

March On, Milwaukee

State Historical Marker Series



Marker #1 - 16th Street Viaduct

Location: 16th Street Viaduct, South Terminus

Status: Installed

In the summer of 1967, the NAACP Youth Council planned a march to protest discriminatory housing policies in the city. On August 28th, 250 members gathered to march across the 16th Street Viaduct from the predominantly Black north side to the white south side.

At the southern end of the bridge, the marchers faced thousands of rioters who harassed and attacked them as they walked to Kosciuszko Park. The next night, the Youth Council held another march and faced up to 13,000 counter-protesters; the night ended with dozens of arrests and injuries.

These marches sparked a movement that lasted for 200 consecutive nights, forcing the city to confront segregation. Coupled with economic boycotts, the marches led to the Common Council passing an open housing ordinance in April 1968 and were part of the larger national movement for civil rights.

Marker #2 - St. Boniface Catholic Church

Location: North Division High School, W. Clarke St. & N. 11th St.

Status: Installed

St. Boniface and its campus at 1122 W. Clarke Street were the epicenter of Milwaukee's civil rights movement. A Catholic church with a predominantly Black congregation, St. Boniface served as a hub during the 200 consecutive days of open housing marches from fall 1967 to spring 1968. Strategies and routes for marches were organized in the church's basement by the NAACP Youth Council Commandos Direct Action Committee. Marches started and ended at the church. St. Boniface supplied food, lodging, medical attention, and transportation to the movement.

Father James Groppi served at St. Boniface from 1963 to 1970 and advised the Youth Council during this period. In 1965, St. Boniface was slated to be the site of a Freedom School offering lessons on Black history and activism. This plan was prohibited by Catholic officials, leading to protests by the Youth Council and its allies. Luminaries from the nationwide civil rights movement, including Fannie Lou Hamer, Hosea Williams, Jesse Jackson, Dick Gregory, and Roy Wilkins, visited St. Boniface to attend rallies, marches, and strategy sessions. The St. Boniface complex was demolished in 1975 to make room for expansions to North Division High School. The parish moved to N. Teutonia Avenue and W. Center Street. The history of St. Boniface illustrates the importance of local churches and their congregations in the organization and enactment of civil rights activities.



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Marker #3 - 5th Street Freedom House

Location: James W. Beckum Park

Status: **Installed**

In August 1966, the NAACP Youth Council established a headquarters at 2026 N. 5th Street. The Freedom House deepened the Youth Council's ties to the surrounding community and was a place for members to relax, eat, sleep, and socialize—a second home, for some. It was also where the group planned protests of the Eagles Club's whites-only policy and later organized open housing marches.

Hostile responses to both the Youth Council's activities and the work of other civil rights groups in the city, which included a firebombing at a Freedom House, prompted ten Youth Council members to form the Commandos to protect the protesters. As the Commandos grew, they became integral to strategy and organization during the open housing marches of 1967–68. Later, the group moved to 1316 N. 15th Street and established a second Freedom House.

Marker #4 - 15th Street Freedom House

Location: King Park

Status: **Projected install Spring 2025**

In the spring of 1967, the NAACP Youth Council rented a property at 1316 N. 15th Street as a second Freedom House. During the initial planning of the demonstrations that became the 200 consecutive nights of open housing marches in 1967–68, the 15th Street house was an important base and expanded the Youth Council's presence in the city, drawing new members to the cause.

After a march on August 29, 1967, police fired tear gas canisters into the 15th Street Freedom House, sparking a fire. Youth Council members inside the house managed to escape, but the house was destroyed. The next day, the Youth Council held a rally outside the burned-out house, defiantly affirming their commitment to fair housing. After the destruction of the 15th Street house, the Youth Council moved to a third location, on 3rd Street and North Avenue.

Marker #5 - March to Kosciuszko Park

Location: Kosciuszko Park

Status: **Projected install Summer 2025**

On August 28, 1967, protesters led by the NAACP Youth Council and Commandos crossed the 16th Street Viaduct toward Kosciuszko Park in one of the earliest demonstrations of the 200 consecutive days of Milwaukee's fair housing marches. As they crossed into the mostly white south side, they were met by 8,000 counterprotesters. The march proceeded to the park, where Father James Groppi planned to speak. Informed by police that their permit did not allow speeches, the marchers disbanded.

Undeterred, they returned the next day. That night, they were met by 13,000 hostile white counterprotesters. Police dispersed the crowd with tear gas. After the march, supporters gathered at the Youth Council's 15th Street Freedom House.

These back-to-back marches mirrored Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1965 Edmund Pettus Bridge marches in Montgomery.



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Marker #6 - Rally at Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church

Location: Friendship Baptist Church, 905 W. North Ave.

Status: Projected install Summer 2025

On September 3, 1967, around 200 protesters led by the NAACP Youth Council and Commandos held a rally at Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church, located at 905 W. North Ave., to protest housing segregation; it was their first rally at a Black Baptist church. From there, they marched toward the Joseph Schlitz and Blatz breweries to initiate an economic boycott of local beer companies as part of their multi-pronged approach to protesting segregation. Protesters continued their march on Wisconsin Ave. from N. Van Buren St. to N. 6th St. The demonstration concluded at St. Boniface Catholic Church. Reverend Dr. E. M. Kelly, the pastor of Metropolitan and a vocal supporter of the Civil Rights Movement, endorsed the demonstrations as “a social, educational, and political revolution.” In 1968, the congregation moved to 1345 W. Burleigh St.

Marker #7 - The Sunday March to Wauwatosa

Location: Uptown 56 Park, 5531 W. North Ave.

Status: Projected install Fall 2025

After a rally at St. Boniface Catholic Church on September 4, 1967, NAACP Youth Council members protesting housing segregation marched up North Avenue into the suburb of Wauwatosa. Youth Council Commandos protected marchers on their journey. The protest was joined by comedian and activist Dick Gregory; local civil rights leaders including Lloyd Barbee, Rev. Richard Kirkendoll, and Rev. Leo Champion; and Black police officers Eurial and Lawrence Jordan. Protesters supported each other on the long trip by singing freedom songs. Police were forced to watch the marchers from their vehicles because of the protesters' strategic plan to periodically slow the march to a crawl, which caused the paddy wagons to overheat. The Wauwatosa Common Council later banned picketing in residential communities and unauthorized public protests.

Marker #8 - Police Confrontation with Marchers

Location: To be finalized

Status: Projected install Fall 2025

On the evening of October 9, 1967, the intersection of 20th Street and North Avenue became crowded with clusters of Open Housing marchers, blocking traffic. Even though the marchers had a parade permit, police declared the march an unlawful assembly. As the protesters attempted to turn the march from the intersection, police blocked them in and confronted them with batons. NAACP Youth Council Commandos tried to shelter the marchers while remaining non-violent themselves; they took the brunt of the police clubbing. Many marchers were beaten and arrested. This confrontation solidified the Commandos as formidable figures in the community and in the Civil Rights Movement.



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Marker #9 - Milwaukee's Fair Housing Movement

Location: To be finalized - Wisconsin Ave.

Status: Projected install Fall 2025

Throughout the 1960s, Milwaukee was the site of a massive, influential civil rights movement that combated racial discrimination and segregation in housing, employment, and education as a part of the broader national movement for civil rights.

Founded in 1948, Milwaukee's NAACP Youth Council was a forum for youth to discuss race. In the 1960s, the Youth Council transformed into the active core of the movement, fighting racism at various city businesses, including at the Eagles Club, with its discriminatory whites-only policy. In the summer of 1966, protests erupted at the Club over the membership of judges who presided over the trials of people of color. The protests garnered media attention and drew white counterprotesters, who verbally and physically attacked the Youth Council. Later, from August 1967 to March 1968, the Youth Council and their protective unit, the Commandos, led 200 consecutive nights of protests for fair housing.

In parallel movements, the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC), founded by attorney Lloyd Barbee in 1964, worked to integrate Milwaukee public schools through boycotts of segregated schools, protests of intact busing, and the establishment of Freedom Schools, while the Milwaukee Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), represented by Cecil Brown, addressed public accommodation and insensitive remarks made by public officials.

On April 11, 1968, the US government passed a national Fair Housing Act prohibiting discrimination based on race. On April 30, Milwaukee passed its own fair housing bill, six years after Alderwoman Vel Phillips first introduced it to the Common Council.

Interested in becoming a maintenance sponsor for a March On, Milwaukee marker?

Please contact Wisconsin Historical Society Statewide Services Coordinator Mallory Hanson at mallory.hanson@wisconsinhistory.org for more information.



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