <https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-year/2013> (last visited Jan. 21, 2026).

¹³ CS/HCR 631 (2017).

¹⁴ Governor Ron DeSantis Pardons Groveland Four with Unanimous Executive Clemency Board Approval, January 11, 2019, at <https://www.flgov.com/eog/news/press/2019/governor-ron-desantis-pardons-groveland-four-unanimous-executive-clemency-board>.

¹⁵ *Order Dismissing the Indictments of Ernest Thomas and Samuel Shepherd; Granting the State’s Motion to Set Aside Judgment and Sentence of Charles Greenlee and Walter Irvin; and Granting the State’s Motion to Correct the Record with Newly Discovered Evidence*, In the Fifth Judicial Circuit in and for Lake County, Florida, Case Nos. 1949-CF-1369 A, B, C and D (Nov. 22, 2021) which is accessible through the case search option at <https://courtrecords.lakecountyclerk.org/> and then selecting docket number 178.

The bill takes effect upon becoming a law.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

None.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

The bill states that the Legislature will make an appropriation to provide financial compensation to the descendants of the four men. However, no specific sum is provided. There are no criteria for determining who is a qualified individual entitled to an award or how to calculate an award.

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Statutes Affected:

None.

IX. Additional Information:

A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Changes:

(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

None.

B. Amendments:

None.

This Senate Bill Analysis does not reflect the intent or official position of the bill's introducer or the Florida Senate.
