Aug. 13, 1955: Lamar Smith Murdered

On August 13, 1955, Lamar Smith, 63-year-old farmer and WWI veteran, was shot dead in cold blood on the crowded courthouse lawn in Brookhaven, Mississippi, for urging Blacks to vote in a local run-off election. No one was prosecuted.

Smith, a locally known voting rights advocate affiliated with the Regional Council of Negro Leadership, had been threatened and warned to stop trying to register and organize African American voters in the community. These threats were realized when Smith was murdered on the courthouse lawn in front of dozens of witnesses, including Sheriff Robert E. Case, who permitted one of the alleged assailants to leave the crime scene covered in blood. Days later, that man and two others were arrested in connection with the shooting. All three suspects were white.

In September 1955, a grand jury composed of 20 white men declined to indict the three suspects for murder after witnesses failed to come forward to testify.

Following the grand jury’s report, District Attorney E.C. Barlow criticized the lack of witness cooperation and complained about the sheriff’s handling of the case. Despite Barlow’s public promises to proceed with the investigation, the criminal case against the three suspects was dismissed. No one was punished for the crime.

Smith’s death was one of several racially-motivated killings in Mississippi that year, including the May 1955 murder of civil rights leader Rev. George Lee in Belzoni; the abduction and murder of Emmett Till in the Mississippi Delta in August 1955; and the fatal shooting of Gus Courts in Belzoni in December 1955. [Description by the Equal Justice Initiative: A History of Racial Injustice Timeline.]

Lamar Smith’s murder is listed in M is for Mississippi and Murder, a 1955 NAACP pamphlet that provides information about three racially-charged murders in Mississippi.
Learn more in the documentary film by Keith Beauchamp called “Murder in Black & White: Lamar Smith.” The film includes interviews with Jelani Cobb, Jerry Mitchell, Jaribu Hill, and Congressman Bennie Thompson.

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NAACP Leader Rev. George Wesley Lee Murdered in Belzoni MS. (May)

Rev. George Wesley Lee is an NAACP leader and one of the first Black men registered to vote in Humphreys County in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. He uses his pulpit and his printing press to urge others to vote. To the great consternation of the White Citizens Council and the KKK, he manages to get almost 100 Blacks registered. White officials offer Lee "protection" on the condition he remove his name from the list of registered voters and end his voter registration efforts. He refuses.

On May 7, 1955, Lee attempts to vote in the Democratic primary. Though he is a legally registered voter, he is prevented from casting his ballot because the Mississippi Democratic Party is "white-only." Only whites are allowed to vote in party primaries or participate in party meetings or activities.

All around the state, the pace of deadly violence steadily increased as the [White Citizens Councils] grew. In Belzoni, the county seat of Humphreys County, Reverend George Lee and Gus Courts, a grocer, organized an NAACP branch in 1954. Its membership grew rapidly. The following year, just a few days before the anniversary of the Supreme Court's Brown decision, Lee was driving home from an RCNL meeting. A car pulled up beside him and someone inside shot him to death. Sheriff Ike Shelton suggested that Lee had somehow lost control of his car and that the lead pellets found in what was left of his jaw might be teeth fillings. As the Jackson Clarion-Ledger, Mississippi's main daily newspaper, headlined Lee’s murder: "Negro Leader Dies in Odd Accident." Six months later, Courts barely escaped death when a car pulled in front of his grocery store and the occupants opened fire. Bullets hit Courts in the left arm and stomach. Shortly thereafter, he left the state for Chicago. — Charles Cobb. [8]

Witnesses describe how whites in another vehicle had fired a shotgun into Lee's car. The local sheriff declares his murder to be "death by unknown cause." He has no explanation for the shot-out tires that brought Lee's car to a halt. The Governor refuses to allow the state to investigate any further. No one is ever arrested or charged in his murder.
Sept. 25, 1961: Murder of Herbert Lee

On Sept. 25, 1961, Herbert Lee, a farmer who worked with voting rights activist Robert Parris Moses to help register Black voters, was killed in broad daylight by state legislator E. H. Hurst in Liberty, Mississippi. Here is excerpt from the description at the SNCC Digital Gateway.

In majority-Black Amite County, only one Black person was registered to vote. It was the most Klan-ridden county in the state, and only a handful of people were willing to participate in the effort to gain voting rights. Nonetheless, as a few people began trickling into voting school Moses organized in the tiny church on Steptoe’s property, an alarmed white community began threatening reprisal and violence.

Herbert Lee was one of the first victims. On September 25th, 1961, Lee arrived at the Westbrook cotton gin outside the town of Liberty with a full load of cotton in his truck. There he was confronted by E. H. Hurst, a member of the Mississippi state legislature. Hurst and Lee, who had been boyhood friends, had been arguing over Lee’s involvement with SNCC. Hurst called him over, and in front of more than a dozen witnesses, Hurst shot Lee in the head, killing him. [Continue reading at SNCC Digital Gateway.]

Hurst claimed self-defense and was acquitted by a coroner’s jury the same day as the killing.

Louis Allen, who witnessed the shooting, was murdered two years later. “Murder Mystery: Shining a Light on the Story that the Newspapers Left Out” is a lesson that brings this story to the classroom.

Read more about Herbert Lee at BlackPast.org.

For more untold history of the fight for voting rights, read “The Voting Rights Act: Ten Things You Should Know.”

Read “Students as Historians: Voting Rights History” about a group of high school students from McComb, Mississippi who traveled to Liberty to learn about Herbert Lee.
June 21, 1964: 3 Civil Rights Workers Murdered in Mississippi

On June 21, 1964, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman were tortured and murdered by the KKK with help from the deputy sheriff near Philadelphia in Neshoba County, Mississippi. They were killed defending the right to learn and human rights for all. The three young men had traveled to Neshoba County to investigate the burning of Mt. Zion Methodist Church, which had been a site of a CORE Freedom School.

While their case received national attention (thanks to grassroots organizers), there were more people murdered while seeking basic democratic and human rights.

Here are resources on the freedom struggle in Mississippi. Listen to the Democracy Now! broadcast: “After Over Four Decades, Justice Still Eludes Family of 3 Civil Rights Workers Slain in Mississippi Burning Killings.”

Update: We are sad to share that Ivanhoe Donaldson passed away on April 3, 2016 at the age of 74. Remembrances can be found on CRMvet.org.

On May 27, 2014, students in two U.S. history class at Stuyvesant High

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Feb. 26, 1965: Jimmie Lee Jackson Murdered

Who murdered Jimmie Lee Jackson? We know a state trooper acting under the orders of George Wallace pointed the gun and pulled the trigger, but how many other fingers were on that trigger? Every white lawman who abuses the law to terrorize! Every white politician who feeds on prejudice and hatred! Every white preacher who preaches the Bible and stays silent before his white congregation! Who murdered Jimmie Lee Jackson? Every Negro man and woman who stands by without joining this fight as their brothers and sisters are humiliated, brutalized, and ripped from this earth! — Dr. Martin Luther King

Dr. King said this words at the funeral for Jimmie Lee Jackson, who died on Feb. 26, 1965, from injuries inflicted by police officers eight days earlier.

Jackson, a civil rights activist and a deacon in the Baptist church, was beaten and shot by state troopers in Marion, Alabama, during a peaceful voting rights march. He was unarmed. His death was the catalyst for the march from Selma to Montgomery just a month later.

To teach about the fight for voting rights and long history of the Selma freedom movement, use the lesson “Stepping into Selma: Voting Rights History and Legacy Today.”

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On March 9, 1965, social worker, Unitarian Universalist minister and father of four, Reverend James Reeb was severely beaten (and died two days later) by a group of white men in Selma. Reeb had traveled to Selma to support the Civil Rights Movement following Bloody Sunday. Read more in the Encyclopedia of Alabama. Learn about Reeb and others involved in the Selma movement in the Zinn Education Project article “Ten Things You Should Know About Selma” and resources recommended by Teaching for Change.
Viola Liuzzo, a 39-year-old Detroit mother of five married to a teamster’s union leader, joined thousands of people converging in Selma, Ala. for the march on Montgomery in 1965.

Shortly after the historic Voting Rights March had ended on March 25, 1965, she was shot in the head and killed by a car full of Klansmen, while driving on a deserted highway.

Why do we not know the story of Viola Liuzzo, while nearly everyone has heard of Goodman, Schwerner and Cheney—the three rights workers killed the year before in Mississippi? The reasons are complex, and won’t be found in history books.

Immediately following her murder, Liuzzo became the target of a smear campaign, mounted by J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI [COINTELPRO], as a means of diverting attention from the fact that a key FBI informant was in the car with Liuzzo’s killers. This discrediting of her name—mostly based on her gender and wholly unfounded—succeeded in erasing Viola Liuzzo from our cultural memory.

The description above comes from the filmmakers for a documentary film about Viola Liuzzo called Home of the Brave. Told through the eyes of Liuzzo’s children, the 2003 award-winning film follows the on-going struggle of her family to survive the consequences of their mother’s heroism and the mystery behind her killing.

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On June 12, 1963, WWII veteran Medgar Evers was murdered in the driveway outside his home in Jackson, Miss.

As a field worker for the NAACP, Evers had traveled through his home state encouraging African Americans to register to vote. He was instrumental in getting witnesses and evidence for the Emmett Till murder case and others, which brought national attention to the terrorism used against African Americans.

Profile by Dernoral Davis. Reprinted from the Mississippi Historical Society, Mississippi History Now.

Between 1952 and 1963, Medgar Wiley Evers was one of Mississippi’s most impassioned activists, orators, and visionaries for change. He fought for equality and fought against brutality.

Born July 2, 1925, in Decatur, Mississippi, Medgar was one of four children born to James and Jesse Evers. His father worked in a sawmill and his mother was a laundress. Evers’s childhood was typical in many ways of black youths who grew up in the Jim Crow South during the Great Depression of the 1930s and in the years preceding World War II. As a youth, Evers’s parents showered him with love and affection, taught him family values, and routinely disciplined him when needed. The Evers home emphasized education, religion, and hard work.

Among his siblings, Evers spent the most time with Charles, whom he idolized. As Evers’s older brother, Charles protected him, taught him to fish, swim, hunt, box, wrestle, and generally served as a sounding board for many of Medgar’s early experiences. He attended all-black schools in the dual and segregated public educational system of Newton County. Segregated public education meant long walks to school for the Evers children. The schools had few resources and operated with outdated textbooks, few teachers, large classes, and small classrooms without laboratories and supplies for the study of biology, chemistry, and physics.
Besides his under-funded public education, Evers on occasion saw and witnessed acts of raw violence against blacks. On these occasions, Evers’s parents and older brother could not shield him from the realities of a society built on racial discrimination. At about age 14, Evers observed to his horror the dragging of a black man, Willie Tingle, behind a wagon through the streets of Decatur. Tingle was later shot and hanged. A friend of Evers’ father, Tingle was accused of insulting a white woman.

Evers later recalled that Tingle’s bloody clothes remained in the field for months near the tree where he was hanged. Each day on his way to school Evers had to pass this tableau of violence. He never forgot the image.

A World War II Soldier

At the end of his sophomore year of high school and several months before his eighteenth birthday, Evers volunteered and was inducted into the United States Army in 1942. During his tour of duty in World War II, Evers was assigned to and served with a segregated port battalion, first in Great Britain and later in France. Though typical at the time, racial segregation in the military only served to anger Evers.
By the end of the war, Evers was among a generation of black veterans committed to answering W.E.B. Du Bois’s clarion call of nearly three decades earlier: “to return [home] fighting” for change.

Upon returning home, the initial “fight” for Evers was to register to vote. For Evers voting was an affirmation of citizenship. Accordingly, in the summer of 1946, along with his brother, Charles, and several other black veterans, Evers registered to vote at the Decatur city hall. But on election day, the veterans were prevented by angry whites from casting their ballots. The experience only deepened Evers’s conviction that the status quo in Mississippi had to change. Continue reading.

Related Resources

Classroom Lesson

Meet Medgar Evers. By Teaching for Change.
An introductory lesson for middle and high school students on Medgar Evers’ life and legacy.

Links to Key Investigations and Events

Below are links to the Veterans of the Southern Freedom Movement and other websites with descriptions of some key organizing and advocacy efforts by Medgar Evers. These provide an introduction to the wide range of issues and tactics addressed by Medgar Evers and the southern freedom movement at the time.

Rev. George Lee Murder Investigation: Medgar Evers insisted on an investigation of the May 7, 1955 murder of voting rights activist Rev. George Lee. It remained a cold case, however, it received more attention than it would have otherwise thanks to the brave work of Evers.

Emmett Till Murder Investigation: Medgar Evers played a key role in securing the involvement of the NAACP in the effort to publicize and bring to justice the case of the August 1955 murder of 14 year old Emmett Till. He also helped secretly secure witnesses for the case.

Clinton and Beulah Melton Murder Investigation: Medgar Evers investigated the murder of Clinton Melton on Dec. 3, 1955. Clinton’s wife died, likely murdered, a week before she was to testify in the case.
James Meredith’s Fight to Desegregate Ole Miss: Medgar Evers helped James Meredith in his effort to enroll at the University of Mississippi in 1962. He secured the NAACP’s legal team, headed by Thurgood Marshall, to assist Meredith. Evers himself had been denied admission to Ole Miss law school in 1954.

Jackson, Mississippi Boycotts of 1962-63: These include boycotts of the segregated county fair and business district.

Books


  This biography draws on personal interviews from Myrlie Evers-Williams, siblings, friends, grade school-to-college schoolmates, and fellow activists. Extensive archival work in the Evers Papers, the NAACP Papers, oral history collections, FBI files, Citizen Council collections, and the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Papers, to list a few, provides a detailed account of Evers’s NAACP work and a clearer understanding of the racist environment that ultimately led to his murder. [Publisher’s description.]


  These writings range from Medgar Evers’ monthly reports to the NAACP to his correspondence with luminaries of the time such as Robert Carter, General Counsel for the NAACP in the landmark Brown v. Board of Education case.


  A thorough and engaging people’s history of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi using wide-ranging archival work and extensive interviews with movement participants.


Films
“Medgar Evers: How His Legacy Shaped the Civil Rights Movement”

By Randall Pinkston. 2013. 3:10 min.
A CBS news story on Medgar Evers’ historic and unusual appearance on the Jackson, Mississippi television station WLBT on May 20, 1963. Less than one month after his appearance, Evers was assassinated. Veteran CBS journalist Randall Pinkston describes how this event was part of the fight for African Americans such as himself to appear on local TV news in the South. Read more about the broadcast and watch Pinkston’s report at CBS News. Read about the case against WLBT in Changing Channels: The Civil Rights Case That Transformed Television on the National Archives website by Kay Mills.

Medgar Evers: An Unsung Hero

Directed by Michael Cory Davis. 2010. 1 hour 11 min.
This two-part documentary on Medgar Evers, produced by the Mad Men TV series, provides extensive interviews with Myrlie Evers-Williams (widow), Charles Evers (brother), Reena Evers-Everette (daughter), Kestin Boyce, Derrick Johnson, and more. It is too long for classroom use, however, it provides useful background information for teachers and clips of the interviews could be shared with students.

Part I

Part II
About Myrlie Evers-Williams

Myrlie Evers-Williams has long been a pioneer in the struggles for racial justice and women’s equality. She fought for decades to gain justice in the assassination Medgar Evers, worked tirelessly for civil rights, ran for political office, and from 1995-1998, served as chair of the NAACP. She raised three children, Darrell Kenyatta, Reena Denise, and James Van Dyke.

Evers-Williams has co-written three books: *For Us, The Living*; *Watch Me Fly: What I Learned on the Way to Becoming the Woman I Was Meant to Be*; and *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers*.

She is currently serving as a distinguished scholar-in-residence at Alcorn State University and directing the Medgar and Myrlie Evers Institute.

See [interview with Myrlie Evers](https://www.nationalvisionaryleadershipproject.org/people/myrlie-evers-williams) on the National Visionary Leadership Project website.

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On January 9, 1966, Vernon Dahmer announced on the radio that he would pay the poll tax for anyone who could not afford to register to vote. (Despite the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, a poll tax was still charged in local elections in Mississippi."

The next day, Dahmer’s home was firebombed by the Ku Klux Klan. Dahmer guarded the front door while his wife and children escaped out the back. He died the next day from severe burns and smoke inhalation.

Here is a brief description of his extraordinary life of activism, excerpted and adapted from the excellent profile of Vernon Dahmer on CRMvet.org.

**Vernon Dahmer: Brief Background**

Vernon and his wife Ellie Dahmer had a 200-acre farm, a small store, and an independent saw mill in north of Hattiesburg, Mississippi. They were one of the few prosperous Black families in southeast Mississippi, providing jobs and assistance for others in the community.

Dahmer was a leader and prime mover of the Forrest County NAACP. “If you don’t vote, you don’t count,” he told his friends and neighbors. Inspired by his example, a chapter of NAACP Youth Council became active. Among the young council members were high school students Joyce and Dorie Ladner, who traveled with Dahmer to statewide NAACP meetings in Jackson.

With Dahmer’s support, military veteran Clyde Kennard applied for admission to Mississippi Southern College, only to be framed on petty charges and sent to Parchman Prison to silence him. Dahmer, Medgar Evers, and the Ladners struggled for years to free him from prison.
In 1961, Dahmer invited the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to set up a voter registration project in Forrest County. They faced fierce opposition from Circuit Clerk and Registrar of Voters for Forrest County Theron Lynd and the Klan.

In early 1964, Dahmer was one of the speakers at Hattiesburg Freedom Day, a mobilization of would-be Black voters attempting to register en masse at the county courthouse. More than 150 courageous Black citizens defiantly lined up to register. Only a handful were allowed in the building, and few — if any — were added to the voting rolls. Some of those attempting to register were fired from their jobs, others were threatened with violence.

Following passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Dahmer obtained the right and the materials needed to register voters and collect poll taxes at his store. This would have facilitated a great increase in voter registration by African Americans in Forrest County. It was on the day after he announced this opportunity that his house was bombed.
Four of Dahmer’s sons were serving in the U.S. military to “defend democracy,” only to have their father murdered in his fight for the democratic right to vote in the United States. They returned home for his funeral and were joined by hundreds of mourners at Dahmer’s funeral on Jan. 16, 1966.
Four of Vernon Dahmer’s sons observe the family home burned to the ground. Photo by Chris McNair, courtesy of Jerry Mitchell.

Demonstrators sing on the courthouse steps on the morning of Vernon Dahmer’s funeral, Jan. 16, 1966. Credit: Moncrief Collection, MDAH.
On this 50th anniversary of his murder, we encourage everyone to learn and teach about Vernon Dahmer and the long, brave fight for voting rights. Two key resources are the profiles of Dahmer on the SNCC Digital Gateway and CRMvet.org websites. We also recommend *Count Them One by One: Black Mississippians Fighting for the Right to Vote* by Gordon A. Martin Jr. and the Journey to Justice blog by Jerry Mitchell, whose investigative journalism played a key role in the convictions of Klan imperial wizard Sam Bowers for ordering the fatal firebombing. For images, visit the Moncrief photo collection.

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The Voting Rights Act: Ten Things You Should Know

By Emilye Crosby and Judy Richardson

The Voting Rights Act (VRA), signed into law on Aug. 6, 1965, was a victory for the Civil Rights Movement, southern African Americans, and American democracy. It outlawed strategies that had been used by white supremacists to disenfranchise Black citizens and included provisions to facilitate the registration of new voters. Together with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act ended most legal forms of white supremacy. Although this was important, it did not end all forms of racial discrimination, many of which were—and are—embedded in the structures of our society.

Most textbooks approach history through a top-down lens that gives President Lyndon Johnson, along with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., most of the credit for this important legislation. Both men did play a key role. But the Voting Rights Act came into being through intensive organizing and activism spearheaded by the Black community, including people often marginalized and not seen as central to our society.

It is tempting to think of universal voting rights as a fundamental pillar of our country, but access to the vote has been hard fought and even today we face challenges and rollbacks. Although voting rights have always been essential, they are not a given and do not alone secure equality. The struggle for civil and human rights for all must continue. The untold history of the VRA can inform and strengthen that struggle.

Here are key points missing from most textbooks.

1. Long before the Voting Rights Act, Reconstruction launched another vibrant
Following the Civil War, African Americans used the Reconstruction Amendments to democratize the South. Although only men were allowed to vote in formal elections, women and children participated actively in Black community meetings, even voting on delegates and platforms. Black women often accompanied men to the polls, sometimes bringing weapons for protection.

This community-wide engagement translated into progressive laws, including policies that laid the foundation for free universal public education. As with many rights secured by African American struggle, the Black vote expanded benefits beyond the Black community.

2. **Black voting rights have been attacked and rolled back throughout our history.**

African American political power gained during Reconstruction was overthrown by massive fraud and domestic terrorism. The federal government stood by as white supremacists regained control over state and local governments. The timing and process varied across the South, but in the end, whites established oppressive Jim Crow laws that remained in place until the modern Civil Rights Movement.
A prime example is Wilmington, North Carolina, where whites in the Democratic Party overthrew (in a coup d’état) the legitimately elected and integrated local government, murdered Black citizens, and destroyed the Black newspaper. [Read about more massacres in U.S. history, many of the time designed to suppress the Black vote and role back gains in interracial democracy.]

3. From the end of Reconstruction through the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, white supremacists used numerous tactics to keep African Americans from accessing their constitutional right to vote.

Textbooks generally list the Jim Crow practices of the grandfather clause, literacy tests, and the poll tax, but less well known are the economic terrorism and violence that backed up these strategies and were the ultimate barrier to Black voting.

Mississippi sharecropper Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer describes what happened when she took the registration test in 1962:

Well, there was 18 of us who went down to the courthouse that day and all of us were arrested. Police said that the bus was painted the wrong color—said it was too yellow. . . . I went back to the plantation where [my husband] Pap and I had lived for 18 years. Mr. Marlowe, the plantation owner, had heard that I had tried to register. He said, “We’re not going to have this in Mississippi and you will have to withdraw. If you don’t withdraw you will have to leave.” So I left that same night. Ten days later they fired into Mrs. Tucker’s house where I was staying.

Later that year Hamer was viciously beaten in jail and in 1964 she testified: “All of this is on account of we want to register, to become first-class citizens.”

4. The modern voting rights struggle had deep roots in the rural South.
At times African Americans prioritized improving educational opportunities, securing land ownership, and developing the institutions—such as churches—that later provided a critical base for the Civil Rights Movement, but they never conceded their right to vote. Even when it was extremely dangerous, there were always men and women trying to register and vote.

In 1944, the NAACP won a landmark case, *Smith v. Allwright*, ruling the white primary—where only white voters could participate in political primaries—unconstitutional. This victory inspired an upsurge in Black voter registration that was reinforced by Black veterans returning home from overseas. One of these veterans was Medgar Evers, who became Mississippi’s first NAACP field secretary and was assassinated in June 1963 for his civil rights work. He describes his first attempt to vote after successfully registering:

>Six of us gathered at my house and we walked to the polls. I’ll never forget it. Not a Negro was on the streets, and when we got to the courthouse, the clerk said he wanted to talk with us. When we got into his office, some 15 or 20 armed white men surged in behind us, men I had grown up with, had played with. We split up and went home. Around town, Negroes said we had been whipped, beaten up, and run out of town. Well, in a way we were whipped, I guess, but I made up my mind then that it would not be like that again—at least not for me.

5. The federal government has played a contradictory role in the fight for voting rights.

The Supreme Court gradually outlawed discriminatory practices, like the grandfather clause, the white primary, and the poll tax, but in general the federal government played a passive role. Even when the Kennedy Justice Department used what civil rights activist Bob Moses calls “the crawl space,” created by the 1957 Civil Rights Act to file lawsuits charging numerous Southern officials with racial discrimination in voter registration, other branches of the federal government undermined this work.
Some white supremacist judges blocked the department’s work at every turn and the FBI only reluctantly carried out the necessary investigations. And after initially promising to protect anyone working on voter registration, the Kennedy administration backtracked and the FBI refused to protect civil rights workers, even when they were attacked on federal property in front of agents. More lives might have been lost if Black citizens had not used weapons to protect themselves and the young civil rights organizers.

6. SNCC’s voter registration organizing fundamentally changed our country, both because of what they did and how they did it.

SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), an organization of young people that emerged from the 1960 sit-in movement, developed an approach to grassroots community organizing that has influenced every subsequent progressive movement. Their voter registration work in the Deep South was built around canvassing—going door-to-door, talking to people—and relied on
patience, education, and building relationships. The work could be slow and tedious. It took place out of the spotlight, with few big or quick victories.

Influenced by Ella Baker and community leaders, the young people in SNCC made decisions by consensus, helped develop leadership skills in others, and challenged hierarchies that privileged wealth and education. In the summer of 1961, a group of about 16 young people put school and jobs on hold to become SNCC’s first field staff and commit to full-time movement work.
Over the next four years—working with other organizations and allies—SNCC was successful at organizing rural African American communities and making it impossible for the country to ignore the violence and discrimination at the heart of Jim Crow and white supremacy.

Though SNCC was not acting alone, their organizing was at the heart of the movement that moved people to insist that our country eliminate the legal basis of white supremacy. SNCC’s organizing led directly to the Voting Rights Act, expanding the electorate and ending the undemocratic stranglehold of the southern Dixiecrats. Their work made the national Democratic Party more explicitly representative (in race and gender).

Perhaps most importantly, SNCC recognized and nurtured leadership in people that the rest of the country had dismissed (like Hamer). Their alliance with these everyday people breathed new life into our democracy—challenging long-standing ideas of who and what was important.

7. SNCC upended traditional ideas about who was qualified to vote.

White supremacists responded to the voting rights campaign by manipulating the registration process, firing and evicting people, burning and bombing homes and churches, as well as beating and even murdering people. White officials then used the low numbers of African Americans registered to vote to insist that Blacks had no interest in politics. In response, SNCC organized Freedom Days, first in Selma, Alabama, in 1963 and in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in 1964. Whether in the punishing sun or pouring rain, people lined up to demonstrate their desire to vote. With little chance of actually registering, much less voting, they stayed in line and refused to be intimidated by white threats and harassment.

Working with a coalition of civil rights groups called COFO, SNCC also organized a Freedom Vote, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and the Congressional Challenge. Each was designed to...
demonstrate that Blacks did want to vote and participate in politics. In addition, each provided an important experiential education for people who had been excluded from the political process for almost a century. Throughout this process, SNCC field secretaries were learning from the people they were working with. One result was that, in addition to helping people improve their literacy, in 1963 SNCC began to **challenge the whole idea of requiring literacy to vote**. They had encountered many people who had been denied education but still had more than enough wisdom to vote on their representatives.

8. **SNCC sought not only Black access to the vote, but also to transform voting into “freedom politics” and small-d democracy for all.**

Lowndes County, Alabama, with an approximately 80 percent African American population, but no Black registered voters, provides a wonderful case study of SNCC’s approach to using the vote. According to field secretary Gloria House,

We were helping to equip the people with the information and skills essential to running the county themselves not just as new voters but also as political leaders. We found that a review of African American and African history, giving a strong sense of historical identity, was of immeasurable significance in this process.
Historian Hasan Kwame Jeffries explains that SNCC “developed a unique political education program that used workshops, mass meetings, and primers to increase general knowledge of local government and democratize political behavior.”

This wasn’t just voting or even politics as usual. Rather, SNCC linked their “egalitarian organizing methods” with the people’s civil and human rights goals to create what Jeffries calls “freedom politics,” an approach that rejected traditional politics and instead emphasized acting on the community’s best interests. In Lowndes County, for example, Alice Moore, candidate for tax assessor, announced that she would “tax the rich to feed the poor.”

SNCC’s work followed Ella Baker’s belief that “In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. . . It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system.”
9. The Black Panther symbol was first used in Lowndes County, Alabama.

When the Lowndes County Freedom Party was founded, Alabama law required that it have a symbol to help illiterate voters. They chose the Black Panther, indigenous to Lowndes, as their ballot symbol. [See the short clip below from Eyes on the Prize about the Lowndes County Freedom Party.]

Leader John Hulett explains,

This black panther is a vicious animal as you know. He never bothers anything, but when you start pushing him, he moves backwards, backwards, backwards into his corner, and then he comes out to destroy everything that’s before him.

When young Black activists in Oakland established an organization to combat police brutality, they adopted the snarling black panther symbol and the LCFP’s informal name, the “Black Panther Party.”

10. Federal protection for voting rights is still necessary.

In July 2013, a deeply divided U.S. Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act in Shelby County v. Holder. Arguing in part that it is arbitrary and no longer necessary to focus exclusively on the former Confederacy, the Court’s majority eliminated the pre-clearance requirement for nine Southern states. This means that the Justice Department can no longer check for racial bias in new laws in these states.

Given widespread efforts to block voting access in areas across the nation that were not governed by federal review, it may well be arbitrary to hold the former Confederate states to a different standard. But the response of those states, along with other forms of voter suppression enacted throughout the country, makes it clear that we still need robust, proactive tools to protect voting rights for all citizens, but particularly African Americans, students, immigrants, and other marginalized groups.

Rather than being curtailed, the Voting Rights Act should be extended. No doubt future historians will look back at today’s voter ID laws, ex-felon disenfranchisement, and other forms of voter suppression (including Jim Crow voting booths) as a 21st-century version of the literacy tests, poll tax, and grandfather clause of the last century.

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The Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts removed most forms of legal discrimination against African Americans, but did not bring an immediate end to the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow.

Current protests over police brutality and the disregard for Black lives; the persistence of extreme economic and racial segregation; and the tenacity of separate and unequal schools demonstrate that although the Voting Rights Act was necessary, it is not sufficient to address white supremacy and the oppression of people of color. Unfortunately, Ella Baker’s words still echo today. In 1964 she said,

Until the killing of Black men, Black mother’s sons, becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of a white mother’s son, we who believe in freedom cannot rest.

Although the context has changed, there are many links between the freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s and today. And millennial activists are creating a new movement that builds on the work of previous generations.

Knowing some of the bottom-up history of the VRA can help students and others learn valuable lessons for today. SNCC veteran Bernice Johnson Reagon explained that the movement gave her “the power to challenge any line that limits me. . . . And that is what it meant to me, [it] just really gave me a real chance to fight and to struggle and not respect boundaries that put me down.”

Emilye Crosby is professor of history and coordinator of Black Studies at SUNY Geneseo. She is the author of A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi and editor of Civil Rights History from the Ground Up. She is working on a book length project, Anything I Was Big Enough To Do: Women and Gender in SNCC, with a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Judy Richardson was on the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from 1963-66 and was researcher, series associate producer, and education director for the 14 hour PBS series Eyes on the Prize. Her other films include Malcolm X: Make It Plain and Scarred Justice: The Orangeburg Massacre 1968. She is currently on the SNCC Legacy Project Board and the editorial board for the SNCC Digital Gateway collaboration between the SNCC Legacy Project and Duke University. She co-edited Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC. Read more.
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References and Related Materials


Bernice Johnson Reagon. “The Borning Struggle: An Interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon” by Dick Cluster in *Radical America*. (Note: “Borning Struggle” is the first article in the attached journal. Photo: Ella Baker at the Highlander Center.)

SNCC Digital Gateway. *June 1966 Meredith March Against Fear*. Description of the March Against Fear, led by James Meredith in June of 1966 to encourage African Americans to vote one year after the passage of the Voting Rights Act. Meredith was shot and other civil rights leaders and activists stepped in to carry on the March, registering voters along the way.

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