African Americans in Milwaukee were fighting for their rights long before the 1960s. In 1866, black men sued for the right to vote. In 1889, black leaders first organized to demand an end to segregation.

**Right:** Father James Groppi and Vol Phillips speak to a gathering of NAACP Youth Council members and other concerned citizens in Milwaukee.

During the 1940s, many African Americans moved to Milwaukee in search of jobs. Black people in Milwaukee had no choice but to live in a small, north-side section of the city known as the “Inner Core.” This segregation was enforced by many of Milwaukee’s white leaders and business owners.

How do citizens work for change when faced with injustice?

This exhibit contains language and images that may be offensive to some viewers. The Wisconsin Historical Society does not condone the use of this language but includes it as an accurate reflection of society in the time shown.
LLOYD BARBEE, FATHER JAMES GROPPi, AND VEL PHILLIPS

“The whole system should be ordered to desegregate, root and branch.”

Lloyd Barbee was a lawyer who fought to end segregation in Milwaukee’s schools. His lawsuit in 1965 against Milwaukee Public Schools took 14 years to complete, but in 1979, he won his battle with the state and federal government, forcing the district to desegregate.

“You must be revolutionaries.”

Father James Groppi was a priest at St. Boniface Church in Milwaukee’s Inner Core. He had marched in the South with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and believed that Milwaukee needed to change, too. He advised the NAACP Youth Council and led many fair housing marches.

“Live where you want to live.”

Vel Phillips was the first black woman to graduate from UW-Madison’s law school, and in 1956 she became the first woman to win a seat on Milwaukee’s City Council. In 1962, she introduced her fair housing bill in an effort to stop housing discrimination against people of color.

How can individuals make a difference?
Housing Segregation

Until the 1960s, almost all black residents of Milwaukee lived in one neighborhood north of downtown known as the Inner Core. The Inner Core was run-down and falling apart, with few jobs and not enough housing. The people who lived in the Inner Core felt ignored by Milwaukee’s leaders.

A 1946 map created by the Citizen’s Governmental Research Bureau shows Milwaukee’s black neighborhood.

Written covenants as well as unspoken agreements prevented people of color from buying or renting homes outside of the Core. White landlords and realtors made sure these agreements were followed.

In 1962, Madam Alderman Vel Phillips introduced her fair housing bill to the council, where it was defeated 18–1. Phillips would try to pass her law four times over the next six years, but the other council members, all white men, voted against the bill every time.

Middle Left: In 1962, Vel Phillips introduced this fair housing ordinance to the Milwaukee Common Council. It was rejected four times over the next six years.

Bottom Left: Vel Phillips speaks in the Milwaukee Common Council chamber as her fellow aldermen look on.

What is systemic racism?

1954
Brown v. Board of Education makes school segregation illegal

1962
Vel Phillips introduces fair housing ordinance

1964
Milwaukee United School Integration Committee is created
In 1954, the US Supreme Court’s Brown v. Board of Education decision made segregation in schools illegal. Milwaukee school officials ignored the Supreme Court ruling for the next 25 years. Schools that black children went to were not equal to the schools white children attended. There were fewer supplies and more out-of-date textbooks. The buildings weren’t maintained. Even when some schools were integrated, shared spaces like lunchrooms and bathrooms were not.

In 1964, Civil Rights leaders created the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee, or MUSIC. They organized a boycott of “black only” schools to bring attention to the problems of segregation. Over half of the black students of Milwaukee stayed home or went to “Freedom Schools” organized to teach students about African history, culture, and the arts.

Why are separate schools unequal?

1964
Freedom Schools are established
Lloyd Barbee is elected to State Assembly
Civil Rights Act passes

1965
Milwaukee marches for Selma
Lloyd Barbee files federal lawsuit against MPS
The Youth Council protested job discrimination at Marc’s Big Boy restaurants. They demanded that the Eagles Club let people of color join by protesting outside the homes of members. Of course they marched for fair housing.

In response to violent counter-protests, the NAACP Youth Council formed the Youth Council Commandos for protection. After the 1960s, the Commandos continued to help people of color in many ways.

How can young people get involved in social justice?
A large group marches across the 16th Street Bridge. Father James Groppi can be seen at the front of the group.

CROSSING THE 16TH STREET BRIDGE

By the 1960s, Milwaukee’s neighborhoods had been segregated for many years. The Menomonee River factory district, just south of today’s I-94, separated the black neighborhood on the north side and the white neighborhood on the south side. The 16th Street Bridge connected these communities.

Milwaukee residents joked that the 16th Street Bridge was the longest in the world, connecting Africa to Poland. It separated the black and white neighborhoods of Milwaukee.

On August 28, 1967, over 200 members of the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council led by Father James Groppi crossed the 16th Street Bridge as a protest against segregation and unfair housing practices.

The following evening the marchers were attacked by 13,000 angry white residents. Some were hurling bottles and swinging clubs. The police were overwhelmed as the mob pressed in.

What motivates people to demonstrate and how does that affect others?

Dr. King is assassinated
Fair Housing Act passes
Common Council passes Phillips housing ordinance
US Supreme Court rules in favor of Barbee

1968
200th March
1979
When the marchers returned to the NAACP Freedom House the evening of August 29, 1967, it was in flames. The police claimed they heard gunshots and fired tear gas into the building, which caught fire. No gun was found, and many people believe the police intentionally caused the fire. Still, the marches continued.

On August 30, Mayor Henry Maier forbade nighttime marches. National news media began to cover the demonstrations, and support flooded in from across the US. The Youth Council would continue the protest marches for 200 nights.

On April 8, 1968, the marchers gathered one last time to memorialize Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., killed by an assassin four days earlier. On April 11, the US government finally passed a national Fair Housing Act prohibiting discrimination based on race. People could now live where they wanted to live. On April 30, Milwaukee passed Vel Phillips’s fair housing bill as well.

How and why do people resist change?
The racial divisions caused by segregation run deep. They still divide most of Milwaukee’s neighborhoods and schools today in ways people from the 1960s would easily recognize.

Fifty-five years ago, segregation was legal and the state of Mississippi was the most segregated place in the US. Today, even though segregation is illegal, Milwaukee is cited as the most segregated city in the nation.

Although these maps are separated by 50 years and the Fair Housing Act, a clear racial divide still exists in Milwaukee.

De facto segregation, ingrained ideas about culture and race, influences decisions made every day about where people live and work and how they socialize with. Ideas are much harder to change than laws.

The hard work of people like Vel Phillips, Lloyd Barbee, Father James Groppi, and the NAACP Youth Council members helped make segregation illegal, but there is still much more to be done.

What can you do to help end segregation?

Learn more
wisconsinhistory.org/marchonmilwaukeeeexhibit

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