

Freedom Summer of 1964 and Its Significance for the Civil Rights Movement in the USA

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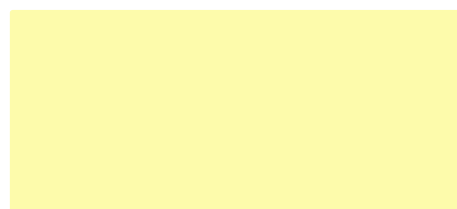
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ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá Létem svobody a jeho významem v boji za občanská práva v USA. Projekt Léto svobody byl vytvořen v roce 1964 v Mississippi s cílem podpořit registraci černochů k volbám. První část práce je zaměřená na historické události popisující rasové rozdíly, segregaci a probíhající boj za rasovou rovnost. V další části je popsáno hnutí za občanská práva a jeho základní představitelé a protesty. Dále tato práce analyzuje Léto svobody v Mississippi a smrt několika účastníků. Nakonec je vysvětlen dopad projektu Léta svobody na hnutí za občanská práva.

Klíčová slova: Léto svobody, Spojené státy americké, Jih USA, Mississippi, hnutí za občanská práva, rasismus, nerovnost, segregace, útlak, Hořící Mississippi, černá rasa, protesty, lidská práva

ABSTRACT

This bachelor's thesis deals with the Freedom Summer and its significance for the U.S. civil rights movement. The Freedom Summer project was created in 1964 in Mississippi to encourage voter registration of blacks. The first part of the thesis is focused on historical events, describing racial disparities, segregation, and the ongoing battle towards racial equality. The next part describes the civil rights movement and its fundamental leaders and protests. Further on, it analyses the Mississippi Freedom Summer and the deaths of several participants. Finally, this thesis explains the influence of the Freedom Summer project on the continuation of the civil rights movement.

Keywords: Freedom Summer, United States, U.S. South, Mississippi, civil rights movement, racism, inequality, segregation, oppression, Mississippi Burning, black race, protests, human rights

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I hereby declare that the print version of my bachelor's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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INTRODUCTION

From enslaved Africans arriving in Jamestown in 1619 to the civil rights movement in the 1960s and beyond, blacks faced an ongoing struggle against systemic racism. White superiority was built on the perception of black inferiority and intellectual differences, creating an unequal social status between blacks and whites. Despite the abolition of slavery and Reconstruction's promise of equality under the law, new aspects of racism emerged. Jim Crow laws enforced segregation and disenfranchisement, thus depriving blacks of their civil rights. The civil rights movement, with its distinctive nonviolent approach, tried to tackle the embedded inequality, particularly in the South. Through the activism of civil rights workers, some of the efforts of the movement were achieved, such as the Brown V. Board of Education decision and the Civil Rights Act of 1957. But the execution of civil rights and equal conditions for blacks were not coming quickly enough.

“Mississippi Goddam” was a protest song that turned the world’s gaze on Mississippi in March 1964. Its creator, Nina Simone, was distressed by the senseless violence inflicted upon blacks. Civil rights activist Medgar Evers had recently been murdered, and a church had been bombed, killing four young black girls. Simone demanded desegregation and unification in the song, both of which, in her opinion, were coming “too slow.”¹ She was not the only one outraged by the situation in Mississippi. The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) also wanted to take a radical step towards equality, organising a voter registration drive in Mississippi, later known as the “Mississippi Freedom Summer.” The project was one of the interracial efforts of the civil rights movement to expand the voter registration of blacks while challenging segregation and inequality. It was a pivotal moment for the movement because it demonstrated the power of collective effort, initiated political and social change, and laid the foundation for significant civil rights legislations.

¹ Nina Simone, “Mississippi Goddam,” YouTube, 2013, <https://youtu.be/LJ25-U3jNWM>.

1 THE HISTORY OF THE BLACK STRUGGLE

This chapter describes the historical timeline of the black struggle for freedom between 1619 and 1965. The chapter explains how every slave revolt, resistance against white supremacy, and other attempts at freedom slowly paved the way for the civil rights movement.

1.1 The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the First Revolts

The transatlantic slave trade started the enslavement of blacks in the Americas, which lasted for more than two centuries. Western European traders purchased Africans in exchange for goods, such as weapons, cotton, and rum. These Africans were boarded on a ship and sent across the Atlantic Ocean while suffering inhumane treatment, which historians now refer to as the “Middle Passage.”² Due to the malnourishment and diseases spreading throughout the ship, the mortality rate was about 16%. Approximately “10.7 million Black men, women, and children were transported from West Africa and sold into slavery” in the Americas.³ Enslavement provided no legal rights for the person while giving the slave owner absolute autonomy over their enslaved property. Owners could abuse, rape, or even kill without prosecution- black life had no value.⁴

In 1619 in Jamestown, Virginia, a labour force was needed to improve the current economic status, which was reliant on tobacco farming. Firstly, Africans arrived there as servants, but as the racial prejudice strengthened, slavery received a hereditary status.⁵ According to Christianity, racism was, to some extent, justified. The Bible portrayed blacks as cursed by God, and their only salvation was to be enslaved. But when blacks started to convert to Christianity, thus meeting the rule of British colonies that no Christian could be enslaved, it scared the slave owners. Richard Baxter (1615-1691), a British Puritan minister, wrote that enslaved people should be converted to Christianity but implied that they could not be freed if they wanted to be saved by God- he simply justified the racism.⁶

² Equal Justice Initiative, *Slavery in America: The Montgomery Slave Trade* (Montgomery: Equal Justice Initiative, 2018), 9; “Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History: A Journey in Chains,” The Library of Congress, accessed March 28, 2023, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/african/journey-in-chains/>.

³ Equal Justice Initiative, *Slavery in America*, 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

Slave uprisings were not uncommon during the eighteenth century. Enslaved people rebelled against the embedded inhumane treatment they experienced each day. To avoid rebellious outbreaks, the slaves were distributed around the land to prevent them from gathering.⁷ The most significant uprising before the American Revolution was the Stono Rebellion of 1739 in South Carolina, during which 60 slaves escaped their masters and headed to St. Augustine, Florida, where the Spanish government, in an effort to create a disturbance in the British colonies, had guaranteed enslaved blacks land and freedom. The escapees killed twenty whites. In response, whites hunted them down, captured and executed them.⁸ The Negro Act was passed by colonists as a reaction to the rebellion. The act specified who must be enslaved and further restricted their rights.⁹

The Declaration of Independence was written and passed in 1776 during the American Revolution. It stated that “all men are created equal.”¹⁰ Historian Jack Rakove argued that people misinterpret the phrase. Thomas Jefferson wanted to imply that colonists had a right to self-government, not individual equality.¹¹ The topic of slavery was not addressed by the fledgling United States even though slaves constituted one-fifth of the population. As a response, the post-war era witnessed a significant growth of abolitionist movements, especially in the north, which created conflict for the slave owning founding fathers.¹² Historian Edmund Morgan described it as the “American paradox,” implying that it is rather contradictory that liberty and slavery could coexist concurrently in colonial America.¹³

The transatlantic slave trade was abolished in 1808 by federal law, however, slavery in the United States remained legal until 1865. Therefore, the only possibility was to replace it with the domestic slave trade and wait for the reproduction of the enslaved generation to gain more cheap labour.¹⁴

⁷ Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1983), 368.

⁸ John K. Thornton, “African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion,” *American Historical Review* 96, no. 4 (1991): 1101, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/96.4.1101>.

⁹ Birgit Brander Rasmussen, “‘Attended with Great Inconveniences’: Slave Literacy and the 1740 South Carolina Negro Act,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 125, no. 1 (2010): 201-2, <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.1.201>.

¹⁰ “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription,” National Archives and Records Administration, accessed 21 January 2023, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

¹¹ Mellissa De Witte, “How the Meaning of the Declaration of Independence Changed over Time,” Stanford News, accessed December 10, 2022, <https://news.stanford.edu/2020/07/01/meaning-declaration-independence-changed-time/>.

¹² Philip Steele, *Slavery and Civil Rights* (London: Wayland, 2011), 24.

¹³ Edmund S. Morgan, “Slavery and Freedom: The American Paradox,” *Journal of American History* 59, no. 1 (1972): p. 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1888384>, 5.

¹⁴ Equal Justice Initiative, *Slavery in America*, 23.

David Walker was one of many blacks who attempted to spread awareness of the inhumanity of slavery. In his radical Appeal of 1829, he argued that slavery opposes Christian beliefs and that it severely violates the Declaration of Independence, pledging freedom. He called for the immediate termination of slavery and criticised colonisation. His appeal created a wave of reaction from blacks, encouraging a rapid movement to abolish slavery. It transformed the perceptions of many and gave blacks hope that their situation would improve. The whites sensed a potential risk of slave rebellion, so they further limited black rights. His appeal pointed out that people of colour are “the most degraded, wretched...beings.” Walker emphasised that the Jews, Greeks, Irish, and Indians were all free, but blacks were not. He described how much slaves enrich Americans with their ongoing blood, sweat and tears, but they are not seen as equal parts of society. He encouraged people to take action and fight for their equality because God sees all creatures as equal.¹⁵

Another important rebellion occurred in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831, when a group of black rebels, led by Nat Turner, killed sixty whites. The next day, the rebellion was suppressed, and more than thirty slaves were executed after a trial. Turner himself was hung. The consequence of this uprising tightened the slavery laws of the southern states and further restricted Virginia’s emancipation requirements.¹⁶

Blacks were perceived as inferior and often described as emotionless. This myth only strengthened the distorted public perception that blacks are less human.¹⁷ Samuel Morton’s 1839 *Cranium Americana* argued that based on the cranial capacity of all races, the “negroes” proved to have the lowest cranial capacity, meaning the lowest intelligence. Inspired by this anecdotal evidence, American scholar Louis Agassiz delivered a lecture in 1847 claiming that “the brain of the Negro is that of the imperfect brain of a seven month’s infant in the womb of a White.”¹⁸ There was a cultural perception that blacks had to be transported to the South to work on plantations because Amerindian and white labourers were unsuitable for growing cotton, tobacco or sugar crops, whereas blacks thrive in the sun, and the conditions are perfectly in correlation with their skin colour.¹⁹ Minorities received

¹⁵ “Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World (1829),” National Constitution Center, accessed January 13, 2023, <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/david-walker-appeal-to-the-colored-citizens-of-the-world-1829>.

¹⁶ Patrick Breen, “Nat Turner’s Rebellion,” *African American Studies*, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780190280024-0092>.

¹⁷ Equal Justice Initiative, *Slavery in America*, 13.

¹⁸ Louis Menand, “Morton, Agassiz, and the Origins of Scientific Racism in the United States,” *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 34 (2001): p. 110, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3134139>, 110.

¹⁹ Kenneth Milton Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (Norwalk: Easton Press, 1995), 7.

subordinate status compared to whites, who assumed that there was genetically an intellectual gap between themselves and people of other races. These claims reinforced the justification of racial prejudice and the lack of educational opportunities.²⁰

The institution of slavery was not built overnight, but it was slowly created by every decision of white planters, who did not face the consequences. Their actions were excused by folklore traditions and myths. Black inferiority, the supposed result of physical differences, intellectual weakness, immaturity, animal characteristics, and African ancestry, artificially divided blacks and whites. The racial caste system was built and lasted for centuries.²¹ Every revolt had its impact, even if it was not visible at the time.²²

1.2 The Civil War and Abolition

As the United States started expanding to the West, slavery became a controversial topic between the South and the North, ultimately resulting in the Civil War. Southern crops were dependent on slave labour, and the South fiercely protected the institution of slavery. The industrial North gradually abolished enslavement throughout the eighteenth century, as it became more socially unacceptable.²³ The change was gradual rather than radical because the legal measures to eliminate enslavement were often ambiguous. To give an example, Connecticut's Gradual Abolition Act of 1784 pledged freedom to descendants of the enslaved when they reached a certain age but failed to liberate the living slaves. The last Northern state to prohibit slavery was New Jersey in 1804.²⁴ Other northern states, e.g., Illinois, took a different, more racist approach to ending slavery within their borders, simply making it illegal to be black.²⁵ The situation in the South was significantly different. The economy desperately needed a low-cost and accomplished workforce to sustain tobacco and cotton production. The cotton and textile trade had grown significantly in the nineteenth century. Southerners feared that the abolition would destroy their "well-established" way of

²⁰ L. Scott Miller, "The Origins of the Presumption of Black Stupidity," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 9 (1995): 79, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2962640>.

²¹ Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution*, 11.

²² Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 368.

²³ Equal Justice Initiative, *Slavery in America*, 10.

²⁴ David Menschel, "Abolition without Deliverance: The Law of Connecticut Slavery 1784-1848," *Yale Law Journal* 111, no. 1 (2001): 183, <https://doi.org/10.2307/797518>.

²⁵ Elmer Gertz, "The Black Laws of Illinois," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 56, No. 3 (1963): 454-473, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40190621>.

life and their economic prosperity.²⁶ Blacks had no civil rights and could only vote in a few states.²⁷

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852 depicted the harsh realities of slavery, which helped to bring the issue to the forefront of the public consciousness. Despite the author's racist views, her anti-slavery novel played a significant role in rallying support for the abolitionist movement. When she met President Lincoln a decade later, he allegedly said: "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war."²⁸

Dred Scott was one of a few enslaved people who attempted to gain his freedom through the legal process. As he was enslaved in a free state, Illinois, he filed a lawsuit against his owner, who refused to free him. Scott won a few trials, but the decision was always overruled. In 1854, eight years after the first trial, Scott lost his bid for freedom after appealing to the U.S. Supreme Court. The decision irritated abolitionists and added fuel to the emerging Civil War.²⁹

An upheaval emerged after the Kansas- Nebraska Act of 1854. The residents were given "popular sovereignty," meaning they could decide by a popular vote whether Kansas should be a slave or free territory while entering the Union. People gathered in the territory to influence the voting process, culminating in extreme violence. The anti-slavery and pro-slavery supporters fought against each other, and the upheaval received national attention. A free-state constitution was adopted in 1859, but the territory could not be part of the Union. During "Bleeding Kansas," 50 people were killed, escalating the controversy of slavery.³⁰

Abolitionists such as John Brown, who was in Kansas in 1854, demanded radical changes regarding the abolition of slavery with immediate effect. One of his ways of achieving "radical abolition" was raiding the armoury in Harpers Ferry, Virginia in 1859. With stolen weapons, he would start a slave uprising in the South.³¹ During his guerrilla warfare, he was accompanied by eighteen other people, four of whom were black. Brown's initial idea was to liberate the slaves in the region and to invoke a widespread slave rebellion.

²⁶ Equal Justice Initiative, *Slavery in America*, 10-11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁸ "Stowe's Global Impact," Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, accessed 2 April 2023, <https://www.harrietbeecherstowecenter.org/harriet-beecher-stowe/her-global-impact/>.

²⁹ History.com Editors, "Dred Scott Case," accessed 10 March 2023, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/dred-scott-case>.

³⁰ History.com Editors, "Bleeding Kansas," History, accessed 10 March 2023, <https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/bleeding-kansas>.

³¹ William T. La Moy, and F. B. Sanborn, "The Secret Six and John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry: Two Letters," *New England Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (2015): 141-43, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24718206>.

He was captured, convicted and hung two months after the raid. Despite the fact that the mission failed, the event was an important impetus for the Civil War.³²

In 1860, fifteen states of the America South still refused the abolition of slavery. This, combined with the election of Abraham Lincoln as president, who was not even on the ballot in the South, resulted in division, with eleven pro-slavery states seceding and forming the Confederate States of America.³³ Kansas was approved to be part of the Union in 1861, just a few months before the war.³⁴

The Civil War started in July 1861 after the Confederacy attacked the U.S.-held Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina. President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, which was supposed to be only a “wartime measure.” It promised freedom to enslaved Americans, but it was only applied to the Confederate states. The proclamation had a somewhat symbolic function and did not guarantee the abolition of slavery, as it had no Constitutional value. The proclamation's goal was not to free slaves but to protect the Union.³⁵

The function of blacks within American society had significantly changed during the Civil War. More than 180,000 black troops were estimated to have served in the Union army. The black community was, to some extent, responsible for the Union’s victory in the Civil War, which gave blacks higher standing in white minds. It was possibly the first time that blacks were seen as a positive contribution to society, which led to the “constitutional recognition in the principle of civil and political equality.”³⁶ Even so, the awareness of their role in the Civil War slowly vanished. Within the years of the American Civil War, multiple laws promoting equality were passed in the North.³⁷

Finally, in 1865, Congress officially abolished slavery within the Union through the authorisation of the Thirteenth Amendment. With this, many questions arose concerning its meaning for the black community. There were many interpretations regarding the outcome of abolition. People were unsure whether it meant complete freedom for blacks or, as future president James A. Garfield asked, “is it the bare minimum of not being chained?”³⁸ In the

³² Fred Landon, “Canadian Negroes and the John Brown Raid,” *Journal of Negro History* 6, no. 2 (1921): 174–76, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2713730>.

³³ Equal Justice Initiative, *Slavery in America*, 11.

³⁴ History.com Editors, “Bleeding Kansas.”

³⁵ History.com Editors, “Emancipation Proclamation,” History, accessed 15 January 2023, <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/emancipation-proclamation>.

³⁶ Eric Foner, “Rights and the Constitution in Black Life during the Civil War and Reconstruction,” *Journal of American History* 74, no. 3 (1987): 864, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1902157>.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 867.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 869.

light of emancipation, blacks tried to be more autonomous regarding their legal and social rights. Some changed their names; they created communities, churches, and schools.³⁹

1.3 Reconstruction and Its Amendments

Reconstruction was a significant era for the four million new freedpeople. The era, however, proved too short to provide a complete shift from enslavement to freedom.⁴⁰ After the war, the goal was to fund the country's restoration, to create equal protection under the law, and ultimately to address the institution of slavery.⁴¹ Multiple Reconstruction Acts were passed, which created a positive outlook throughout the black community.⁴² With the Civil Rights Act of 1866, the first "federal civil rights law," the position of blacks had changed in terms of the Constitution. They received birth right citizenship, freedom, voting rights, and equal protection under the law.⁴³

Black men were also, for the first time, promoted to positions of power. In 1870, Hiram Revels was the first black senator ever elected. He was outspoken against segregation and laid the foundation for other blacks in Congress.⁴⁴

The Constitution was enriched with the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery, the 14th gave civil rights to blacks, and the 15th outlawed racial prejudice and discrimination.⁴⁵ Blacks were the ones to confront the nation about racial disparities that did not go hand-in-hand with the democracy in the country. After more than two centuries of struggle, equality in America seemed possible, as blacks received a new status.⁴⁶

Prior to the implementation of the 14th Amendment, the Three-fifths Compromise of 1787 had been the law of the land. It defined the apportionment of taxation and representation within the Union. The number consisted of all free people and "three fifths of all other Persons"- meaning three fifths of a slave. This ratio increased the representation of the southern states by 30 percent while creating the perception that slaves were only 60

³⁹ Ibid., 863.

⁴⁰ Henry Louis Gates, *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020), 14.

⁴¹ Foner, "Rights and the Constitution," 863.

⁴² Gates, *Stony the Road*, 2.

⁴³ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁴ "Hiram Revels: A Featured Biography," U.S. Senate, https://www.senate.gov/senators/FeaturedBios/Featured_Bio_Revels.htm.

⁴⁵ John Harrison, "The Lawfulness of the Reconstruction Amendments," *University of Chicago Law Review* 68, no. 2 (2001): 375-376. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1600377>.

⁴⁶ Foner, "Rights and the Constitution," 863-64.

percent human. The 14th amendment of 1868 invalidated the Compromise, instead counting the total number of individuals in every State.⁴⁷

In response to the constitutional amendments guaranteeing black freedom and equality, Southerners not only established the Ku Klux Klan, which intimidated blacks, but developed the black codes, a series of state and local laws that maintained black inferiority.⁴⁸ The threat of the Klan was largely eliminated by the Enforcement Act of 1871, while the codes were seriously undermined by the Civil Rights Act of 1875, sponsored by a Republican senator from Massachusetts, Charles Sumner. It ensured that all citizens could equally use public transportation, accommodation, and forbade exclusion from jury service. Sumner's lifelong quest was to ensure equal civil and legal rights regardless of race.⁴⁹

1.4 Jim Crow Laws and the Klan

Numerous Jim Crow laws were passed nationwide between 1877 and 1965. These laws promoted extreme racial segregation, where according to this system, blacks were subordinate to whites. It was a new version of white superiority that assured the oppression of blacks after the abolition of slavery.⁵⁰ The Civil Rights Act of 1875 was ruled as unconstitutional in 1883.⁵¹ During this era, authorities such as scientists, Christian ministers, and teachers promoted black inferiority.⁵²

Blacks were separated in public transportation, jobs, and neighbourhoods, and denied voting rights. Even though the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments assured all people receive equal legal protection, Jim Crow was upheld by the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court decision,⁵³ which indoctrinated the idea of "separate but equal" and legalised "racially segregated public facilities."⁵⁴ Blacks and whites had separate public transport, schools, parks, prisons, waiting rooms, toilets, restaurants and more. These laws quickly resulted in

⁴⁷ Susan L. Boyd, "A Look into the Constitutional Understanding of Slavery," Ashbrook, accessed February 16, 2023, <https://ashbrook.org/viewpoint/respub-v6n1-boyd/>.

⁴⁸ W. E. Bois, "Reconstruction and Its Benefits," *American Historical Review* 15, no. 4 (1910): 781, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1836959>.

⁴⁹ "Landmark Legislation: Civil Rights Act of 1875," U.S. Senate, <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/CivilRightsAct1875.htm>.

⁵⁰ Aldon D. Morris, "A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement: Political and Intellectual Landmarks," *Annual Review of Sociology* 25, no. 1 (1999): 518, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.25.1.517>.

⁵¹ Judy L. Hasday, *The Civil Rights Act of 1964: An End to Racial Segregation* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007), 11.

⁵² Morris, "A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement," 519.

⁵³ "Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896)," Justia Law, accessed 14 February 2023, <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/163/537/>.

⁵⁴ History.com Editors, "Brown v. Board of Education," History, accessed 17 January 2023, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/brown-v-board-of-education-of-topeka>.

a widely accepted system, which led to extreme violence towards blacks when the laws were disobeyed.⁵⁵ Lynching created an atmosphere of fear among the black community. Mass lynchings during riots was commonly used as a means of terror, often supported by the police. The causes of lynchings were regularly based on rumours rather than on facts about black misbehaviour. The punishment was often performed on black men who supposedly sexually harassed or assaulted white women. It was not uncommon to kill a person, burn their body at the place of their crime, and keep some of their body parts as souvenirs.⁵⁶ During the Jim Crow era, 539 blacks were lynched in Mississippi alone.⁵⁷

Blacks also faced extra requirements when it came to voting rights. In order to vote, they had to pass literacy exams, own a property and pay poll taxes. Black voting rights were an overlooked problem; therefore, voter registration became one of the major issues tackled during the civil rights movement. Even when all the requirements for voting were met, blacks were frequently threatened or violently attacked during elections.⁵⁸

1.4.1 The Ku Klux Klan

The Ku Klux Klan was one of the first terrorist groups created in the United States. It started in 1866 as a secret social club for Confederate veterans. After the Civil War, the organisation asserted power over the South while being extraordinarily racist and violent. Klan members were frightened that white supremacy was in danger. Freedpeople, along with Catholics and Republicans, were victims of the Klan's terrorism. There are several explanations for why such a group could have been accepted. One of the reasons is the fact that Southern states were ashamed because blacks were freed. Their lives had changed significantly because they lost their slave labour; thus, they suffered economically.⁵⁹

The Klan frequently used intimidation to create a sense of fear among Northern representatives and the general public. The Klan was not hiding, and they did not intend to cover up their crimes. On the contrary, they patrolled the streets in large numbers, announcing their entrance to people in advance. However, some people thought it was only a media fabrication. Witnesses and tangible evidence were often left at the crime scene after

⁵⁵ Bruce J. Dierenfield, *The Civil Rights Movement: Revised Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 47.

⁵⁶ Equal Justice Initiative, "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror" (Montgomery: Equal Justice Initiative, 2017), 3-5.

⁵⁷ "Lynchings: By State and Race, 1882-1968," University of Missouri-Kansas City, accessed February 2, 2023, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchingsstate>.

⁵⁸ "Voting Rights," Library of Congress, accessed February 2, 2023, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/voting-rights/>.

⁵⁹ David A. Horowitz, *Inside the Klavern: The Secret History of a Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 2.

attacks, reminding people of the Klan's power.⁶⁰ According to Charles L. Ruby, "the act [of terrorism] is committed in order to create a fearful state of mind in an audience different from the victims."⁶¹ That was the ultimate objective of the Klan's psychology.

The first Ku Klux Klan group disbanded around 1877 when the Northern soldiers departed the South.⁶² The second KKK group was established in 1915 in Georgia. It was inspired by the original documents and by D. W. Griffith's movie *The Birth of a Nation*. The controversial movie described the birth of the first KKK and not only perceived Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner as the clear villain but the Klan as a heroic organisation, protecting white supremacy and white women. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson reportedly called the film truth written with lightning.⁶³ The new Klansmen, consisting of white Protestant men, adopted these values while holding racial prejudice against Jews, blacks, Italians and other minorities. These values were shared with ordinary people of the time, which gave them credibility as well as a political strength. The Klan often quoted the Bible and highlighted the importance of tradition, Americanism, and the Constitution.⁶⁴ The second KKK slowly disappeared in the 1940s after one of its founders, David. C. Stephenson, was accused of the abduction and homicide of Madge Oberholtzer - a white woman. In the 1950s, a third Ku Klux Klan would be created as a response to the civil rights movement (See 3.2.1).⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Elaine Frantz Parsons, "Klan Skepticism and Denial in Reconstruction-Era Public Discourse," *Journal of Southern History* 77, no. 1 (2011): 56. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27919387>.

⁶¹ Charles L. Ruby, "The Definition of Terrorism," *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 2, no. 1 (2002): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1530-2415.2002.00021.x>.

⁶² Horowitz, *Inside the Klavern*, 2.

⁶³ Mark E. Benbow, "Birth of a Quotation: Woodrow Wilson and 'Like Writing History with Lightning,'" *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 9, no. 4 (2010): 509, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537781400004242>.

⁶⁴ Horowitz, *Inside the Klavern*, 3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 146

2 THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

World War II (1941-1945) changed the position of blacks within American society. The German and Japanese defeats, aided by black participation in the military, undermined white superiority. Black troops were protecting democracy and freedom with their own blood in Europe and Asia, but democracy did not protect them back in America. It became necessary to further recognise blacks legally, as it made no sense for them to fight against fascism but accept racism in their home country. President Harry Truman published a document in 1948 called “To Secure These Rights,” supporting a federal process to terminate institutional racial segregation, lynching, and obstacles in voter registration. This event helped to initiate a step towards racial equality.⁶⁶

Post-war America was marked by the pivotal mass civil rights movement.⁶⁷ This movement was kickstarted by the 1954 *Brown V. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision that proclaimed racial segregation within the public school system as unconstitutional. Chief Justice Earl Warren declared segregated education to be “inherently unequal.”⁶⁸ After the end of legal segregation, it was a rocky road for all black students to redeem their civil rights. A six-year-old elementary school student, Ruby Bridges, was escorted by the U.S. marshals onto the school grounds six years after the prohibition of segregation. Even though she was in the right, Bridges was threatened by people waiting outside, and her own teachers refused to teach her. It took ten years for the Supreme Court to stress the importance of desegregation in the school system and incite protests on behalf of this issue.⁶⁹

Several factors helped the creation of such a movement. First of all, there was a shift in terms of technological development in the 1950s. The exposure to black protests was more significant as the general population could watch them on TV. Aldon D. Morris wrote that racism and democracy increasingly appeared incompatible, which emboldened blacks to fight for their rights even more.⁷⁰ The concept of persistent social protests through mass demonstrations made a significant social change, which slowly helped to abolish Jim Crow laws. Various associations collectively organised protests for the black community, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), the

⁶⁶ Dierenfield, *The Civil Rights Movement*, 56-58.

⁶⁷ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (January 2005): 1234, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3660172>.

⁶⁸ History.com Editors, “Brown v. Board of Education,”

⁶⁹ Dierenfield, *The Civil Rights Movement*, 67.

⁷⁰ Morris, “A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement,” 522.

Montgomery Improvement Organisation (MIA), and the black church.⁷¹ Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. became the social movement leader. He promoted the strategy of nonviolent boycotts, which deprived the white supremacists of the ability to slander the movement publicly. There was so much violence, murders, and arson that peaceful protests caught the people's attention. However, there were also leaders, such as Malcolm X, who had a more militant approach towards the movement and promoted violence in terms of self-defence.⁷² It was Malcolm's Old Testament "eye for an eye," versus King's New Testament "turn the other cheek." Americans became increasingly nervous about which philosophy would prevail.⁷³

The attitude towards violence shifted when Emmet Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy, was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 because he whistled at a white woman. However, the judicial system failed to punish the murderers. The brutality of this crime was so extreme that it brought attention to white supremacy and the injustices experienced by the black community.⁷⁴ Roy Wilkins, the head of the NAACP, shouted through Harlem that "Mississippi has decided to maintain white supremacy by murdering children."⁷⁵ And, as Dierenfield wrote, it was a wake-up call for blacks to fight for their rights, as the odiousness of such a crime promoted activism against oppression in the white South.⁷⁶

The 1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott was the first large-scale protest of the movement. Rosa Parks refused to give her seat on a bus to a white man and declined to sit in the designated place in the back for blacks. Her arrest commenced a 381-day bus boycott that ultimately culminated in a seating segregation ban. The Montgomery Improvement Association was formed on behalf of Parks' bravery.⁷⁷

After eighty-two years, a new civil rights legislation was passed. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 promised to protect the voting rights of blacks, who faced a series of measures such as literacy tests and poll taxes that prevented them from voting. The act established the Civil Rights Commission that investigated allegations of voter discrimination and granted the

⁷¹ Ibid., 524.

⁷² "Malcolm X Sees Rise in Violence," *New York Times*, accessed 3 March 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/1964/03/13/archives/malcolm-x-sees-rise-in-violence-says-negroes-are-ready-to-act-in.html>.

⁷³ Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King, *The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr: Selected by Coretta Scott King* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1983), 73.

⁷⁴ Morris, "A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement," 521-22.

⁷⁵ Dierenfield, *The Civil Rights Movement*, 66.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 66.

⁷⁷ History.com Editors, "Civil Rights Movement," History, accessed February 4, 2023, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-movement>.

Attorney General the authority to file a lawsuit on behalf of individuals who had been disenfranchised or had their voting rights violated. However, the act was ineffective in practice and most of the states ignored its provisions.⁷⁸

As a reaction to Till's murder, a sit-in protest took place when four black students sat down in the Greensboro, North Carolina Woolworth's restaurant with an only white customers policy. More than 300 students joined them, creating a wave of calm sit-in protests all around the South and North. Many more sit-ins were organised between 1958 and 1960. The NAACP along with history teacher Clara Luper were among the first figures initiating this kind of peaceful protest. Through media exposure and the engagement of civil rights activists, their goal was reached in 1960 as dining facilities became integrated.⁷⁹

In 1963, black citizens still encountered segregation, systematic racism, high unemployment, and low-paying jobs. Most objectives of the civil rights movement were not reached at that stage. The lack of change in the South fuelled the civil rights organizations to take action and pressured the government to present a sweeping civil rights bill. The March on Washington took place on the 28 August, with more than 200,000 protestors. With its primary goal to support the civil rights bill, the march also tackled other issues- discrimination in employment, the lack of training opportunities for the unemployed, and segregated public places. The event came to a grand finale with King's "I have a dream" speech.⁸⁰

The civil rights movement culminated in 1964 when President Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act (See 4.2), which revoked the Jim Crow laws after ten years of collective fighting for equality.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Thomas R. Winquist, "Civil Rights: Legislation: The Civil Rights Act of 1957," *Michigan Law Review* 56, no. 4 (1958): 620, 625-26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1286055>.

⁷⁹ History.com Editors, "Greensboro Sit-in," History, accessed February 4, 2023, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/the-greensboro-sit-in>.

⁸⁰ "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom," The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, accessed February 19, 2023, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>.

⁸¹ Morris, "A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement," 527.

3 THE FREEDOM SUMMER OF 1964

Mississippi was overflowing with Jim Crow restrictions preserving white supremacy.⁸² Blacks attempted to vote, organised protests against racial prejudice and segregation in public places. Only 5 percent of blacks could vote in Mississippi. Since Reconstruction, not a single black had held elective office.⁸³ It was not until the summer of 1964 that young people became involved in the civil rights movement, which accelerated the awareness of the movement and brought attention to the societal myths. Students were inspired to expand the movement after seeing freedom riders boldly resist bus segregation in the South throughout 1961. They saw kids their age being murdered- like Emmett Till- and they read about fourteen-year-old Hezekiah Watkins being put into the penitentiary for taking part in the freedom ride protest. They heard about students being arrested by police for the school walkout in Mississippi in 1961. The violence brought black Mississippians of all ages together and created a collective wave of fighting for equality.⁸⁴

In 1963, almost a million blacks living in Mississippi were marked by poverty and brutality. It was not uncommon to see an unconscious body lying in the streets. The accusations of police violence were not prosecuted, and many civil rights movement supporters were frequently assaulted or even killed.⁸⁵ At the time, the U.S. economy was booming: “Americans drove two-thirds of the world’s cars and held half the world’s wealth.”⁸⁶ Yet, the living conditions for a black person in Mississippi could be described as inhumane. In the midst of the civil rights movement, after King’s speech, multiple boycotts, and many attempts to end segregation, the South was not making much progress. It was almost impossible for an ordinary black person to exercise their constitutional right and vote. The restrictions were still requested- even with a completed literacy test and paid poll tax, black voters had to also endure violence perpetrated against them.⁸⁷ As Nina Simone pointed out in “Mississippi Goddam”, the change was coming too slow.⁸⁸

⁸² Jon Hale, “‘The Student as a Force for Social Change’: The Mississippi Freedom Schools and Student Engagement,” *Journal of African American History* 96, no. 3 (2011): 327-28, <https://doi.org/10.5323/jafriamerhist.96.3.0325>.

⁸³ Dierenfield, *The Civil Rights Movement*, 136.

⁸⁴ Hale, “The Student as a Force for Social Change,” 327-28.

⁸⁵ Bruce Watson, *Freedom Summer: The Savage Season That Made Mississippi Burn and Made America a Democracy* (New York: Viking Adult, 2010), 31,32.

⁸⁶ Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 25.

⁸⁷ History.com Editors, “Freedom Summer,” History, accessed March 2, 2023, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/freedom-summer>.

⁸⁸ Ruth Feldstein, “‘I Don’t Trust You Anymore’: Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1349, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3660176>.

The Freedom Summer project was begun in February 1964 by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Three black civil rights leaders were behind the Freedom Summer - James Farmer, a member of CORE; Robert Moses from the Council of Federal Organisations (COFO) and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); and James Forman from SNCC. The project's main goal was to register more voters and create equal educational opportunities in Mississippi.⁸⁹ The crucial part of this system was adult education, where black adults were educated in the field of “literacy education, practical skills, and political awareness.”⁹⁰

3.1 The Beginning of the Freedom Summer

Robert Moses wanted to show that blacks are interested in voting. To do so, he organized the first unofficial freedom election, to be held in November 1964. He created a parallel election for blacks on the same day when whites were voting to put their candidate, Paul B. Johnson, in the governor’s mansion in Jackson. Johnson, who was previously well known for blocking a black man’s entry to a state university, was elected by the white majority without hesitation. Eighty thousand blacks participated in Moses’s unofficial freedom election, voting instead for Arron Henry, an NAACP leader.⁹¹ In the official elections in neighbouring states, blacks voted in large numbers: 44% of blacks voted in Georgia, 69% in Tennessee. However, in Mississippi, the black vote lagged way behind at just 6.7%. The social hierarchy in Mississippi ensured that black voters could not execute their political power. That was the reason why Mississippi was chosen for the summer project.⁹² The outcome of the Freedom Vote Campaign was rather favourable. It proved that blacks were interested in the political process, and they would like to participate in political decisions.⁹³

After the first freedom election, the brutality increased. Students working for the elections were often followed, beaten, or arrested. The civil right movement often neglected Mississippi; however, thanks to Martin Luther King and his activism, awareness about the situation in the South was brought to wider attention. After the fall of 1963, it was indisputable that a new plan should be implemented. Bob Moses said that nothing smaller

⁸⁹ John R. Rachal, “‘The Long, Hot Summer’: The Mississippi Response to Freedom Summer, 1964,” *Journal of Negro History* 84, no. 4 (1999): 315-16, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2649035>.

⁹⁰ John R. Rachal, “We’ll Never Turn Back: Adult Education and the Struggle for Citizenship in Mississippi’s Freedom Summer,” *American Educational Research Journal* 35, no. 2 (1998): 167, <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312035002167>.

⁹¹ Harvard Sitkoff and John Hope Franklin, *The Struggle for Black Equality* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), 203.

⁹² Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 23.

⁹³ Sitkoff and Franklin, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 203.

than an army would save Mississippi; therefore, instead of leaving blacks to struggle and fight on their own, they thought of bringing a whole army of students to give a helping hand. The idea was to get national attention to the problem of racial inequality. The chairman of the Student Nonviolent Committee said, “we are going to Mississippi full force.”⁹⁴

The Mississippi Summer project was described in the media as an “invasion.” The capital city, Jackson, had a military preparation for the expected attack, assembling tanks, police forces, and military vehicles. The problem was that white southern supremacists did not perceive inequality as an issue in their states. The mayor of Greenwood even boasted that they were creating new public places for the integration of blacks approved by the “nigger civil league.”⁹⁵ The general perception was that they gave enough to the black community. The Klan of White Knights arose again in Mississippi to fight against the invasion. They opposed the idea of white students staying in a black home.⁹⁶

The project began by enrolling prospective college students from prestigious universities, who volunteered to represent the program and bring more public attention. COFO members and volunteers allied to execute their strategic plan to boost voter registration and enlighten the nation about the civil rights inequality in the South.⁹⁷ To prepare for the event, students had to pass various interviews and training sessions to ensure it was not only a publicity stunt for them.⁹⁸

On June 15th, 1964, three hundred mostly white volunteers entered Mississippi. At first, Moses was opposed to the idea of inviting white students, but then he came to a decision that integration could potentially deter discrimination and defend blacks from violent attacks.⁹⁹ Another aspect of his decision was that participation of whites on this project would ensure instant protection, and publicity throughout the nation.¹⁰⁰ The volunteers were given daily assignments that included writing reports, phone answering, handling money transfers, and operating mimeograph machines.¹⁰¹ Some of them were teaching at Freedom Schools, and others had to go from house to house to register voters.¹⁰²

⁹⁴ Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 27.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁹⁷ Rachal, “The Long, Hot Summer,” 315.

⁹⁸ Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 39.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁰¹ Dierenfield, *The Civil Rights Movement*, 145.

¹⁰² Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 44

They were instructed not to use violence on any occasion. But at the time, they could not have predicted what awaited them in Mississippi.¹⁰³

As soon as the project commenced, it received agitated attention from the media. Many officials and the press turned their backs on the project and openly spoke against it. The general perception was that the project would infuriate blacks and change their view of the widely accepted traditions, in which the hierarchical gap between white and blacks was still significant.¹⁰⁴ The Freedom Summer was designed to tackle the inequality ingrained in Southern society, which was hierarchically represented in everyday life. The Freedom Summer workers had to deal with violence from law enforcement and Ku Klux Klan members. The civil rights movement received international attention after several incidents, including unprosecuted murders, violent attacks, and false incarcerations.¹⁰⁵

3.1.1 Freedom Schools

Freedom schools were an excellent opportunity for Mississippi children to participate in civil rights activities without the risk of being punished for their actions. These schools encouraged children to create a newspaper- a type of activism where they could use their voice freely to talk about equal opportunities, education, and freedom. Public schools were often fearful places for black students. The educational system did not offer enough assets to provide basic literacy knowledge and skills for unprivileged students. Black history, black literature, and the issue of poverty- they were taught all the topics forbidden in public schools, which were still following the “separate, but equal” doctrine.¹⁰⁶

The twentieth century dealt with the issue of insufficient funding for public schools; however, in 1964, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) financed freedom schools. Therefore, black students received proper education and resources to achieve “intellectual freedom.” The decision, whether a family should send their child to a freedom school, was a tough one. Schools openly supporting the civil rights movement were a target for Jim Crow supporters. However, when a young child took part in the social movement, they usually continued to do so also later in their life, mirroring the involvement

¹⁰³ Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi* (New York: Nation Books, 2006), 29-30.

¹⁰⁴ Rachal, “The Long, Hot Summer,” 316.

¹⁰⁵ History.com Editors, “Freedom Summer.”

¹⁰⁶ Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 27; William Sturkey, “‘I Want to Become a Part of History’: Freedom Summer, Freedom Schools, and the Freedom News,” *Journal of African American History* 95, no. 3-4 (2010): 349, <https://doi.org/10.5323/jafriamerhist.95.3-4.0348>.

of their parents.¹⁰⁷ Due to the freedom of newspapers and educational opportunities, people became more knowledgeable about racial inequalities, constitutional rights, social structure, and history. Consequently, they became more involved in activism and politics.¹⁰⁸

3.2 The Deaths of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner

Shortly after the first wave of students entered Mississippi, the town of Philadelphia, Mississippi was shaken by news.¹⁰⁹ On June 21st, 1964, civil rights workers James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman disappeared. It happened within the first week of the Freedom Summer. Volunteers from COFO were afraid that they might have been attacked or even murdered as a reaction to the newly launched project in Mississippi. The response of the public and media were diverse. Most of the white citizens of Philadelphia refused to believe that the disappearances were intentional and presented the situation as a hoax rather than fact. The press favoured the COFO's belief and speculated that the sheriff and deputy of Philadelphia were entangled in the case. Those who believed in the civil rights theory requested federal intervention.

Chaney and Schwerner were civil rights workers based in Meridian, Mississippi. Goodman was a white Queen's college student who had arrived to help with the summer project. Schwerner and his wife managed a community centre for the civil rights organisation, the Congress of Racial Inequality (CORE), where Chaney was employed.¹¹⁰

They visited Longdale in Neshoba County, Mississippi, five days before their disappearance. The White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan assaulted black church leaders and burned their church to the ground. Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman visited the location and were told the Klansmen were looking for Schwerner. Schwerner publicly spoke about his efforts to promote racial equality through voting. Despite all the warnings he received, he still boldly continued his civil rights-oriented speeches. This had its consequences. He spoke in the burned Mount Zion Methodist Church just a few weeks before the incident. More than twenty other black churches were burned during the summer project. The FBI investigation file was called "MIBURN," an acronym for "Mississippi Burning."¹¹¹

It was not unknown that cars with black and white passengers were stopped on the roads and investigated. Neshoba County officers were in alliance with the Ku Klux Klan ideology

¹⁰⁷ Hale, "The Student as a Force for Social Change," 329.

¹⁰⁸ Sturkey, "I Want to Become a Part of History," 350.

¹⁰⁹ Sitkoff and Franklin, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 207.

¹¹⁰ Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, I.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, I, III, IV.

and wanted to eliminate the civil rights workers. Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner were on their way back to Philadelphia. Deputy Price, a KKK member, arrested Chaney for speeding on a highway. He could not miss a chance to capture Schwerner, so he arrested the other two as suspects in the church burning.¹¹² They were denied the right to have a phone call from jail to alert the headquarters.¹¹³ All the civil rights workers knew that being in prison meant beatings and assaults, but from the accessible evidence, Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman were not beaten that day in the Neshoba County Jail. They were kept there while the KKK prepared their graves.¹¹⁴ After their release, they were attacked, shot, and buried in the forest.

After the involvement of the FBI, their bodies were found six weeks later. The investigation of the Klan resulted in the conviction of eighteen men. The all-white jury decided to only condemn Price, along with six other men— but not with murder charges.¹¹⁵ Edgar Ray Killen, a Baptist preacher, was found guilty forty-one years after the crime.¹¹⁶ The Mississippi burning murders created turmoil in the South. It took the execution of two white men to finally shed light on how brutal the situation had been for blacks.¹¹⁷ The public attention pressured and sped up the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.¹¹⁸ (See 4.1)

3.2.1 The Third Ku Klux Klan

To provide context, it is necessary to mention the third Ku Klux Klan. The third Klan was created as a counter reaction to the civil rights movement and desegregation attempts. After the second world war, southern white supremacists grouped together to maintain the Jim Crow style of living, because they once again felt threatened of losing their superiority.¹¹⁹ The FBI struggled to maintain justice in Mississippi, where the Klan was actively committing crimes but where klansmen were rarely convicted. The problem was that they were protected by the police and all-white juries, who themselves were often members of the Klan, sharing the same beliefs. The FBI agents worked overtime to solve the Mississippi burning murders, the burning of the Sixteen Street Baptist Church a month later, and to reestablish order in Mississippi. The list of the Klans' crimes in the 1960s is long- murder

¹¹² Ibid., 13.

¹¹³ Ibid., 18.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 26.

¹¹⁵ History.com Editors, "The KKK Kills Three Civil Rights Activists," History, accessed March 2, 2023, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-kkk-kills-three-civil-rights-activists>.

¹¹⁶ "Mississippi Burning," FBI, Accessed 5 February 2023, <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/mississippi-burning>.

¹¹⁷ Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, XI.

¹¹⁸ FBI, "Mississippi Burning."

¹¹⁹ Richard Spence, "The Three Generations of Ku Klux Klan," 3 December 2020, accessed 4 April 2023, <https://www.wondriumdaily.com/the-three-generations-of-ku-klux-klan/>.

of two black teens in 1964, the bombing of Vernon Dahmer's house in 1966, and threats and violence towards FBI agents.¹²⁰ Some of the Klan members were captured and incarcerated thanks to the increasing pressure from the general public on the federal government.¹²¹

3.3 The End of the Summer

The summer project did not commence on a positive note with the deaths of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner. However, volunteers still flooded into Mississippi and fulfilled their functions. During the project, thirty-five churches were burned, more than eighty activists were attacked, more than a thousand workers were arrested, and this on top of the three civil rights workers who were killed. All of this happened in the span of four months. Many people involved in the project lost their jobs, e.g., the mother of Hezekiah Watkins, who was fired after allowing her son to take part in a protest. Fannie Lou Hamer from Ruleville registered to vote, and it cost her a job. The economic impact of the project brought fear to such people, especially those with white employers.¹²²

The project failed to reach its immediate objectives regarding the voter registration, but it brought much more to Mississippians. Only 1,200 out of 17,000 potential black voters registered. What was successful was providing proper education to 3,000 students in 41 Freedom schools. The project changed the minds of blacks in the South. They became more knowledgeable, wrote articles, studied foreign languages, etc.¹²³ The volunteers were points of light for blacks—they treated them equally and talked to them respectfully—and after years of neglect and humiliation, black Mississippians felt like human beings.¹²⁴ They still feared discrimination, but thanks to the encouragement of the student volunteers, they felt hope that one day they would no longer have to anticipate violence in the streets and inequality during everyday activities.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ "KKK Series," FBI, accessed February 5, 2023, <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/kkk-series>.

¹²¹ Rick Seltzer and Grace M. Lopes, "The Ku Klux Klan," *Journal of Black Studies* 17, no. 1 (1986): 92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002193478601700107>.

¹²² Hale, "The Student as a Force for Social Change," 330.

¹²³ Dierenfield, *The Civil Rights Movement*, 146.

¹²⁴ Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 27.

¹²⁵ History.com Editors, "Freedom Summer."

4 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FREEDOM SUMMER FOR THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

In the 1950s, in the attempts to subvert Jim Crow, many important milestones were reached along with efforts of blacks to fight against oppression- the Brown v. Board of Education, the bus boycotts, and the Civil Rights Act of 1957. Institutional racism was ingrained in American society, and much more needed to be done to put an end to discrimination and racial prejudice.¹²⁶

The Freedom Summer laid the groundwork for important landmarks passed in 1960s such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. Additionally, the project stimulated political participation, which encouraged the foundation of an alternative “anti-Jim Crow” political party called the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.¹²⁷

4.1 The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) was formed by civil rights activists that wanted to challenge the all-white Democratic party delegation at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey in 1964. The exclusion of blacks from the political processes in Mississippi and barriers to voter registration spurred activists to create a political party inclusive of all people regardless of race.¹²⁸

Joseph Rauh Jr., the party’s lawyer and an advocate of the civil rights movement, lobbied for the passage of the Civil Rights Act and nurtured the development of the movement- financially and politically. Robert Moses introduced him to the objectives of the MFDP in March 1964, and Rauh was impressed.¹²⁹ Sixty-eight people, with Fannie Lou Hamer and Aaron Henry in front, attempted to gain their seats as freedom democrats. Their main goal was not only to secure the seats, but also to establish a solid and legitimate position for the first party representing black rights. Rauh knew President Johnson would not support them because the fight for the MFDP’s seats could threaten his position in upcoming elections.¹³⁰ To avoid conflict, the president offered a proposition that two seats at large would be given to the MFDP and segregation would be prohibited at future conventions.

¹²⁶ Hasday, *The Civil Rights Act of 1964*, 45.

¹²⁷ Susan Goldman Rubin, *Freedom Summer: The 1964 Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Holiday House, 2016), 48-9.

¹²⁸ Alan Draper, “Class and Politics in the Mississippi Movement: An Analysis of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Delegation,” *Journal of Southern History* 82, no. 2 (2016): 274-76, <https://doi.org/10.1353/soh.2016.0100>.

¹²⁹ Cagin and Dray, *We Are Not Afraid*, 403.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 404-5.

Arron Henry wanted to accept, but Fannie Lou Hamer spoke against it. 70 % of the MFDP delegates voted against the offer.¹³¹ The MFDP's effort ended unsuccessfully, and the delegates were not seated at Atlantic City. However, their efforts to challenge the Democratic Party's status quo brought attention to racial discrimination in politics and secured the seats for the MFDP at the 1968 convention.¹³²

4.2 The Civil Rights Act of 1964

King understood after multiple sit-in protests and bus boycotts that in order to approach equality, segregation needed to be abolished first.¹³³ In June 1963, President Kennedy spoke to Americans and tackled the problem many civil rights activists passionately pointed out before- there was a necessity to ensure that everyone is protected equally under the law, regardless of race.¹³⁴ He introduced an act as a reaction to the protest in Birmingham and racial turmoil in the South. After Kennedy's assassination just five months later in Dallas, the passage of the bill was suspended by Southern Democrats.¹³⁵

President Lyndon Johnson found out about the summer project in Mississippi in April 1964. He knew about their plan to register new voters, and he was apprehensive about the potential eruption of violence. He told Richard Russell, a senator from Georgia, that "they're gonna try to get 'em all registered in Mississippi. And there's gonna be a bunch of killings."¹³⁶ Even so, Johnson failed to react to SNCC's and COFO's repeated requests to ensure protection. Instead, Johnson's mind was preoccupied with the upcoming signing ceremony of the Civil Rights Act. Yet, questions about Mississippi started to multiply. Without any federal protection the first day of the project, Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner vanished.¹³⁷ The disappearance of three civil rights workers received international attention. The Klan did not expect such a reaction and, as Bruce Watson wrote, "someone had miscalculated."¹³⁸ Until then, no one really cared about crime in Mississippi. The deaths after Emmett Till- Herbert Lee and Louis Allen- were barely published. The murder of Kitty Genovese had many eyewitnesses, who did not bother to alert the police. What raised national concern was when two white men were killed- Schwerner and Goodman. President

¹³¹ Draper, "Class and Politics in the Mississippi Movement," 285-86.

¹³² Dierenfield, *The Civil Rights Movement*, 148.

¹³³ Hasday, *The Civil Rights Act of 1964*, 49.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³⁶ Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 147.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹³⁸ Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 152.

Johnson became concerned about the future of America, which was, in his opinion, “basically a law abiding nation.”¹³⁹ The conviction of Deputy Price along with six other people, for the murder of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman, marked the first time that whites had been imprisoned for violating civil rights in Mississippi since the Reconstruction. The times were changing as justice slowly approached the state, but the road towards equality was still rocky.¹⁴⁰

President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act on 2 July 1964. The act’s passage promised the end of segregation in public facilities, and the prohibition of discrimination based on race, religion, or sex.¹⁴¹ The attorney general was allowed to bring legal charges against schools that segregated students, thus finally fulfilling the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision from 1954. The act prohibited federal funds from going to states or programs that practiced discrimination, thus depriving the South financially.¹⁴² A thirteen-year-old, Eugene Young, was served in a barber shop on 3 July 1964. As a black teen, he was denied service in the exact same shop only one day prior. His story quickly travelled around the country. For the first time, blacks could freely enter public places, be served as normal customers, and visit places where they could only work before. Their oppression was ingrained in the social hierarchy, but the Civil Rights Act changed the lives of many.¹⁴³

The reactions towards the act were sundry. Some people resisted it by filing a lawsuit against it and labelling it as unconstitutional.¹⁴⁴ One act could change the law but could not change the relationship between blacks and whites in the South. The most problematic states that opposed desegregation were Mississippi and Alabama. A few weeks after the passage of the act, the bodies of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman were found.¹⁴⁵

4.3 The Voting Rights Act of 1965

After the march on Washington, SNCC’s Bob Moses felt that his mission was to dramatically reform the voter registration in the South. The civil rights organisations, SNCC and CORE started to see an end to the Jim Crow era. Moses attempted to foster black political power through the voter registration process, which could potentially reduce poverty and racism.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 426.

¹⁴¹ Hasday, *The Civil Rights Act of 1964*, 103.

¹⁴² Clay Risen, *The Bill of the Century: The Epic Battle for the Civil Rights Act* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 6.

¹⁴³ Risen, *The Bill of the Century*, 8-10.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴⁵ Hasday, *The Civil Rights Act of 1964*, 103-04.

Mississippi served as a deterrent case with the highest number of illiterate people, extreme segregation, and discrimination. “Only one out of twenty blacks could register to vote,” and that was the reason Moses chose Mississippi.¹⁴⁶ His ultimate goal was to pressure the government to ensure voting rights for the black community.¹⁴⁷ The project succeeded in registering only 1,600 black voters because they feared the consequences. They knew they could be easily attacked, killed, or fired from their job- the risk was just too high.¹⁴⁸

After the passage of the civil rights act, President Johnson required a new voting rights act. He demanded “the toughest voting rights act that you can devise.”¹⁴⁹ There were more events that urged the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, such as the voter registration attempts during the Freedom Summer, and the deaths of civil rights workers in Mississippi. The Congress wanted to honour their memory and “to insure they did not die in vain.”¹⁵⁰ Another significant event that boosted the act’s approval was the march on Selma, Alabama in 1965. The SNCC’s and King’s demonstration for the ballot ended in violent soldier intervention. The TV captured the brutality towards the innocent marchers, and viewers were enlightened about the discrimination in the Deep South that prevented blacks from voting. The unreasonable police attack fuelled the flame, and Americans once again blamed Johnson for the lack of federal intervention.¹⁵¹

On 3 August 1965, The Voting Rights Act was signed into law. The act promised the suspension of literacy tests, prohibited changes in voting law without federal approval, and ensured federal supervision during elections. The black and white ballots were finally merged- every qualified person could be registered to vote without any discriminatory practices. The participation of black Mississippians rose from 7 % in 1964 to 59 % in 1968. In Alabama, the number of voters increased from 22 % in 1964 to 57 % four years later. In Selma, black voting registration skyrocketed within two months from 10 % up to 60 %.¹⁵²

4.4 The Black Power Movement

By 1965, the civil rights movement had been in full swing for over a decade. The peaceful protests and nonviolent attempts against institutional racism were met with the discontent of many blacks. The Black Power movement was formed as a response to the Democratic

¹⁴⁶ Sitkoff and Franklin, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 201.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 215.

¹⁴⁹ Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 426.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 426.

¹⁵¹ Sitkoff and Franklin, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 227.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 234-35.

convention in 1964 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which failed to fully address voting and housing discrimination and many other social and economic inequalities.¹⁵³ To some extent, the freedom project catalysed the Black Power movement because it highlighted the deep-seated racism in the South. The volunteers and black Mississippians faced extreme violence from the Klan, white supremacists, and law enforcement officials during the summer. The murder of the civil rights workers and the lack of effort to convict the murderers provoked the idea that non-violence was no longer an option. The civil rights movement brought desegregation and voting rights, but many believed a more radical approach was needed to reach full equality.¹⁵⁴

The Black Power movement promoted black pride, black art, and black history.¹⁵⁵ Before his assassination in 1965, Malcolm X inspired the movement to strive for self-reliance instead of integration. The ultimate goal was to gain control over their civil rights and create new organisations that would serve the interests of blacks.¹⁵⁶ There was a controversy between the civil rights organisations over violent vs. nonviolent tactics. The SNCC and CORE ultimately undertook the radical approach- their focus became militant separatism and self-defence.¹⁵⁷ Cleve Sellers claimed that after the Atlantic City convention there was no longer a fight for civil rights, but for liberation.

Stokey Carmichael, SNCC's chairman, demanded the exclusion of whites from the organisation- even those that were committed civil rights activists. The radical approach was in disagreement with Martin Luther King Jr.'s main principles of nonviolence, and the civil rights movement was split into two branches- radical or peaceful. The Freedom Summer was one of the last nonconfrontational efforts of SNCC, which afterward started a new era of more militant civil rights.¹⁵⁸

4.5 Public Perception

The Freedom Summer created an impact that lasted longer than the project itself. It fostered pride within the black community. The volunteers exemplified how well blacks and whites

¹⁵³ Risen, *The Bill of the Century*, 12.

¹⁵⁴ Hasan Kwame Jeffries, "SNCC, Black Power, and Independent Political Party Organizing in Alabama, 1964-1966," *Journal of African American History* 91, no. 2 (2006): 172-75, <https://doi.org/10.1086/jaahv91n2p171>.

¹⁵⁵ "Black Power," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed 13 March 2023, <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/black-power>.

¹⁵⁶ "The Foundations of Black Power," National Museum of African American History and Culture, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/foundations-black-power>.

¹⁵⁷ Jeffries, "SNCC, Black Power, and Independent Political Party," 186.

¹⁵⁸ Dierenfeld, *The Civil Rights Movement*, 111.

could cooperate, treating each other with decency and love. The bond between them and the volunteers was strong as they shared accommodation, religion, and a common goal. It was a transforming experience for both blacks and whites.¹⁵⁹ The education provided during the project encouraged blacks to speak about their needs, and to know their civil rights. Black pride came along with knowledge and fostered political power.¹⁶⁰

Most of the volunteers, despite the hardship and violence, stayed in the sphere of civil rights activism- they fought for the underprivileged as lawyers, established non-profit organisations, and lectured at universities. Families became involved in the civil rights movement, as the freedom schools encouraged activism.¹⁶¹ Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks are often mentioned as prominent figures of the civil rights movement, but without the constant effort of ordinary civil rights workers, courageous underprivileged blacks and motivated individuals such as Robert Moses, there might not be desegregation and enfranchisement in Mississippi.¹⁶² Fannie Lou Hamer said that the Freedom Summer was “one of the greatest things ever happened in Mississippi.”¹⁶³ She claims that the volunteers encouraged blacks to make a change for themselves. According to Stacy White, the Freedom Summer created new opportunities for blacks, which is illustrated by the fact that the number of black elected officials in the United States is the highest it has ever been. She also argues that without the project, Barack Obama would not have been elected president.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 108

¹⁶⁰ Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 161.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 439.

¹⁶² Ibid., 195.

¹⁶³ Rubin, *Freedom Summer*, 98.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 98.

CONCLUSION

Although the Freedom Summer of 1964 is often overlooked, its contribution to the civil rights movement is undeniable. However, some historians see the project as controversial due to the fact its initial idea- voter registration- failed. The institutional racism and racial injustice that plagued the United States had been tolerated for centuries, but with the country's prosperous economic status in 1963, it was apparent that the Jim Crow system would eventually be abolished. While some argue that the disenfranchisement of blacks would have been resolved on its own without the "unnecessary" violence and brutality the project brought into Mississippi, it still cannot be disputed that the Freedom Summer shed light on the extreme bigotry in the Deep South and the urgent need for change.

Robert Moses understood that, to emphasise the racism and disenfranchisement experienced by black Americans, he would need to go to extremes. In many ways, Mississippi served as a symbol mirroring the current situation in the United States, with blacks comprising 42% of the state's population but being devalued.¹⁶⁵ The deaths of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman were a stark reminder and a powerful symbol. The fact that their case received national attention proves how embedded racism in American society was. No other case received such recognition, but when two whites were killed, panic set in.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was already in progress when the civil rights workers vanished. As a result, it is debatable whether it affected the acceleration of the process. Nonetheless, the Freedom Summer demonstrated to the rest of the nation how blacks and whites could live integrated. The prediction of President Johnson proved right, and segregation still persisted in some places. "I can't make people integrate but we can make them feel guilty if they don't."¹⁶⁶ Mississippi merged underprivileged blacks with privileged whites, and although it is impossible to define an exact date when the bigotry started to recede, the change was visible with each interaction. A black man was no longer called "a boy," Charles Evers was elected as the first black mayor of Fayette, a black footballer was given "a top sports honor" at a university, and Unita Blackwell became the first black female elected mayor.¹⁶⁷ The Freedom Summer restructured Mississippi's racial hierarchy, and by extension the nation's, but it did not eradicate discrimination entirely.

¹⁶⁵ Sitkoff and Franklin, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 202.

¹⁶⁶ Watson, *Freedom Summer*, 428.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 427-8.

What can be stated is that the freedom project played a crucial role in the enactment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Congressmen advocated for the act in honour of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman's legacy. The initial voter registration drive was largely unsuccessful, but the movement's impact persisted and convinced President Johnson that blacks wanted to participate in the political process. Barriers to voter registration were lifted for everyone, regardless of colour. This was a major achievement for the civil rights movement, as the number of voters in Mississippi rose tenfold in 1966.¹⁶⁸

The Freedom Summer was one of the final significant interracial civil rights initiatives of the civil rights movement. The movement reached a turning point created by conflict between the objectives of Martin Luther King Jr., the NAACP, and the more radical wing inspired by Malcolm X, such as COFO and its Black Power movement. Despite the fact that impactful landmarks were passed in the 1960s such as The Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act, racism still persisted in the form of economic disparities, voter suppression, and social inequality. The civil rights movement was founded on the idea of collective and interracial effort, but it fragmented after the summer project as organizations split into nonviolent and militant approaches. In this regard, the Freedom Summer might be viewed in hindsight as the peak of the movement, as blacks 1961s were for the last time united in their peaceful approach to securing positive change.

¹⁶⁸ Rubin, *Freedom Summer*, 106.

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