“Mississippi is the stronghold of the whole vicious system of segregation. If we can crack Mississippi, we will likely be able to crack the system in the rest of the country.”

— SNCC chairman John Lewis, July 1964
It Wasn’t About Bus Seats

“When you talk about violence, you’re just talking about what goes on in Mississippi regularly. That’s a part of its history, its culture.”

— Annie Devine, Canton, Miss.

Sometimes people think the civil rights movement was about who got to sit at the front of the bus. Actually, in Mississippi it was about the brutal exploitation of one half of society by the other half.

In 1960, almost half of Mississippi’s residents were African American. State law kept them apart from whites in neighborhoods, schools, and jobs.

Leaders made sure that black people had the lowest wages, poorest houses, and harshest lives. Most white Mississippians thought this was normal. Racism was state law.
Before Freedom Summer

“When you speak out, somebody’s there to crush you ... There’s too many things happened to me. This country ought to wake up.”

— Fannie Lou Hamer, Ruleville, Miss.

For decades, many African Americans had fought segregation in Mississippi.

Some, like Clyde Kennard, Lamar Smith, Herbert Lee, and Medgar Evers, had paid for it with their lives.

But the U.S. government refused to get involved.

Then, in the early 1960s, young people decided to try to change everything.

Winona police torture Fannie Lou Hamer, June 9, 1963

A partial list of racist murders, 1963-65

Bob Moses' review of work in Mississippi 1961-63

HARVEY RICHARDS MEDIA ARCHIVE


Jimmie Travis, shot outside Greenwood, Feb. 28, 1963

MINNIS, CHRONOLOGY OF VIOLENCE

WILLIAM HEATH PAPERS

ARTHUR KINOY PAPERS

POOR PEOPLE'S CORPORATION RECORDS

WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Planning a Revolution

"The only attack worth making is an attack aimed at the overthrow of the existing political structures of the state. They must be torn down completely – to make way for new ones."
— Bob Moses, Sept. 1963

Leaders of SNCC and CORE decided that the ballot box was the only way to end injustice in Mississippi. They invited northern volunteers to help try to register black voters during the summer of 1964.

They also planned to start Freedom Schools for kids, community centers for poor families, and a new political party to oppose the racist system. Bob Moses and Dave Dennis led the project.

* SNCC = Student Nonviolent Co-ordinating Committee, CORE = Congress of Racial Equality.
More than 900 Northern college students came to Mississippi for the summer of 1964. They worked under 120 SNCC and CORE staff.

More than 60,000 black residents went to meetings, marched in demonstrations, and voted in an unofficial election. Hundreds of them risked their lives by letting volunteers stay in their homes.

The campaign became known later as “Freedom Summer.”

In June 1964, the northern volunteers learned how to fight racism at week-long training workshops in Ohio. SNCC and CORE veterans taught them about life in Mississippi and nonviolence. They learned how to protect themselves, how to sign up new voters, and how to teach in Freedom Schools.

Then they packed into cars and buses, drove all night, and spread out across Mississippi.

"They had to be prepared to go to jail, they had to be prepared to be beaten, and they had to be prepared to be killed."

— Hollis Watkins, SNCC staff
Facing Off

“We’re going to be ready for them. They won’t have a chance.”
— Mayor Allen Thompson, Jackson, Miss.

Mississippi authorities wanted to stop Freedom Summer.

Businessmen formed white Citizens’ Councils to fire local residents from their jobs if they helped the civil rights workers.

Thousands of white people joined the Ku Klux Klan so they could wage war on the “uppity” blacks and “outside agitators.”

Civil rights workers survived more than 400 acts of violence during the 10 weeks of Freedom Summer.
On June 21st, three young workers — James Chaney, Mickey Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman — disappeared near Philadelphia, Miss.

They were stopped by the county sheriff's office, who handed them over to the Klan. After they were killed, their bodies were buried on a remote farm.

While the entire nation watched on TV, the FBI and U.S. military searched for six weeks before finding their remains on August 4th.

The FBI arrested 18 men for the murders, including a deputy sheriff. When local officials dismissed the charges, U.S. officials charged the killers in federal court with violating the victims' civil rights. Most of the murderers were convicted in 1967.
Searching for Voters

“As Mr. Hills was leaving the courthouse, a policeman pulled beside him and said, ‘If I catch you in that line, I will shoot your damn head off.’”

— Testimony, LeFlore Co., Miss., March-April 1964

Black residents were kept from voting by unfair tests, threats of punishment, and violence.

Freedom Summer’s leaders knew they couldn’t sign up many new voters. Most black Mississippians would be too afraid to try. And most of those who did would be rejected.

But documenting their illegal treatment would support federal lawsuits against the racists. And wherever large numbers of black residents tried to vote, fear might be replaced by hope.
At the Courthouse

"I told him about going down to the courthouse and asking to register... He said, proudly, 'That's what I've always wanted to do - vote.'"

— Ellen Lake, Gulfport, Miss., July 4, 1964

Most black Mississippians only had a sixth grade education. They'd never had to write anything complicated.

But the test for new voters made them fill out a two-page form and explain part of the state constitution in writing.

A white court officer decided whether applicants did it right. They let uneducated white people pass on the first try but turned most black people away.

The name of everyone taking the test was printed in the newspaper. This helped the Citizens' Council and Klan punish black residents who tried to vote.
Poor, segregated schools helped keep African Americans uninformed and powerless. Their books were outdated and the buildings were run-down. Teachers were hired by racists who tried to make them smother the hopes and dreams of black children. Freedom Schools made kids look at their own lives and challenge the racist ideas that held them down. Volunteer teachers encouraged questioning, insight, creativity, and commitment.
"They began to discover that they themselves could take action against the injustices which kept them unhappy and impotent... They began to have a sense of themselves as a people who could produce heroes..."

— Liz (Fusco) Aaronsohn, Freedom School coordinator, Aug. 1964
Many of the women and young girls are unable to buy new clothing... I have spoken to a large number of girls who cannot remember ever having owned a new dress.”

— Rita Schwerner (Bender), Meridian, Miss., March 5, 1964

White leaders didn’t give basic services to black neighborhoods. So Freedom Summer workers created community centers where people could hold meetings and get child care, medical advice, and library books.

Rita and Mickey Schwerner started one of the first centers. They opened a library, set up a sewing program, gave away clothing, led story hours, and taught classes for high school dropouts.

Community centers opened in 13 cities and towns, with 61 full-time staff working in art programs, day care, libraries, and health services.
A New Political Party

“It is time that the forces of justice and emancipation become as well organized as the forces of injustice and oppression.”

— Annie Devine, Canton, Miss.

Because black people couldn’t join the main political parties, Freedom Summer workers helped them start a new one called the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. All across the state, black residents held meetings, signed up members, and ran campaigns. New leaders were born.

The MFDP held an unofficial Freedom Election at the same time as the regular 1964 election.

More than 60,000 African Americans braved threats and violence to join in the unofficial voting.

In most places, MFDP candidates got more votes in the Freedom Election than regular Democrats did in the official one. Bob Moses said, “They had the mock election. We had the real election.”
Challenging America

“Is this America? The land of the free and the home of the brave?”
— Fannie Lou Hamer, Atlantic City, N.J., Aug. 1964

Democrats from across the nation met in Atlantic City, N.J., to choose their presidential candidate in August. The MFDP argued that Mississippi’s all-white official delegation had no right to speak for the state’s Democrats. They sent their own delegates to Atlantic City instead.

The FBI infiltrated their meetings and politicians whom they thought were their friends betrayed them.

Millions of Americans watched on TV as Democratic Party leaders rejected the MFDP’s challenge. SNCC’s Joyce Ladner called Atlantic City, “the end of innocence.”

Three months later, Mississippi segregationists easily won re-election to Congress. The MFDP filed a second challenge. That was rejected, too, and racists took the state’s seats in Washington.
By the fall of 1964, Freedom Summer workers were exhausted. They'd been jailed, beaten, bombed, and shot. Hundreds were hurt and several were dead. And segregation was as strong as ever in Mississippi. They thought they had failed. But they had woken up America.

Thousands of black Mississippians had joined together to confront their oppressors. They would never be silenced again. And white Americans across the country were shocked at savage attacks on kids like their own.

Freedom Summer helped change the country’s racial climate so Congress could pass the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965. Soon, tens of thousands of African Americans registered to vote in Mississippi. Over the next 18 months, more than half of eligible black voters in the South would register. Some ran for city council, school board, and sheriff.

Racism and brutality would continue and more people would die fighting them. But segregation had been cracked during Freedom Summer. America would never be the same.
About the Exhibit

This exhibit was created for middle and high school students who are learning about Freedom Summer for the first time.

All photographs and manuscripts shown here are housed at the Wisconsin Historical Society. To learn how they got there, see the book “Risking Everything: A Freedom Summer Reader” (Madison, WHS Press: 2014) or the Summer 2014 issue of the Wisconsin Magazine of History.

Visit www.wisconsinhistory.org/freedomsummer for a digital archive with thousands of other Civil Rights documents.

The uncaptioned images on the first banner show young men planning at a political meeting, a young woman resisting police non-violently (courtesy of Ted Polumbaum Collection, The Newseum), children reading in a community center, staff and volunteers in Holly Springs, and the U.S. Constitution. Many of the images used in the exhibit are from a filmstrip produced by the MFD in the winter of 1964-65.

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