Everyday Heroes : The Civil Rights Movement in Holmes County, Mississippi

Anna Delaney

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/ehd_theses

To learn more about our programs visit: http://www.brockport.edu/ehd/

Repository Citation
http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/ehd_theses/738

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Education and Human Development at Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education and Human Development Master’s Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.
Everyday Heroes: The Civil Rights Movement in Holmes County, Mississippi

by

Anna Delaney

2012

A thesis submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of the State University of New York College at Brockport in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education
Everyday Heroes: The Civil Rights Movement in Holmes County, Mississippi

by

Anna Delaney

Approved by:
### TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title Page</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signature Page</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historiography</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Research</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Charles Payne, a well known civil rights historian once wrote, “Our understanding of social change, our conceptions of leadership, our understanding of the possibilities of interracial cooperation are all affected by how we remember the movement.”¹ These understandings and conceptions that cause us to “remember”, are most oftentimes heavily shaped by the interpretative literature we read. But which interpretation sends the “correct” message? And who is actually able to make this call? I found myself asking these questions upon my examination of the recent work on the civil rights movement with a focus on Holmes County, Mississippi. Every author, historian or not, presents their information with a varying approach and has chosen to highlight certain events or people of the movement over another. On one end of the spectrum I found some authors tended to side more with the mindset of the popular media. They dedicate more pages to the larger, more publicized events and popular movement figures like Martin Luther King Jr. While on the other end, there were the authors who believed it more important to give attention to the behind the scenes grassroots organizing of everyday local African Americans whose stories tend to get lost in the pages of our students’ textbooks. Depending on what I was reading, the civil rights movement could be quite simple, outlined in a few pages by a few major events and people, or it could be complex, involving a number a pieces that can barely be explained in five-hundred pages. My approach for this unit is going to be more this second approach. I want to allow my students the opportunity to see the bare bones of the movement. I want them to get a feel for the dynamics and challenges facing everyday African Americans in order for them to see how the

movement changed it.

I was pleased to come across a number of sources which did not simply give me the generic, freeze frame, publicized major events of the civil rights movement. These sources took the faces, names and work of the everyday local African Americans that generally tend to get swept under the rug and told their story. A story I personally believe to be just as important to one’s understanding of the movement as any event captured on video by the media. They ranged from all encompassing accounts of movement activity to simple local studies of small, relatively unknown counties. They tell the stories of developing local leadership, and believe success comes not in the form of court cases, or laws, but in a change of mindset. These sources allow us a window to examine the everyday life for African Americans at this time. Websites like the Civil Rights Documentation Project, and authors like Charles Payne, John Dittmer, Todd Moye, and Chana Kai Lee, and all utilize this bottom-up approach when looking at the movement.

The University of Southern Mississippi has put together an excellent project on civil rights movement. The website includes civil rights oral history transcripts of interviews with everyday African Americans who participated in the movement. It includes interviews from sharecroppers, Freedom Summer participants, those whose children integrated schools, and the list goes on. The majority of those interviewed are basically unknown to us today. This website allows their story to be told and allows us to recognize how important everyday African Americans were in the progress of the movement.

One of the first authors I was lucky to come across was Charles Payne. His
article “The View from the Trenches”, describes how he believes movement history should be approached. Payne’s piece focuses more on what the American public was not seeing: the everyday, door to door, organization that was going on within the African American communities. Payne felt that, “Placing so much emphasis on national leadership and national institutions minimizes the importance of local struggle and makes it difficult to appreciate the role “ordinary” people played…”.2 Payne brings up names that most Americans would have never heard of regarding the progress of the movement. Names like Septima Clark and her work with the Highlander Folk School, Ella Baker and her behind the scenes activism that helped create and shape SNCC, Bob Moses and his voter registration work in McComb, and Robert Williams and self-defense are Payne’s “stars” of the movement. He centers the movement to be about grassroots organizing and the theme of helping people help themselves. Payne highlights the importance of developing local leaders rather than simply discussing the popularity of one. Payne’s bottom-up piece captures the complexities and the small, but hugely important issues of the Movement. This approach is evident in another one of his works, I’ve got the Light of Freedom, which is based on movement activity in Mississippi. From what I have gathered, Payne tends to take a more “bottom-up” approach when looking at the civil rights movement, dedicating most of his work to the story of voter registration. In regards to the movement in Mississippi, Payne speaks to the lack of public knowledge concerning grassroots efforts, “…organizing represented just one culture…It never had much visibility to those outside the movement. Outsiders saw the sit-ins, the

Freedom Rides, Freedom Summer, but not deeper traditions that lay underneath them.”\(^3\) Payne believes it essential to give a voice to those who canvassed door to door were a driving component behind the progression of the movement, and again this is the type of history I would like to see integrated into the classroom.

John Dittmer sets his book up in the same manner as Payne by giving a historical context for action in Mississippi. He begins with post WWII, “The War had brought change to Mississippi, yet it remained to be seen whether, in the critical area of race relations, the state would move forward with the times or continue to cling to the vestiges of the Jim Crow society…”\(^4\) By setting up a background of inequality, Dittmer can give us a sense of why the organizing tradition was so powerful to those who, years before, were powerless. He believes that a lot of this power was given through the organizing tradition, and therefore dedicates a large section of his book towards the importance of the organizing tradition on the African American communities in Mississippi. He gives a specific focus to Sam Block’s organizing in Greenwood. He quoted Block saying that Greenwood’s organizing was built around, “…older people who were angry, who were looking for somebody who could give form and expression to ideas and thoughts they had in mind for years…”\(^5\). Through Dittmer including these types of quotes, we get to see the organizing tradition as more about helping the people achieve, through helping them help themselves. Dittmer’s book will help students to recognize the importance of

\(^3\) Payne, 364.

\(^4\) John Dittmer, Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi, (Urbana the University of Southern Illinois Press, 1994), 18.

\(^5\) Sam Block, in, Dittmer 129.
community for African Americans in the Movement.

I decided to take a look at what a local study would have to offer me in terms of teaching about the movement. J. Todd Moye’s local study of Sunflower County, Mississippi gave me a deeper, more intimate look at an African American community. In Moye’s introduction he makes it clear that, “For many African Americans in Sunflower County, the journey of their civil rights work was much more important than any destination they may have reached.” He sets the stage, by describing the conditions for African Americans and therefore makes it clear why the organizing process would later become so important. Moye gives us insight by giving personal examples of Sunflower County residents returning from war, just completely disenfranchised by white resistance, “George Jordan, a Ruleville sharecropper, was among the most radical of Sunflower County’s returning black veterans, and he did not attempt to vote until 1953.” Moye gives detail and emphasis to the process behind the organizing in Ruleville by highlighting the actions of SNCC member Charles McLaurin. Moye describes McLaurin’s organizing tactics and relationship with “Mrs. Anderson”, who owned a small grocery store, “She taught McLaurin local history and told him about local people: who liked whom and who didn’t, who would be likely to listen to him...McLaurin sat on the front porch for hours at a time, learning the lay of the land.” By spending time on discussing these relationships, it is evident that Moye sees the importance not in large organizing

---

7 Moye, 43.
8 Moye, 103.
events, but the basics behind working to organize the local people through relationships and trust building.

I chose Chana Kai Lee’s article on Fannie Lou Hamer, because I believe this would be a beneficial person to highlight in teaching the movement. Not only was she a black woman, she came to represent the sharecropper without a voice. Lee’s article based on Fannie Lou Hamer allows one to comprehend the inclusive nature of the movement and details the organizing process. Everyone, regardless of social status, socioeconomic status, or education could find a place within the movement. Fannie Lou Hamer was not well educated or wealthy, but she became a leader in Mississippi’s organizing for civil rights, “Hamer’s leadership during the civil rights era is best understood as an evolving process. As such, her leadership was an effective, if sometimes conflicting, blend of personal qualities, boundless vision, and thoughtful strategizing”9. By focusing her article on Hamer, Lee gives a face to the many organizers, like Hamer, who found their place in the Mississippi movement. Also, Lee says that according to Hamer, “…a meaningful social movement was one that addressed the everyday needs of the people”10, which was the basis for most grassroots organizing that took place during that time. Again, a name that would benefit students in their path to understanding the true value of the movement.

These grass-roots historical accounts and oral histories are not the only sources out there however. There are plenty of authors who tend to take the opposite


10 Lee, 141.
approach to looking at the movement. Authors like Steven Lawson, Taylor Branch, and Adam Fairclough tend to write from the perspective which highlights the major, publicized milestones and figures of the movement. There is generally less discussion of the local organizing, and less attention given to the everyday African Americans. Martin Luther King, the role of the federal government, and controversial events are seen as the building blocks that tell the story of the civil rights movement. This top-down approach tends to be what textbooks tend to utilize when “teaching” this history, which in my opinion, leaves out a lot.

When looking at the civil rights movement, Steven Lawson places great emphasis on the role of the federal government. He felt that, “Without their crucial support, the struggle against white supremacy in the South still would have taken place but would have lacked the power and authority to defeat state governments intent on keeping Blacks in subservient positions”. Lawson feels that the government played a dominant role in shaping the movement both positively and negatively. He sees the movement through how different presidents handled the demands of African Americans, and how the Supreme Court ruled on cases. Lawson also plays up the role of national organizations and their importance in the progress of the movement, “Along with national officials, the fate of the civil rights movement depended on the presence of national organizations” 11. He goes on to mention groups like the NAACP and SCLC, and of course SCLC’s leader, Martin Luther King. These types of groups were known for their legal battles and their abilities to mobilize large groups of African Americans for demonstrations and publicity.

Lawson initially does not really even mention SNCC and all the behind the scenes work it was doing with local African Americans. He sees the mobilizing tradition and overlooks the organizing tradition. Lawson basically breaks the history of the Civil Rights Movement down into what the American public was witnessing: major court cases, major demonstrations, and well known faces.

Taylor Branch tends to follow this pattern as well in his book *Parting the Waters*. Taylor Branch’s discussion of the organizing process is summed up in his chapter titled, “Moses in McComb, King in Kansas”. He really gives no set up what conditions were like for everyday African Americans, he just jumps into action in Mississippi. First, the chapter is split; Moses in Mississippi does not even receive its own chapter, which gives a sense about how much importance Branch put on the organizing tradition. Branch describes, “Moses knocked on doors through blistering August days, telling all who would listen that he was C.C. Bryant’s voter registration man”¹². That is about all dedicated to the actual work and process behind organizing in McComb that Branch gives. He mentions interest of youth in SNCC’s activities, by introducing Hollis Watkins. However, Watkins is introduced through an anecdote asking if Moses was Martin Luther King. Whether intentional or not, Branch managed to slip King into organizing in McComb. He does give insight as to the difficulties African Americans had when it came to involving themselves with Moses as well as the dangers of registering to vote. However, to me, Branch made the local African Americans seem almost helpless and lost without Moses, “A very old Negro man waited helplessly for one of the two women volunteers to reply, but both of them

also stood speechless with fear. Moses finally spoke from behind”\textsuperscript{13} I just felt that this chapter really lost the complexities behind what the organizer was really about, and what civil rights work came to mean to everyday African Americans.

Adam Fairclough seemed to have the most blatant top-down perspective of all in his book \textit{To Redeem the Soul of America}. Again, he takes a more top-down approach when looking at the civil rights movement leading him to place his focus on the larger, public events that mobilized a great number of African Americans. He thoroughly examines Martin Luther King’s and King’s organization, SCLC’s, tactics and then gives examples of how and why they were effective. He believes that SCLC’s tactic of nonviolent direct action, in the right setting, could get the reaction needed to prod the federal government into action, making SCLC an overall effective group. For the most part, Fairclough is accurate and knowledgeable about King and SCLC. However, Fairclough’s findings are lacking in complexity. If his book was to be someone’s only source on the civil rights movement, the reader would gain a vast knowledge about the inner workings of SCLC and its relationship to Dr. King. Unfortunately, the movement would look like a series of big events starring King, SCLC, and the federal government, when really there is so much more involved. It would seem as though it were these main players and these main events alone generated the successes that the movement had. There is no attention given to the organizing before SCLC arrives on scene, nor the effects on the momentum of the movement after it leaves. The reader gains no perspective of how the movement affected the local African Americans of the places where SCLC staged these big

\textsuperscript{13} Branch, \textit{Parting the Waters}, 494.
The civil rights movement comes in many different shapes and forms. Historians, authors, participants, all give different takes on a single event, and that makes it difficult to decide who is correct. However, different perspectives are necessary when studying something like the civil rights movement. For, reading just one book and assuming it has all the necessary pieces to understanding the movement can leave out an entire history of people and events. Historiography allows for a reader to dig deep, looking at what an author focuses her time on and what she does not, and get an understanding of what that person believes to be significant. By examining the existing work done on the civil rights movement, I am strengthening my unit. I can pick and choose which perspective I believe fits what I want my students to come away understanding about civil rights and its relationship to their lives today.
Works Cited
Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters; America In the King Years 1954-1963*. New York:
“The Civil Rights Documentation Project”. University of Southern Mississippi.
http://www.usm.edu/crdp/.
Dittmer, John. *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi.*
Fairclough, Adam. *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership*
Moye, Todd J. *Let the People Decide; Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements*
A white activist in Holmes County, Susan Lorenzi Sojouner, had this to say about the Movement developed by its local African Americans: “Usually they did not accomplish what they supposedly were trying, like registering to vote. But they were successful in performing an alienating act. Individually they were strengthened and bound together as a group.”

During the Civil Rights Movement, Holmes County, Mississippi went through a transformation. Like in much of the Magnolia State at the time, African Americans in Holmes were victims of drastic inequality. Segregation was still intact, and discrimination was a way of life. While blacks held the majority in the numbers game, whites held the power and in no way were ready to concede. However, I have found that upon deeper investigation, Holmes County is quite unlike any local movement I have come across thus far. For, African Americans in Holmes do not fit neatly into the typical history of a local movement in Mississippi. Various aspects separate it from what happened in other counties drawn to the Civil Rights Movement, making it unique. It began with a sense of independence and determination which became contagious. African Americans in Holmes experienced a dramatic rise in self-efficacy, and in my opinion, that is a success story in itself. With the help of SNCC, they were able to develop a grassroots movement in which local people eventually took the reins. They established their own institutions from which they were able to organize and find a voice to fight on behalf of the success of their race. From what I have come across, it has become clear that African Americans in Holmes gained a sense of confidence, and belief that they had the ability to break

---

the caste-system they had been subjected to for centuries. This, though intangible, is
the first step in the direction of a new way of thinking. My research will examine
Holmes County from a bottom-up perspective, emphasizing the important role that
local organizing played in helping close the gap of equality created by white
dominance. It will highlight aspects of this county's history, discuss the role played
by outside assistance, as well as attempt to provide a sense of the progress made.
Holmes County succeeded in getting its people organized and the transformation of
mentality made by its citizens is the real success story.
Understanding the History of Holmes County

An activist in Holmes County, Hartman Turnbow, gave Susan Sojourner this advice for writing her piece on her work in during the Movement, “You need to tell it how it was before the Movement what led up to it, how life was for a Negro in Mississippi back before the Movement come…and how they was lynching and beating on Negroes and just what life was like down here. And then how it built up to the Movement that come.”

The history prior to the arrival of official Movement action tends to something that many scholars tend to jump over in their analysis. However, I believe that in order to paint a fully accurate depiction of a local Movement, one must understand the community before the Movement. What did the county look like before the arrival of the “official” Movement? What were the dynamics between white and black? And what sort of resistance activity was already taking place amongst the local people? These questions can only be answered by examining the lives of everyday local African Americans. I believe Charles Payne says it correctly when he wrote, “Placing so much emphasis on national leadership and national institutions minimizes the importance of local struggle and makes it difficult to appreciate the role “ordinary” people played…”

The historiography of Holmes should thus be treated no differently.

---


Holmes County is part of the Mississippi Delta, one of the most dangerous areas where Civil Rights Movement emerged. From the outside, it looks very much like what one would discover upon examining any county in the Delta during this time period. It could almost be said that Holmes looked as though it remained frozen in time since the days of reconstruction. It is located just south of Greenwood, and “No town is larger than about 2,500 inhabitants and about 80% of the people live outside of towns of 200 or more”. The majority of its inhabitants were black, and at the time of the Movement, the numbers show that around “…19 thousand of the 27 thousand people (or 72 percent) were black”. Pushing on into the 1960’s, its primary crop continued to be cotton, with African Americans representing most of the underpaid labor force. They were paid less than unfairly, generally, “…hand pickers getting $2 per 100 pounds and choppers making $2 a day.”17 The Delta was a scary place for African Americans at that time, and Holmes County was no exception.

As it turned out, Emancipation was not all it was cracked up to be. For, the emancipated South was a harsh place for African Americans. And it was clear that blacks in counties like Holmes were left to battle the demons of racism and structural inequalities on their own. Now allowed to leave the life of slavery, African Americans searched for a sense of independence and freedom; they came up empty handed. Nothing was there to aid them nor help them establish footing in their new lives. A former slave from Holmes County, Elvira Boles, recalls, “Dey turn us loose in the world. Not a penny. Oh, dey was awful times. We just worked about from

17 Sojourner, 2.
place to place after freedom."\(^{18}\) African Americans were freed into a society which condemned them. They were now expected to live peacefully amongst their former enslavers. Most had been denied any sort of formal education, leaving them with little but skills to farm. They were thus thrown back into working on the plantations they had just been freed from for less than livable wages. African Americans in Holmes soon came to discover that their faith in the efforts of the federal government were fruitless. The government’s initial promise of “forty-acres and a mule” proved to be empty. Isaac Crawford, another African American born slave in Holmes recalls, “I didn’t know about freedom and I didn’t care about it. They didn’t give no land nor no mules away as I ever know’d of.”\(^{19}\) The concept of Emancipation for blacks in Holmes turned out to hold practically zero of the freedoms entitled to white Americans. They were American citizens only by law; the truth of the matter being that whites determined whether or not they received any of their rights. Little did they were aware that blacks were about to embark on a one-hundred year journey towards achieving what Emancipation had promised.

The history of a brief period during Reconstruction in Holmes County is unlike any of the other Delta counties I have come across. It brought a short period of interracial democracy where African Americans appeared as relatively major players in politics. For, “although Reconstruction failed to alter fundamentally the plantation


economy, it was a rousing period of black political and social mobilization”. Blacks in Holmes were elected to the positions of sheriff, state senator and representative, county supervisor, tax assessor, circuit clerk, and coroner. However, “The majority of the posts were filled by white Republican allies, mostly northern ‘carpetbaggers.’” As one could possibly guess, the southern white community was far from pleased. They loathed the idea of northerners holding positions of power that once belonged to them, and refused to accept the idea that African Americans belonged any place but the cotton fields. Enter white resistance. The backlash against these interracial politics was quick and openly violent. Groups like the KKK and The Red Shirts actively worked to cover this bright spot being experienced by African Americans. The Red Shirts, “Organized by the Democratic Party…likewise used violence and intimidation to stem the tide of black political and social power…” White backlash persisted and proved to be too much and too dangerous for this type of political freedom to continue in Holmes. Ultimately, white resistance won out and conservative white rule was restored. The fact that this type of interracial democracy happened at all I believe to be significant. It shows that if given the chance, blacks were interested in holding positions of power and being involved in politics. It also foreshadows the unique activism that would later emerge during the Civil Rights Movement.

From this period in Reconstruction on, African Americans in Holmes found saw their situation go from bad to worse. Despite their majority in numbers, they

20 MacLeod, 5.

found themselves completely excluded from most political and social institutions by
the white minority. They were trapped. One of the most valued rights of an
American citizen was the right to vote. Blacks in Holmes were actively denied this
privilege of citizenship. For, “Between 1890 and 1964, only twenty-six African
Americans were allowed to register to vote in Holmes County.”22 They were
restricted from the one avenue to changing their current situation. Blacks were
unable to elect people to represent them in office, meaning they would remain under
the “representation” of an oppressor. Why did they not register? one might ask.
Violence was always waiting. White were so adamant about keeping blacks from the
polls that, “In one Holmes County community, Democrats went so far as to mount a
cannon at the polling place.”23 Blacks who valued their lives tended to steer clear of
the threats of the registrar. In addition, other tactics were imposed in order to keep
blacks “in their place”. In the 1890 State Constitution, literacy tests, poll-taxes, and
residency requirements were instituted as additional safeguards to ensure that only the
“right” types of people were casting the “right” types of votes. Whites were not
addressing blacks directly in the language of this constitution; it was simply part of
the structural inequalities already in tact. Blacks received little to no formal
education and could thus not pass a literacy test. Their incomes were severely limited
by their white employers they therefore could not pay a poll tax. Whites could spin
these inabilities, claiming they were technically doing nothing against the law, and

22 MacLeod, pg. 7.

23 “History of Holmes County: Reconstruction”, Holmes County WPA Files, in, Minds Stayed on
Freedom, 7.
African Americans could register if they had really wanted. Blacks were stuck in a near unbreakable cycle.

To make matters worse, African Americans in Holmes found themselves trapped in economic peril as well. In 1925, more than 90 percent of all farmers in Holmes were tenant and 94 percent of those on tenant farms were black. African Americans thus found themselves in an updated version of slavery. True, they were no longer technically slaves by the meaning of the word; however, they were paid barely enough to feed themselves and were completely dependent on these white landowners. Reflecting back on forty years as a sharecropper, Mrs. Catherine Jefferson commented, “it seemed like I just been a slave all the way down from then til now.” African Americans were unable to make any real financial gains and were living in terribly impoverished conditions. There was a stark contrast in the standard of living of the have (the whites) versus the have-nots (the blacks). While whites were enjoying the niceties of modern technology, most blacks barely had electricity. Ms. Austry Kirklin remembers, “Back then, didn’t’ have no running water, no inside bathroom, no refrigerator, no electric lights. The white people had all kinds of convenience. Black people made white people rich.” It was just another way for whites to ensure they remained the dominant race. If they could keep African Americans dependent upon them, with little to no buying power, blacks would have no room to move up in society. Mr. William B. Eskridge remembers, “What used to be the biggest landowner in this county had a big store in Carrolton, and my daddy


25 Ms. Austry Kirklin, Interview in Lekeshia Brooks and Teleshia Kirklin, Minds Stayed on Freedom, 38.
heard him telling a white feller: ‘One thing we do, we give that Negro fifty cents a day. You keep him down by keepin’ the money out of his hand.” Whites were doing all they could to ensure the structural inequalities they placed within their society were remained intact. For, they could claim that they were working within the legal system, for they were not holding any slaves. Yet, through the invisible structural inequalities, they were able to keep blacks from enjoying their rights as U.S. citizens.

The “legal” system in Holmes County might as well have not existed for blacks. It offered nothing but empty justice and false promises of protection. Again, blacks were distanced from the rights they should be given as American citizens. A jury of “peers” was not so; it was a jury consisting only of white, generally racist, men. When a black man was placed on trial for a crime against a white man, a verdict of “guilty” could be reached within minutes. And in turn, a white man accused of committing a crime against a black man might as well have not even showed up to court, as he almost always was guaranteed an acquittal. It was not uncommon for white citizens in Holmes to practice the “law” outside the courtroom. Lynching and torture were popular forms of punishment against blacks whom they decided was guilty. This was especially true in instances involving sexual relations between white women and black men. Whites were terrified of the mixing of the races; they believed black men to be constantly on the prowl threatening to disrupt the purity of white women. An example of this occurred in Holmes in 1936, “When Booker T. Burch’s love affair with a white woman was discovered...he was

26 Mr. William B. Eskridge, Interview in “We Still Got a Long Ways to Go” by Dwayne Bruchanan, John Darjean and Jay Mcleod, Minds Stayed on Freedom, 181.
mercilessly tortured, castrated, weighted with heavy chains, and drowned in a pond.”

Whites tortured Booker T. Burch probably for a number of reasons. They most likely hoped to make an example of him, letting other African Americans see what could happen if they threatened the purity of the white race in this way. Also, they most likely castrated him to remove the masculinity which they were fearful of. Lynching and torture were a visual way to prove a white man’s superiority. For, the laws of the South would not touch him for this, further proving that African Americans truly had no real protection. Here again, we can see how Emancipation left blacks to handle centuries of racism and structural inequalities on their own, a nearly impossible task.

The education of black students in Holmes was last on the list of concerns of white local leadership. By now, one can see a pattern emerging. Black children, like their parents, were allowed as much as whites believed they deserved; which consequently enough, was very little. For up until the 1950’s, “…only four black public schools in the county offered instruction through the ninth grade”. Black children were educated around the schedule of the planting season. Whites decided to use, “Split sessions that required school attendance during the hottest summer months…thus ensuring that white planters had an adequate supply of cheap labor to harvest their cotton in the fall.”

Everything that blacks in Holmes were “allowed” was structured around ensuring that whites had everything they needed first. Not only were these terribly uncomfortable and inconvenient split sessions in place, the


28 MacLeod, 8.
schools meant for blacks were completely inadequate. White school received the attention and upkeep, leaving blacks to work with what little was leftover. High school researchers found that, “according to the district records for Holmes County in the 1938-1939 school year, an average of $33.22 was spent on the instruction for each white student, compared to $2.63 spent on each black.” 29 White children were clearly favored, and educated to eventually become part of the white power structure created by their parents. Black students received only a partial education, if any, and were instantly cut off from using education as a way to break this cycle. They could not achieve the educational skills that would potentially help them to crack down on the caste system running Holmes County.

Because blacks in Holmes were stripped of their rights as American citizens, some carried with them a sense of inferiority and social ostracism. This would prove to be one of the more difficult aspects of white power the Movement would have to break down in order to reach the locals of Holmes. Many African Americans reached the point of actually believing that whites were the superior race. The fact that they were actively excluded from any position of prestige or significance simply based on color left blacks with little confidence in their race. White power was a dangerous force, and the fears it created left a lasting impression upon the mindset of African Americans. It was, “reinforced by the pervasive threat of violence against nonconformists...” and “… the social code in Holmes County required blacks to feign difference in all things. African Americans got down off the raised sidewalk when whites approached. They went to the back door of snack bars, train depots, and white

29 “Holmes County School Census and Statistics for Session 1938-1939”, Holmes County WPA Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, in, Minds Stayed on Freedom, 8.
homes. Black men averted their eyes when white women passed”. There was to be no question as to whether or not blacks would defer to whites. Those who did not, often ended up injured or dead. After existing in a period where this was the status quo for so long, it is not hard to understand how African Americans adapted to this lifestyle. Mr. William B. Eskridge remembers that whites, “...had the opinion that we should accept whatever they say. Of course, I couldn’t blame them much because we had been mostly acceptin’ of whatever they said.” There was a real loss of self-efficacy on those who were closely dependent on the white world. As discussed previously, whites were at the top of every aspect of society. Suspicion of an African American could result in them being cutting off. They could lose their lives, their land or be refused things like bank loans. Many, “black farmers struggled to hold on to their land in the face of determined white attempts to break black landowners by squeezing their credit.” Even those with their own land could feel the effects of power-hungry whites in their daily lives. However, it was these independent landowners who would come to be the catalyst in the Movement’s arrival to Holmes.

While Holmes just prior to the Movement may look like a carbon copy of previous local studies, there is one aspect which separates Holmes from the pack. Unique to within the borders of Holmes County, was the strong presence of independent black landowners. In 1940, the New Deal’s Farm Security Administration bought failing plantations in the Mileston area. They then took this land and broke it up, selling it to black sharecropping families. They were given land

---

30 MacLeod, 8.
31 MacLeod, 12.
with, “long-term, low interest mortgages…” which, “…financed their 40 acre plots, a house, plough tools, and a mule.”

Some African Americans were “lucky” enough to eventually receive the government’s promise of forty-acres and a mule after all. This helped to create a generation of African Americans who got a taste of financial autonomy. This land was generally passed on, creating a line of African Americans who could work be their own boss. A strong sense of independence and community grew out of this Mileston area. Blacks living amongst other blacks in this way did not have the burden of white bosses breathing down their neck. Unlike blacks who worked under whites on plantations, independent landowners could not be threatened for “stirring up trouble”. For, they did not rely on white landowners for payment nor their housing. They had more freedom to move and to think. Because they had this increased autonomy, their self-worth and confidence was higher than those living in the constant presence of degradation. Despite the fact that they were not making money, they were providing enough for themselves and their families. What Mileston farmers could boast, was “…more threatening to the caste system: independence, pride and control of their destiny.”

What the white community had worked so hard to beat out of blacks in Holmes was being re-established in Mileston. They were awoken to what they deserve, and could step back and see the bigger picture without being persecuted right away. Mrs. Hayes, the widow of Ralthus Hayes recalls having independent land was, “a gift from the Lord…Had your own stuff then, wadn’t dependent on the white man for nothing. If you didn’t make it, that

---

32 Sojourner, 2.

33 Macleod, 11.
was your own fault."  

It was this independent black landownership which allowed for the Movement to make its way into Holmes. The little freedom it allowed these Mileston farmers was just enough to spark the drive towards change.

Through my research, it has become increasingly evident that black landownership was absolutely critical in creating a Movement in Holmes. Again, these African Americans lived in a way that allowed a distance between themselves and the white community. They had the freedom to discuss ideas and foster a sense of strength within their community. And it was these Mileston farmers who brought the Movement to Holmes. For SNCC did not come to Holmes, Holmes went looking for SNCC. Again, Holmes stands out among the other Delta counties. For, generally, SNCC would enter a community with the initial battle of having to do some heavy convincing to encourage activism. SNCC often received instant responses of, "Don't want none of that mess here boy', or 'Now ya'll be careful foolin' around with that white folks' business'"; not in Holmes. They wanted a piece of the action. It was "sixty-six year old, intensely fired Alma Mitchell Carnegie, with her younger brother Ozell Mitchell...", who, "...brought the Movement to Mileston in early 1963". SNCC, who had been working close by in Greenwood, sent John Ball to set up voter registration classes. Voter registration classes evolved into eventually attempting to go down to the courthouse and register. The "First 14" in April of 1963 to attempt to do so consisted of all independent

---

34 Mrs. Hayes, qtd in MacLeod. 11.
35 Robert Moses, Radical Equations: Civil Rights From Mississippi to Algebra Project, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 46
36 Sojourner, 4.
landowners who had owned their land for close to twenty years. The Movement thus sprouted from actions of the Mileston landowners, drawing in locals from all across the county who seemed to have been waiting for something like this.

The generic history of the Civil Rights Movement tends to look like series of spot-lighted, publicized major events. Yet, there is so much more to it. It is mostly these faces and these names that are swept under the rug, leaving their work unaccredited. However, without these everyday local citizens, the Movement could not have been made possible. Hence, why I believe it to be important, in order to truly grasp the history of a certain Movement, one must start with the bare bones. One must get feel for the dynamics and challenges facing African Americans in order to see how the Movement changed it. Holmes County holds certain unique aspects to it that if one was to gloss over its history would miss entirely, and therefore miss what makes it unique. It was the local people who started the Movement, and their history is essential to comprehending the Movement as a whole.
Early Stages of Organizing

“The Holmes County Movement...epitomizes the community organizing tradition developed by SNCC in Mississippi. Organizers immersed themselves in communities outside the nation’s public eye and sought to politicize residents around everyday problems and issues. Inspired by Ella Baker and exemplified by Bob Moses, the community organizing tradition sought to develop indigenous leadership and to build an organizational vehicle owned by local people that would carry their agenda over the long haul.”37 While Holmes County’s route of attracting SNCC is rather unique, the work and goals of the organization remained on target with that of the organizing tradition. African Americans in Holmes were ready for a change and no longer willing to let whites determine its timetable. SNCC worked alongside the willing and encouraged the timid to combat their fears and redeem their confidence. Local everyday African Americans, following the guidance of SNCC, developed the home-grown leadership and parallel institutions which allowed them to carry on alone to battle existing structural inequality.

With the 1960’s sit-in movement still fresh in the minds of students, the lack of an organization suited to channel their energy and devotion to the Movement became apparent. Civil Rights worker Ella Baker took notice of this influx of youthful interest and felt there should be some type of organization to harness their ideas and spirit. She helped organize The Student Leadership Conference, where

these students could come together and brainstorm. Not wanting the voices of the students to be swallowed by the larger, top-down organizations of SCLC and NAACP, Baker encouraged the students to develop their own democratic vehicle for change. According to James Foman, "She felt the students had a right to determine their own structure."38 The students decided to take Baker’s advice and form their own independent organization. Enter the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. After its founding, Baker became an influential adviser on its staff, helping to hone a number of its core ideals. In Baker’s “Bigger than a Hamburger” article, she sheds light on the backbone of SNCC, “Whatever may be the difference in approach to their goal, the Negro and white students, North and South, are seeking to rid America of the scourge of racial segregation and discrimination- not only at lunch counters, but in every aspect of life.”39 SNCC wanted more than to just gain access for African Americans to lunch counters and restaurants; SNCC wanted to completely change the fact that African Americans were seen as inferior to whites, eliminate white supremacy, and wanted to spread a new sense of equality throughout the South.

SNCC’s organization and approach to the Civil Rights Movement was quite built on the themes of equality and democracy. There was to be no single “leader” of SNCC. Baker noted an “…inclination toward group-centered leadership, rather than toward a leader-centered group pattern of organization…”, meaning power was equally distributed throughout its members. These ideas thus spread to SNCC’s


organizing tactics upon entering rural African American communities similar to Holmes. SNCC wanted to provide African Americans with the tools and the ability to begin making changes for themselves on a large scale. SNCC wanted to educate, inspire and motivate people to take their own initiatives. Stokely Carmichael said in regards to SNCC’s activities, “We organize the people to speak their own interest and try to leave behind us strong leaders and organizations forged in struggle.” And again, while SNCC did not necessarily “choose” Holmes County, they still used the same tactics and attempted to foster the same beliefs as in other rural communities in the South.

A major area in which SNCC found some of the most dismal situations for African Americans was in the state of Mississippi. Counties like Holmes, especially those in the Delta needed the most work. Here SNCC would infiltrate a community, doing their best to gain the trust of the often timid and reluctant African Americans. SNCC workers would thus begin their heavy task of going door to door to try and get African Americans to agree to go down to their local courthouse and register to vote. Hollis Watkins describes SNCC’s determination, “we are here. This is our purpose: We’re going to get these people registered and we’re going to be going from door to door. We’re going to be getting in touch with people any way we can to make sure that they become registered voters so that they can become citizens.” SNCC workers were willing to go door to door, and offer as much help as they could give, whether it be rides, or simply just accompaniment. Forman describes how Bob

---


Moses, John Hardy and Reggie Robinson employed this tactic in McComb, SNCC’s first Civil Rights project in Mississippi, “Together these three started traveling the dirt roads, going into the old, broken-down houses, talking the language and living the life of the oppressed people and trying to persuade them to face the trials of legislation.”42 SNCC worked this way throughout Mississippi, facing numerous uphill battles. Bob Moses saw this power structure and the effects it had on his voting project attempts in McComb, “In McComb, as in the rest of the state, there was a deeply entrenched habit of deference to as well as genuine fear of white power, accumulated over years of living in a society that not only denied, but enforced through reprisal, any effort by Blacks to participate in the political process”. And in 1963, African Americans in Holmes County, Mississippi recruited SNCC workers to begin a new grassroots campaign within their borders.

SNCC sent John Ball to Holmes County to begin laying the foundation for the organizing process. Initially, with those who were interested from the start, Ball guided them through the muddy waters of voter registration. For, voter registration during this time period was something that was practically unheard of for blacks in Holmes. Whites were adamant about keeping blacks from the polls, thus they made registering to vote almost impossible. They used intimidation and threats of violence, making blacks understand that the choice might be between the vote and their life. Griffin McLaurin, one of the first local activists in Holmes, recalls on one of his attempts to register being sent outside to stand under a tree during which, “…they had all those dogs, and everybody else was standing around with their guns and all that

kind of stuff." If these threats were not enough, African Americans were asked to interpret the constitution, and forced to complete various literacy tests. During his work in McComb, a Mississippi county with conditions similar to those in Holmes, Bob Moses picked up on the threat of these tests by commenting, “Already deemed inferior by whites, few black folks wanted to risk humiliation and even further erosion of their sense of the self-worth by taking a test designed for them to fail.”

Despite these existing threats, there was a select few in Holmes willing to be the first. Ball instructed this group on how to fill out certain forms, answer questions to the satisfaction (maybe) of white registrars, and familiarized them with new laws, “…allowing voters to object to the moral character of new registrants; and about the other recent law requiring that the names of voter applicants be published in local newspapers.”

Different historical sources claim that between fourteen and twenty-one African Americans in Holmes attempted to register to vote on April 9th, 1963. Most of these were independent landowners from the Mileston area, allowing a possible conclusion that independent landownership allowed more freedom to, as whites put it, “stir up trouble”.

Those that were part of this pioneer group embodied SNCC’s vision of change. They took what they learned from working with SNCC workers like Ball, Bob Moses, Samuel Block, Hollis Watkins and Annell Ponder (an SCLC worker) and

---


45 McLeod, 13.
attempted to spread it throughout their county. The students essentially became the teachers. Reverend Russell and Mrs. Russell were among the first participants in the Holmes Movement. Reverend Russell remembers, “When we first was started, we met and we held classes. We had classes goin on in every community which teach you how to fill out these forms.” They held these meetings in their own homes, putting their own lives on the line in order to help teach others. Russell again recalls, “We held them at the Mileston church ‘n’ Jerusalem Church. We held classes in our homes, mostly Mr. Turnbow and Mr. Dave Howard, Ozell Mitchell, Sam Redmond and my home.” African Americans like these were not solely interested in the vote for themselves, however. They wished extend beyond, changing the way African Americans saw themselves and breaking down the fears created by white power. This first group wanted their spirit to transfer to the entire community. This is evident in Mr. Shadrach Davis’s recollection of the advice given to him by Ralthus Hayes before Hayes attempted to register to vote that first time. He told him, “Don’t you go. We don’t know what’s gonna happen when we go up there tomorrow; But we need somebody out like you to carry on our work.” They wanted to ensure that there would be those who would be willing to carry on what they had started. They needed reserves to organize and shape Movement activity in the event they could no

---


47 Russell, 27.

48 Mr. Shadrach Davis, Interview in Thomas Frazier and Nathaniel Spurlock, Minds Stayed on Freedom, 123.
longer do so; the next wave would enter, thus keeping the pressure on the white community consistent and ever-present. The Movement thus began to take shape in Holmes.

Despite this initial base of Mileston farmers ready and willing to work with SNCC, there were other African Americans who did not enjoy the freedoms and sense of independence which came with owning their own land. Though their reasoning was not all the same, these African Americans served as a major obstacle in the ability to organize. "'Don’t want none of that mess here, boy’ or ‘Now ya’ll be careful foolin’ around with that white folks’ business’"49, was often the response SNCC worker received when going door to door encouraging African American citizens to register. To these African Americans, that’s just what voting was: “white folks’ business”. It was not something openly discussed among most blacks. This feeling of inferiority had become internalized, and became difficult for organizers to conquer. There were also those whose response to registering seemed to be a practical response to the consistent threat of white violence. Ms. Austry Kirklin recalls a lot of African Americans tried to warn her away from being involved in Movement activities, “‘Yeah, a lot of them black people say “Chile, you gonna get killed. If I was you, I wouldn’t go off and leave my children like that. They gonna kill you.”’”50 It was a dangerous topic that could lead to anything from the loss of a job to the loss of a life. Blacks working as sharecroppers were some of the most difficult to convince. Mrs. Bee Jenkins remembers, “…we had problems trying to get


these little houses that was built in the back of they bossman house. And so lots of 'em was afraid...They knew if the bossman found out they was goin to redish...they would beat them and wadn’t merciful.”\(^{51}\) Not only could they be physically harmed, they could be kicked off their land, making involvement with Movement activity a danger to their family’s livelihood. White supremacy and severe intimidation had been beaten into their heads for so long that some African Americans believed that that was the way things were supposed to be. The denial of their rights as American citizens had become standard; whites were the ones who voted and blacks were to steer clear of the voting booth. Things were so bad in these Delta counties of Mississippi that some African Americans, like Unita Blackwell, got to the point where they actually believed that they were not entitled to the right to vote. Most were uneducated, keeping them ignorant as to what the law stated and what they deserved as citizens. Blackwell said that the first time SNCC workers approached her was, “…the first time in my life that I ever come in contact with anybody that tells me that I had the right to register to vote.”\(^{52}\) In addition to registering voters, SNCC was spreading awareness of rights given to every American citizen. However, the fact that many African Americans were unconscious of their rights was made it harder for them to actually understand the point of what SNCC was doing, and therefore harder for them to receive SNCC into their communities. For, African Americans had impression that voting was not something that they should be worrying about or risk worrying about. Many other things came before voting their in

---


order of importance, and their involvement with SNCC as well as the voter registration project had the potential to hurt the things that they considered to be more important. This initial unawareness combine with the fear of repercussions, made it easier for them at first to dismiss SNCC and their radical ideas.

It was not only the uneducated sharecroppers, however, that were reluctant to associate themselves with the work of SNCC. Professional African Americans refused to involve themselves in the initial Movement organizing. They too were fearful of losing their jobs, for like the sharecroppers, they relied on whites for maintaining their employment. Mr. Jodie "Preacher" Saffold recalls, "It was the so-called, dumb people. Up from the grassroots they call it. But now, the school teachers, the educated people, they ain't did a damn thang! They so-called dumb people open the way for everybody. Yeah, and when the table got set with cake and pie, school teachers and everybody come in helping eat it up." Preachers in Holmes were also fearful of opening their doors to local movement activity, fearing the possibility of white retaliation in the form of bombs bringing destruction to their churches. And until SNCC and the local, grassroots citizens of Holmes broke down the initial barriers to make a path for the Movement to continue on, professionals chose not to "stir up trouble".

Despite the initial trepidations seen with the sharecroppers and black professionals, there exists proof that quite a few African Americans in Holmes were in fact excited and eager. Until SNCC workers came to their doors, many blacks were unfamiliar with the concept of proactive change. They understood that the

---

53 Mr. Jodie "Preacher" Saffold, Interview in Jeffrey Blackmon, Marvin Noel, and Marques Saffold, Minds Stayed on Freedom, 59.
conditions they were subjected to were severely unequal, yet any real sense of self-efficacy was absent. They needed the information and sense of support that SNCC was willing to provide. Ms. Austry Kirklin recalls, “We really didn’t know no better before. And somebody came out and talked us into it and showed us we could live better. You ain’t got to live in them old shack houses on them white folks’ place. You ain’t gotta chop that cotton for two dollars a day. And we wanted to do better for ourself.”

African Americans in Holmes had been forced into second class citizenry for so long, that many had just accepted the status quo. SNCC’s work going door to door opened up many eyes and ears, reintroducing them to control over their own futures. This change in thinking was the initial barrier. Once people began to believe that they were deserving, and that they too had the power, there was little the white community could do to quiet them. It was these types of people whom made the Movement possible in Holmes. For, once they were in, they were dedicated until the end.

I believe Charles Payne’s quote, “Once the country people did make a commitment, it was solid. Once they had given their word, they tended not to back down, and would go out and recruit their neighbors”, sums up what was taking place in Holmes nicely. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the newly acquired pioneers of the Movement continued to spread Movement mentality. They would move through various communities drawing in new activists. These new members would in turn pay it forward, canvassing to attract others. The transition

---

54 Ms. Austry Kirklin, 37.

55 Charles Payne, I’ve Got the Light of Freedom, 280.
from SNCC being the teachers to the locals taking the reins is very visible. Mrs. Bernice Montgomery Johnson, the only school teacher in Holmes to initially join the Movement recalls that they, “…were constantly trying to get new members. We were constantly going from community to community, from church to church, asking people to allow us to come into your church: ‘Would you become involved? Set you up a community meeting, Elect you some officers…’”56 Local blacks would take the tactics and information the SNCC activists had introduced them to and build their own Movement. They would coach others through the process of registering to vote the way SNCC workers had previously instructed them. They would become the canvassers and the convincers, the builders and the encouragers. Mrs. Bee Jenkins joined the effort in Holmes and found herself actively convincing others to take the leap as well. She describes her work, “I would go in their home and sit down and talk with them and ask them if they wanted to register so they’d be able to vote. They’d say, yes, they did but they was afraid. I’d say ‘Well, nothing to be afraid of. I’ll go with you’”. In addition, to remedy the fears of those on plantations of being noticed as missing, Jenkins recalls, “We decided that we would slip onto the plantation at daybreak. We worked in they place and they slipped off so they could register.”57 It was all very personal work. Trust had to be developed, and this door to door development of relationships allowed a Movement to be cultivated. SNCC fostered the development and growth of this local leadership in order for it to eventually become self-sufficient. Communities would support one another, and more

56 Mrs. Bernice Montgomery Johnson, Interview in Kenneth Sallis and Tamara Wright, Minds Stayed on Freedom, 70.

57 Ms. Bee Jenkins, Interview in„Figure this out...Minds Stayed on Freedom, 134.
Importantly a network of newly empowered blacks would emerge.

While it’s true that SNCC’s early work was mostly concentrated on getting local blacks registered to vote, community organizing in other areas was beginning. Voting was so heavily emphasized in the beginning due to the principle that once African Americans had a sense of representation, their needs were more likely to be met. Replacing white supremacists holding positions of power was essential in order to achieve change and eventually equality. Yet, voting was not the only area blacks were excluded from, thus the development of other community education classes. African Americans in Holmes had basically been excluded from a proper education, thus keeping them from learning about many essential aspects of daily life. Reverend Russell remembers, “During that time, there were people that could not read, and write and we had classes. Those people learned how to read, write, how to write checks, how to bank money, and how to get money outta the bank. People didn’t know how to just take care of their business.”58 Whites kept African Americans in a place of ignorance, and this ignorance allowed the continuance of these vast structural inequalities. The Movement’s goal was to help blacks level this playing field, and the skills taught in these citizenship classes would help them in doing so. In addition to education, separate black establishments were created. Places where African Americans could come together and speak freely had not existed before the Movement. Thus the creation of the Holmes County Community Center in late 1964 was so significant. It allowed blacks to have their own space to do with what they pleased. They could have open discussions, share ideas, and come up with new

58 Reverend Russell, 23.
strategies. They did not have to worry about the threat of white landlords, and it filled the void for a number of Movement activities.

SNCC’s early work in Holmes was essential to cultivating a Movement spirit in the people. Though through unconventional means, SNCC arrived in Holmes with the intent to develop a community of African Americans who believed in their abilities. The vote was the first step, for with the vote, African Americans could have a voice and work towards change. SNCC’s early work in Holmes helps make it clear that there was no single leader, and that it was the local everyday people who came together to break down white power. SNCC provided them with the tools and mindset to reach equality, but the citizens of Holmes were the true actors.
White Retaliation in Holmes County

It is no surprise that once signs that the Movement had reached Holmes began to appear, the white community immediately saw red. Like in most of the South, white skin and superiority came as a package deal. Whites were the judge, the jury and the executioner. They ran the banks, were the politicians, and administered the law as they saw fit. African Americans were banned from positions of prestige, keeping them from obtaining any sense of authority. African Americans in Holmes could not even cast a vote. They were kept from the polls through ridiculous tests, poll taxes, and fear. Whites in Holmes, for obvious reasons, were adamant on keeping change from taking root in their county. Any African American who dared to step out of line concerning any matter was seen as a direct threat. Whites in Holmes were not going to give up their power easily, and went to great lengths to hold on. Intimidation, laws and violence were directed at African Americans in order to preserve the Southern way of life. Their retaliation, oftentimes seriously dangerous, was a matter of concern to those involved in the Movement, but not the halting force the white community hoped for.

The white community in Holmes had woven a series of structural inequalities into the daily lives of African Americans. These vast inequalities were, “Reinforced by the pervasive threat of violence against nonconformists, the social code in Holmes County required blacks to feign deference in all things. African Americans got down off the raised sidewalk when whites approached. They went to the back door of snack
bars, train depots, and white homes." It is easy to see why some blacks developed a sense that they were actually inferior. African Americans were believed sub-human, deserving few of the rights given to whites. The law was vastly different for whites than blacks in Holmes. Lynching was considered socially acceptable for punishing an African American, for "Whites justified lynching as a deterrent against the rape of white women by black men, but most blacks in Holmes County were lynched ostensibly because they were suspected of murder." A fair trial was a rarity, for the jury remained lily white. Schooling remained segregated as well as unequal, despite the Brown vs. Board decision, and it was not until 1950 that more than four black public schools went beyond the ninth grade. Whites held every position of power, thus there was really no way around correcting these vast inequalities without the ability to cast a vote. Which raises yet another issue: African Americans in Holmes could not vote. Whites would play off the fact that blacks had been kept in the dark so long concerning politics or any education regarding their rights to legitimize their being denied. Griffin McLaurin recalls, "'Yeah, because the same questions that they had asked about the poll taxes and all is here, looked like somebody just drew up some information and presented it to us to harass us because we didn’t’ know anything about this.'" Even if a black in Holmes were to be brave


60 MacLeod, 9

61 MacLeod, 8.

enough to attempt to register, his or her very livelihood would be threatened. Before
the Movement even entered Holmes, whites were threatening blacks to keep them
inferior. Once they began to sense that their security and their stability could
potentially change, white retaliation intensified. An African American with a voice
and a will automatically received a target on his back.

Simply the possibility of white retaliation alone kept many African Americans
distanced from the Movement. Generally, these were the Blacks who found them-emselves closely tied to and heavily dependent on the white world. And to the
disappointment of many rural black farmers, black professionals withheld their
involvement in Movement activities. Black professionals had the looming, constant
fear of being fired and thus losing their source of income. They had broken into a
small minority of an emerging black middle class and most were reluctant to give that
up. Mrs. Bernice Montgomery Johnson, the only black teacher to initially join the
Movement in Holmes, recalls, “But if professional people were really afraid of losing
their job, of losing what they had, they didn’t’ want to participate. Because now
when you talk about fear, they were really afraid to become involved”. Black
teachers, whom one would assume would be natural leaders in the Movement because
of the vast inequalities in education, made up a large piece of this detached group of
professionals. Johnson comments on many in her own profession’s reason for not
joining, “Well, there were quite a few threats in the country; people saying if teachers
became involved in anything like this, you gonna lose your job or you gonna get
killed. They didn’t even want to be seen talking to me…“63. Again, this was

63 Mrs. Bernice Johnson Montgomery, Interview in Kenneth Sallis and Tamara Wright, Minds Stayed
on Freedom, 69.
disappointing to so many grassroots people who were placing their lives on the line for the Movement on a daily basis. Mr. Cooper Howard remembers, “I think the teachers should be some of the leading people out there. They supposed to be out there looking for you, opening your eyes to what’s happening”. Surprisingly enough, most ministers in Holmes County also withheld their support to Movement activities. Again, this is surprising considering the Movement’s spiritual and religious undertones. Yet, again, the threat of white retaliation placed a barrier between black preachers and civil rights organizing. Preachers were fearful that any sign of their church’s involvement would result in destruction. They feared the night attacks and fire bombs that came with Movement activity and kept their hands clean and their heads turned. Again, Howard comments, “And you don’t have a preacher hollerin’ in any pulpit... No, lord, you couldn’t hardly get a preacher. Very few would come out.”

Those who would seem like the types of people to take the reins of a revolution were among the last to join. Their ties to the white world combined with their fears of the consequences of joining kept them at arms length at best.

African Americans in Holmes County did not wait for the Movement to come to them, and this outright activism was not kindly taken to. A few independent black landowners from the Mileston area actively sought out SNCC workers from Greenwood in early spring of 1963 to come and begin working with those who were interested. SNCC sent John Ball to Holmes to begin the transformation within the black community. Ball began instruction with these Mileston farmers on tactics for voter registration. These students became the group known as “The first fourteen”;

64 Mr. Robert Cooper Howard, 100.
they were the first group of African Americans in Holmes to attempt to register to vote on April 9th, 1963. This group immediately felt the heat from the white community. Hartman Turnbow, one of the first black men to attempt to register found his house under almost immediate attack. Rev J. J. Russell, another member of Turnbow’s group remembers, “They threw firebombs into his livin’ room and one in his other bedroom. Burned the sheets...burned the livin’ room out. One man...was at the back waiting on Mr. Turnbow to come out with the intention of killing him...”. All it took was one attempt, one instance, for Turnbow to be marked, placing his life in danger. The white community could have been trying to make an example of Turnbow; threatening those considering registering, and making many have second thoughts for fear of ending up like Turnbow. Rev. Russell, also discusses the fact that these first waves of blacks attempting to register found their names being printed within the pages of their local newspapers. When asked for the reasoning behind this, he recalls, “They did that to let the Ku Klux Klan and the Citizens’ Council know who was in the group. They also took pictures and put them on the front line in publicity.” Although this may not seem as threatening or dangerous as what happened to the Turnbows, it was a more silent intimidation. It would keep blacks from the polls based on the idea that if one’s name was made public, they became a public target. Employers could find the name of African Americans who worked for them and fire them. Banks could refuse loans, and sharecroppers could be kicked off their land. It played off the structural inequalities already embedded in society. Others brave enough to attempt to register, despite witnessing these examples, faced white

resistance directly at the courthouse. Once whites grasped the fact that more and more blacks were going to attempt the actions of the first fourteen, they were going to be ready for them. Whites concluded that if they could make the polls a threatening, hostile atmosphere, blacks would wish to steer clear. Giffin McLaurin, an African American in the second or third wave of blacks attempting to register, remembers a white man sending his group to wait under a tree, “And we had to stay out there under the tree. And during that time, they all had those dogs, and everybody else was standing around with their guns and all kinds of stuff...” While the whites were not using the dogs or guns directly, it was a silent threat, a warning. Whites were wishing to instill fear in African Americans and were willing to go to great lengths to do so. They targeted their homes, and their livelihood in society. Voting was a large way in which, if successful, African Americans could begin making changes which would begin to break down the white wall of oppression. Whites were willing to guard their superiority to no end.

The vote was just the beginning. To the dismay of the white community, blacks in Holmes were ready to take it a step further. Despite the Brown vs. Board of Education decision passed in 1954, schools in Holmes were still segregated and vastly unequal. All the superior teachers, supplies, and buildings went to the whites. African American children in Holmes were stuck in an unbreakable cycle, unable to receive the education necessary for them to break free. As with registering to vote, whites were not going to let go of their separate institutions without a fight. For blacks attempting to break down the walls of segregation, white retaliation came in

66 McLaurin, Interview in Harriet Tanzman.
many forms. Physical violence and acts of intimidation against parents was not uncommon. In the opinion of the white community, black parents wishing to place their children within white schools was ludicrous. For example, Mr. Robert Cooper Howard sent his children to an all white school in Goodman in 1965. He remembers, “I was harassed. They burned crosses; they put out leaflets tellin’ me what I bet’ do, not do; my house was shot into; my wife was shot in the right leg.” Whites used night rider attacks in order to remain anonymous, yet still make their claim. African Americans like Howard were directly upsetting the status quo, and whites wanted to make sure they knew their actions were not escaping their attention. This indirect message of “we’re watching you”, was sent to blacks through the posting of names under the headline “Parents who had children in the white school”. Mrs. Viola Winters remembers, “I was passing through town and saw posters with the names of parents or guardians of children who had integrated the Durant schools. I saw one on the Charles Durham store in the main part of town. On the main highway, 51, going out of town, on a telephone post in front of C.A. Dickinson’s store I saw another one.” All these stores were white-owned. Again, it was a simple, non-confrontational way to direct a warning to African Americans. Even parents who simply supported their children’s demand for equality were retaliated against. In 1965, Reverend Marsh’s son was suspended from school for holding a Movement meeting during lunch. Marsh did not take this quietly and actively spoke out on his son’s behalf. In the testimony given by Otis Brown in a memo to the FBI he recalls

67 Mr. Robert Cooper Howard, Interview in Jeffrey Blackmon and Felisha Dixon, Minds Stayed on Freedom, 93.

68 Mrs. Viola Winters, December 4th 1965, SNCC Papers, reel 37.
Marsh, “...came to the school then for the first time in full support of his son...He spoke at mass meetings, and urged support of the students...”. Marsh was said to have disappeared shortly after speaking out against the all white school board and superintendent. It is uncertain exactly what happened to Marsh, but Brown commented that, “…where he stays is surrounded by land owned by whites and the road is dark.” 69 It is no stretch to believe that Marsh ran into some trouble with the white community. It does not even seem too much of a reach to connect this fact with his disappearance. Black parents who made a ripple in the community were dangerous, and whites felt as though it was something that had to be taken care of.

Whites who could not keep African Americans children from entering their schools often took their business elsewhere. White parents would pull their children from these public schools and filter them into private schools. This, once again, splintered students in Holmes based on their race, further perpetuating segregation. This can be seen in the evidence brought to light in the 1965 case, *Alexander, Beatrice vs. Holmes CNTY BD of ED*. The number of white students enrolled in the traditionally four “white” schools, Lexington, Durant, Tchula and Goodman, dramatically plummeted. Lexington drops from one-hundred and seventy-two white students enrolled to zero. Durant decreases from one-hundred and sixty-five to a mere eight white students. And Tchula dropped from sixty-five to zero. Even white teachers were allowed to participate in this white flight, breaking contracts and following students to the private sector. 70 Despite what the law technically stated,

---

69 Testimony of Otis Brown, “Memo to Jesse Harris and FBI”, SNCC Papers, Reel 37.

70 *Alexander, Beatrice vs. Holmes CNTY BD of ED*, Southern Civil Rights Litigation Records, Reel 133
whites found a way to preserve segregation in their schools and perpetuate the imbalance of power in Holmes.

For white students who remained in the public schools undergoing integration, a clear determination to create difficulties for these new students was evident. Black children in white schools were magnets for poor treatment and harassment. They were immediately made to feel unwanted and like outsiders. Teachers and their white classmates seemed to go out of their way to make their school experience practically unbearable. It began as soon as African American students got on the bus, if picked up at all. Annie Washington was a young black child in the sixties who attempted to integrate an all white school in Goodman. She remembers her bus experience, "They would threaten us with what they would do to our bodies if we ever got on the bus again. And they would always make us go to the back of the bus to sit”. Upon arrival, black students then were subject to unrestrained and unpunished violence and psychological abuse throughout the day. During school Washington experienced physical abuse from older white students during lunch periods when “…white college students would come, and they would get big iron baseball bats and baseball sticks. And because we were so small, we had no protection. The teachers would be there, but they wouldn’t say anything.” Teachers chose to turn their heads to this abuse, leaving black children to fend for themselves against the hard driving force of white racism. Black students were not only children, they were also the minority, and whites played off of this to gang up on and humiliate them. However, abuse did not end with physical violence. Psychological strains were common within the four walls

71 Mrs. Annie Washington, Interview in Willa Williams and Roderick Wright, Minds Stayed on Freedom, 104.
of the classroom.

Black students were made to feel and believe that they deserved less than their classmates with white skin. They had to work ten times as hard just to be considered satisfactory. White teachers balked at the fact that they had to actually allow and instruct a black child. Ms. Murtis Powell sent her children to integrate a school in Durant in 1965 remembers, “I asked them, ‘How was the school?’ Everytime they’d come back, they tell me, ‘It’s hard, it’s hard. Them teachers know they’s mean to us.’”

“Blackness” was considered as serious a threat as a contagious disease, and teachers did their best to maintain a sense of psychological as well as physical separation between the two races. For example, Georgia Clark ended up sending her children to an all white school in Durant. Her younger children were sprayed with disinfectant before they were allowed to play with the white children. White teachers believed that equality between the races had already reached its high point when black students were even allowed to attend these white schools. They opposed any integration, and were strong in their dedication to its failure; they often took this out on the students. Thus, equality within the classroom was a different story. It was reported in the *Alexander, Beatrice vs. Holmes CNTY BD of ED* case that in the Durant school, school play and school lunches were ordered to be segregated. In addition, “Teachers have instructed pupils that they are to let white pupils drink from water fountains first and that they must not eat or play with white pupils”.

Similarly, the Tchula school required black students to leave the building in order to use the

---

72 Ms. Murtis Powell, Interview in Marvin Noel and Roderick Wright, *Minds Stayed on Freedom*, 112.

73 Ms. Georgia Clark, Interview in Harriet Tanzman, “An Oral History with Griffin McLaurin”, University of Southern Mississippi, [http://www.usm.edu/html/transcripts/manuscript-clark_georgia.html](http://www.usm.edu/html/transcripts/manuscript-clark_georgia.html)
bathroom despite the one in perfect condition in-doors. White teachers were even actively encouraging black students to leave, often cloaking their racism in "concern". For example, in the Lexington school, "Mr. Eugene Montgomery…was told by a second grade teacher that his little girl, Yvita, was ‘emotionally disturbed by being in contact with white people.’"74 Clearly this "concern" the teacher was having could not be sincere. There were not that many white students still enrolled for Montgomery’s daughter to be interacting with, and clearly this teacher is simply trying to steer this child back towards her old school. Black students were made to feel unequal, and unworthy, while white students were placed upon a pedestal further enhancing their sense of entitlement. White teachers and students alike wanted to punish these children for the upset they were causing within the white community. While segregation between the schools may seem to have been breaking down, within the schools was a completely different story.

When the threats and violence did not curb the willingness of African Americans in Holmes to integrate the schools, the white community needed something more. They needed a way to keep African Americans out of the school systems without actually breaking the Brown precedent as well as the 1964 Civil Rights Act which enforces it. In 1965, the Mississippi legislature passed a bill requiring the payment of tuition to public schools by students not living with a parent or legal guardian. In other words, a bill like this would require payment by those in foster homes or those living with extended families. A suit was filed against the Mississippi Board of Education on behalf of the African American community

74 Alexander, Beatrice vs. Holmes CNTY BD of ED, Southern Civil Rights Litigation Records, Reel 133.
shortly thereafter in the case *Carthan, Willie* *vs. MS State BD of ED*. Though absent in the language, this was clearly a bill designed with color in mind, taking a direct shot at the African American community. More times than not, children in the situations mentioned requiring payment were black. The case states, “The percentage of Negro children who do not have a natural or adoptive parent residing within the state greatly exceeds the percentage of white children...”. Whites were aware of this fact. They were aware that because of discrimination African Americans in Holmes often found themselves having to leave the area in search of employment. There was no chance for upward mobility, and many mothers and fathers were forced to go north and leave their children with family members. This case directly reflects deeper structural inequalities which allows for this bill to seem racially neutral. The case states, “As a result of the caste system and of their exclusion from effective political participation, both of which have been and are officially sanctioned and promoted by the state of Mississippi, the median income of Negroes is appreciably lower than that of white citizens...”75 Whites thus were able to play off of this structural inequality when constructing the specifics of this bill. They were aware that if this bill was enforced, the number of African American children unable to pay would far surpass that of white children. Whites refused to acknowledge the fact that these inequalities existed in society. It was easier for them to place the blame on African Americans, allowing themselves to believe that since Emancipation, blacks were “free”. A newspaper article included in the litigation records with this case titled, “Law Stands” by Charles M. Hills, he writes, “As a matter of fact, this state has long been overly

---

75 *Carthan, Willie vs. MS State BD of ED*, Southern Civil Rights Litigation Records, Reel 138.
patient with ‘cheaters’ who go off to more lucrative areas of the nation and leave their offspring here for the state to take care of. Fact that white people are more considerate of their youngsters than Negroes should not influence any court to set a jaundiced eye on a law.**76** Hills’s attitude reflects that of the majority of whites in Holmes. He ignores the vast inequalities facing African Americans which forces them to search for work elsewhere. This bill has a racist meaning embedded within. And because structural inequalities have been built into the daily operations of Holmes, it is able to hide its direct disadvantage to African Americans.

A large contributor to the threats, violence, and intimidation directed at Movement participants came from the local law enforcement. From the beginning, blacks in Holmes had no real sense of protection, and once blacks became involved in the Movement, they might as well have been fugitives. There were no black patrolmen, and no one to reprimand the whites in charge of “law and order”. The police force in Holmes thus served as some of the major contributors of harassment to the Movement participants. Mrs. Erma Russell remembers various times on her way home from holding citizenship classes where, “The highway patrolmen…they would give illegal tickets to mostly everybody that was in the Movement. The sheriff, the highway patrolmen, and police all get in one car and follow us…Sometimes they’d follow us home right to the fork and turn into our house…”**77** Although these acts were not necessarily violent, they were done to harass and intimidate. The police were among those at the top tier of the power structure the Movement was attempting

---


to break down. They had quite a bit to lose and because they were the “law” they had almost free reign to do as they saw fit. Ms. Austry Kirklin experienced this free-for-all attitude, “I remember when a man called Meter Mack was the police. He shot a black man down on Beale Street in cold blood. For no reason.” They had no one to answer to, and it was their word against that of a black man’s. And in the South at that time, a white man’s word trumped all. They were the protectors of the white power.

Civil Rights Movement public demonstrations tended to bring white backlash out into the open. The anger these marches raised allowed the public eye to see what night attacks and silent, indirect threats kept under wraps. Demonstrations, marches and boycotts were used to integrate hospitals, train stations, and even the job market, rattling the structures of white superiority. Again, there was hardly any sense of police protection, and therefore the demonstrators were often surrounded by threatening groups like the KKK or the White Citizens’ Council. Kirklin describes her experience during demonstrations, “They had rock throwing ‘n’ all. The white people cursed and said numerous things. Then the white people’d get mad and try to get into their trucks and run up in the march.” Rarely did white people receive anything more than a slap on the wrist for their behavior towards the marchers, yet Movement participants would almost always find themselves in a cell. Crosses being burned in people’s front yards were another way in which blacks were punished and intimidated. Numerous participants reported this after being away at a Movement-

---

78 Ms. Austry Kirklin, Interview in Lekeshia Brooks and Teleshia Kirklin, Minds Stayed on Freedom, 41.

79 Mrs. Austry Kirklin, 43.
related event. Yet, like the night attacks, these did not connect a face with the action the way a public demonstration could. Like with issue of integration, whites hit a wall once they began to realized their threats were having little effect in stopping the advance of the Movement; they needed something more concrete.

Whites needed some way to legally ban these types of demonstrations without trying to base it explicitly on race. In 1965 city officials came up with an answer: an ordinance which would ban all types of parades and demonstrations on certain streets. The issue at hand seemed to be worry over traffic flow and safety of emergency vehicles. There was no mention of race marches or civil rights demonstrations within the ordinance. So, technically, this was a race free bill. Yet upon closer look, it is easy to see where the authors of this ordinance could play off the structural inequalities in existence to squash the goals of the Movement. For, parades and demonstrations were allowed, but with only with the permission of the mayor, who was white.\(^8^0\) A white mayor would obviously be opposed to any desired actions of a Movement which wished to strip him of his power and authority. And, because blacks in Holmes were denied the vote, they could not replace this mayor. Holmes County’s “concern” for traffic violations was about as sincere as the previously mentioned teacher’s concern for the emotional stability of her black student. This ordinance was racism dressed up as city planning.

Whites in Holmes were unprepared to relinquish the power and the prestige. They were the minority yet still controlled almost every aspect of society. The ideas and goals of the Movement threatened to tear this away. Whites used threats,

\(^8^0\) Hamer, Don vs. George Musselwhite, Southern Civil Rights Litigation Records, Reel 146.
intimidation and violence in an attempt to keep blacks from taking what was rightfully theirs. They played off of the structural inequalities already in existence to try and hide their racist intentions. However, African Americans in Holmes began something that could not be halted, and would eventually prove to be stronger than the force of white backlash in the end.
A Freedom Summer volunteer, Harry Bowie discusses his summer experience: “To see people grow out of that deprivation, to begin to believe in themselves, and to believe in the possibility of their future, was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life…”81 Once the groundwork for basic local organizing had been laid, the Movement in Holmes County was able to take off. For in 1946, volunteers from across the nation flooded into the Delta, working to extend Movement activity to as many local African Americans as possible. And in June of that year, the Movement’s “Freedom Summer” project sent 33 volunteers to work in Holmes County. They worked in harmony with the local people already canvassing and working to register people to vote. These volunteers, many of which being white college students, were welcomed into the homes of blacks who, at that time, had very little to give. The citizens of Holmes County worked with these 33 volunteers to build a stronger black community, where they would be seen, and more importantly, see themselves as deserving of equality.

“Freedom Summer”, as it was called, was the result of SNCC’s work with other major Civil Rights organizations. SNCC, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the NAACP, and various local organizers came together to orchestrate one of the more publicized, remembered, nation-wide event of the Civil Rights Movement. Freedom Summer brought around 1,000 volunteers from across the nation to the Mississippi Delta in 1964. The Delta at this time was not a safe place for anyone promoting Movement rhetoric, and there was always the question of

81 Harry Bowie, in, Dittmer, 271.
whether or not a volunteer would return safely. These volunteers were mostly white, a majority being college students from prestigious backgrounds. Mr. Shadrach Davis recalls, “Some of those civil rights workers was students from was senators’ sons and daughters or congressmen’s sons and daughters; some were lawyers’ sons and daughters.”\textsuperscript{82} The fact that these were white students with powerful family backgrounds brought a lot of attention and concern over safety to the Delta. This helps paint a picture of the country’s mindset when it came to black and whites. Local blacks lived in the constant danger of white violence and oppression, and it was not until white college students were involved that the nation recognized the problems of the Delta.\textsuperscript{83} In relation to this glossing over of the daily experience of local blacks, Charles Payne writes, “Since the summer involved large numbers of white people, we have a great deal of literature on it, far more than on the three years of organizing that preceded it.”\textsuperscript{84} Before these volunteers were dispersed to Mississippi, many were required to go through an orientation preparing them for what they were about to encounter. The volunteers were about to enter a different world, one in which local blacks could potentially be treating them as their superiors because of their skin color. The students had to therefore be careful to take the foundations of SNCC with them and work with the locals rather than feel the need to lead them. It was a summer

\textsuperscript{82} Mr. Shadrach Davis, Interview in Thomas Frazier and Nathaniel Spurlock, \textit{Minds Stayed on Freedom}, 127.


\textsuperscript{84} Payne, \textit{I've Got the Light of Freedom}, 301.
where racial harmony occurred in a place where whites and blacks were not allowed to use the same water fountains. Holmes County blacks were willing and excited to accept these new resources to further the progress they had already made on their own.

Summer of 1964 arrived in Holmes, bringing with it thirty-three “Freedom Riders”. This term was used by blacks in Holmes to refer to outside activists. Overall, the reaction to the arrival of these workers was excitement. Locals had been hearing of outside Movement activity, and were ready to replicate that mentality within their communities. When Bea Jenkins heard of the atrocity concerning Emmitt Till, she says she asked God, “‘And if you ever heard my prayer would you please step in now and help us to stop this brutality’. The Freedom Riders came into Holmes, and I was so glad, I applauded.” 85 Hattye Gatson, a teenager at the time, was also keeping updated on outside struggles and was eager to join the Movement, “And, but, what really god me interested: I was watching the television and seeing how people were being treated in Alabama,…I just couldn’t wait to get involved. And I was glad when they came through, because that’s what I wanted to do. And that’s what I said I wanted to be: A freedom rider.” 86 People in Holmes wanted change and were ready; all they needed was the courage, the resources, and the


guidance, all of which the volunteers were happy to provide. It is important to stress that these white volunteers were not knights in shining armor; they did not “save” the black people of Holmes County. The local determination was already there, it was simply the fact that these volunteers, because of their backgrounds, had the attention of the nation. They had the resources and the connections blacks in Holmes were excluded from. Mr. Robert Cooper Howard, when asked if the workers had not come, would blacks in Holmes have attempted to register to vote, and he answered, “Oh yeah, we had decided we was gonna do it. But we would have went up and got turn away. Never would have got redished. But those people had the backin’ of the NAACP, SNCC, COFO. They had a lawyer from the president’s office.”87 The volunteers brought the necessary resources which the vast structural inequalities existing in the South denied the locals.

These thirty-three workers integrated themselves into the impoverished, threatening world of the local blacks in Holmes. Room and board was supplied by black families, many of which had little to spare. Independent landowners had an easier time housing many of these workers because they did not have to face obstacles created by having a white landlord. When asked if she housed any of these workers, Ms. Murtis Powell recants, “Naw, we didn’t have no one stayin with us during that time ‘cause we wasn’t on our place then. We was living on a white man’s place ‘n’ they didn’t want ‘em to come in there. But we use’ to let ‘em come in there and eat.”88 This further underscores the important role that independent farmers

87 Mr. Robert Cooper Howard, Interview in Jeffrey Blackmon, and Felishia Dixon, Minds Stayed on Freedom, 99,

88 Ms. Murtis Powell, Interview in Marvin Noel and Roderick Wright, Minds Stayed on Freedom, 111.
played in developing the Movement in Holmes. Blacks who had practically nothing, fed them, gave them a place to sleep and also bath. The volunteers, because most came from families who were financially and socially better-off than those they were now working with, had to develop a trust between with their new community. Again, the volunteers were generally educated whites, placing them in a position of social superiority. They had to be careful to ensure that they made no attempts to fall into the role of leader, or speak above the local organizers. Equality was the reason for their visit. Mr. Shadrach David, a local organizer in Holmes, believes the volunteers were “...drilled by SNCC before they ever came here. That the only way they were gon’ get these people to believe in them or go register. Come here and stay with us and prove to us that they wadn’t no more than us, and that it wasn’t right for us sayin no ‘Yes ma’am’ or ‘No ma’am’ or ‘Yes sir’ to em. Say yes and no.”

The volunteers were there to foster local leadership not to triumphantly deliver blacks from bondage. And, as time passed, many of these volunteers broke through a wall; they transformed from an outsider into lifelong friends and family members. Estelle Harvey’s parents housed a number of white volunteers during this time, “I was very impressed with Mike. Mike was brave, and he was a very smart young man. And he taught us a lot of things. And he just gave us advice on how people think, and, no matter what color you are, it’s what you think of yourself. I mean, he was like a brother to us.”

Blacks were willing to defend and protect their new additions to the extreme they would their own kin. Hartman Turbown, known for his use of self-

89 Mr. Shadrach Davis, 127.

defense, housed the man who would build their community center. Learning of the threat on behalf the law enforcement in Holmes to murder this man, Turnbow confronted the sheriff almost immediately, “’Sheriff, I’m here to register a complaint. I heard that one of your assistants and others are planning to kill my friend. No he’s more than my friend, he’s my brother. Anybody that’s going to deal with my brother is going to deal with Turnbow’”.

Upon entering Holmes County, the work for these volunteers began almost immediately, for the need was desperate. Their dedication came in the form of voter registration canvassing, organizing freedom schools, and refining the structure of the Freedom Democratic Party. Again, it is imperative that it is said that white volunteers did not build this movement; they added the necessary manpower and contributed resources that helped expand on something that was already there. Reverend Russell remembers, “They help us to canvass, going around knockin’ on everybody’s door to follow us. Y’see, people didn’t know ‘bout the Movement, and they was afraid. And we had to go visit them. And they help us do that. Some are doctors, lawyers, nurses, and you name it.”

Because most had the privilege to obtain higher learning, they were valuable resources in the areas of education as well. The volunteers became teachers conducting various classes in “Freedom Schools”. Mileston, Sunny Mount, Mount Olive and Pilgrim Rest all were places in which these classes were held, teaching local blacks about registration, history, and daily living skills. Charles Payne sees the creation of Freedom Schools to be representative of what the Freedom Summer project was all about, “The schools offer another example of the

---

91 Reverend Russell, Interview in, Minds Stayed on Freedom, 30.
developmental aspect of the community-organizing tradition; the response of local people to the volunteers suggests another way of thinking about the influence of southern Black culture on the movement. 92 Whatever was needed, the classes could transform to meet that need. The July 21st, 1964 “Report on the Mileston Freedom School” expresses, “Motivation among the students seems very high; they are all eager to learn. Reading and writing level vary as much as we had been told they might. Knowledge of history and social studies is appallingly absent, but political consciousness and understanding of the students’ situation as Southern Negroes are much greater than the political consciousness of Northern high school students with whom the staff is familiar.” 93 With Movement activity in full swing in 1964, a major hole became apparent: There was no community center or place that meetings and classes could be held consistently. This absence was recognized by an outside white man, Abe Osheroff who wished to make a hands-on contribution to the Movement. In an interview he said, “One of the problems the movement had then is that they didn’t even have a place to meet in some rural areas”, and he planned to build one. Osheroff was willing to raise all the funds and provide the skilled labor necessary. The only terms were that the community would be willing to protect and defend this center. And in the fall of 1964, the Holmes County Community Center was built. Osheroff recalls, “…I did become part of that black community…it wasn’t my

92 Payne, I’ve Got the Light of Freedom, 301.

community, but they let me in.”  

Abe’s work gave the local blacks their own space to meet, and this community center became an essential piece to the Movement. Griffin McLaurin emphasizes this, “Beautiful community center, and that gave most people in this area, and other areas to come in and we sat down and that’s where most of our strategy and all our information dispersed from.”  

The four walls of the Holmes County Community Center saw almost every aspect of Movement activity and social gathering that occurred in Holmes. Its uses were endless, and a crucial addition to the plight of local organizers. In her speech, delivered at a the “First Annual Meeting”, Director Mrs. Daisy Lewis reported, “All along the building has been used for meetings of every kind-sometimes every night of the week. There are regular weekly Mileston Mass Meetings and FDP meetings, health classes, and Board meetings, co-op meetings, meetings with plantation people…also rallies and workshops…integrating schools and other Movement projects”. Volunteers helped to set up and organize these meetings, as well as collected funds to enrich the community center. Books, typewriters, recreational equipment and mimeograph machines were donated or purchased in order to give blacks access to education and information they had been denied.  

---


space with which to learn, discuss and share. In “Messages from the Staff”, the following are excerpts from “What the community center means to me” reports:

Rosey Head, a 26 year old mother writes: “…this is the place our young people can come Saturday and Sunday nights instead of having to stand around on the street and get kicked around and thrown in jail for no other reason than having a black face”

Elease Gallison, 21, writes: “The center is where people come to get information about different things. The center gives me and others a good understanding about my life and I have also learned to read more books…I have been taught to speak up at meetings. I always have been afraid to talk in meetings…We learn to work with others…Henry and Sue have tried to train me to work out things on my own and not look to them for everything”

Mary Helen Kohn, 19, writes “…The center is the best thing that the Negro can have. It gives them a better understanding about life…it teaches them to read and check out books from the library and to go get information…”

These help create an image of the Center as one which brought people together to expand their knowledge and understanding of their situation and discuss how to improve it. It was a place for people to go and know they would not be turned away because of their skin color. People discovered their voice and learned to use it effectively and independently. Not only was it a place for education and discussion, the Community Center became just a place to gather and enjoy one’s self. For example, they held dances and film nights as a get-away from their lives of restriction and oppression. The center came to serve vital purposes, and was a huge breakthrough for blacks in Holmes.

97 Head, Gallison, and Kohn, “Messages from the staff: What the community center means to me”, SNCC papers, reel 37.
It is not surprising that the white community in Holmes County was less than thrilled about the arrival of these “outsiders”. Whites were coming into their community to help the very people who they worked to keep inferior. Whites in Holmes could not grasp the idea that people of their own race would clash with them; Southern whites believed brotherhood came from skin color and skin color alone. This close interaction these white volunteers had with “their” blacks also played heavily on the long, fixated fear of interracial mixing. To whites in Holmes, black men were sexual deviants, looking for the change to prey on an innocent white woman. Any type of relationship between the two would lead to either violence or social ostracism. And Freedom Summer resulted in quite a few interracial relationships. Reverend Russell recalls, “And the young ladies and young men ‘n’ all worked together real good. This is what the white and black didn’t do in our own community. White girls and black boys just didn’t work together and have any associated with each other.” Whites in Holmes could not understand why these outsiders would want to come and stir up trouble in their daily lives, and were more than willing to do whatever they could to stand in their way.

Threats, harassment, and violence. These were constants in the daily lives of Freedom Summer volunteers. A major source of this intimidation came from law enforcement itself. Mr. Shadrach Davis recalls, “On Saturday nights, the civil rights workers would go over to the center, and they’d leave there and come to the store. White and black would dance together and went on. And laws- patrolmen, the sheriff, deputy, constables- would just sit there in their cars and watch. And the time

---

98 Reverend Russel, 31.
you’d leave, they’d take you down the road and stop you and ask you a lot of questions.”

Local whites would burn crosses in the yards of those who were housing civil rights workers, lurk outside, pull them over for menial traffic violations, anything that would let the volunteers know they were being watched. Violence in the form of night attacks on homes housing these “outsiders” was also common. Once the community center was completed, it was a constant target of white retaliation. Not only was it a vital organ of the Movement, it was built by one of these outside white men. Griffin McLaurin remembers, “…we had to spend twenty-four hours a day and night to keep them from bombing it, and they blew up a lot of cars on the road going to the center…”

Whites in Holmes felt like in order for them to protect their civil rights, they had to crush those of the blacks. Their survival had to come at the expense of exploiting African Americans, and they were not willing to let any Northern volunteer strip them of their livelihood.

Once the summer came to a close, many volunteers had to return to their homes. However, many stayed on, discovering they found fulfillment in the work they were doing. One summer could not cure the ailments which had been in existence for over a century. White volunteers like Henry and Sue Lorenzi (Sojourner), remained in Holmes County and dedicated years to it’s cause. In a May 20th, 1966 report, it details, “Two of the FDP workers, Henry and Sue Lorenzi, have been holding political workshops with leaders in small house meetings around the county…and intend to continue doing this for the next two months. They are trying to

---

99 Mr. Shadrach Davis, 123.

100 Griffin McLaurin
draw people out to discuss many things…from ‘what is a leader’ to what is wrong with the movement now, how can we strengthen it, are people interested in running for local offices; what should the FDP approach to these federal programs, etc.\textsuperscript{101}

Freedom Summer did not solve all problems. The Movement did not shut down without the white volunteers. While national attention may have fizzled out, the local organizers remaining in Holmes were moving on to the next phase of their work.

\textsuperscript{101} SNCC papers, reel 37.
Post Freedom Summer

Despite the departure of many Freedom Summer volunteers, the Movement work in Holmes County carried on. The goals of the meetings and classes, as well as the enthusiasm were embedded within the local organizers, and they ensured that the work done during Freedom Summer was not for nothing. For, as SNCC had hoped, local leadership had developed and a new sense of dignity and self-efficacy emerged among blacks the black community. Post-Freedom Summer thus became a transformative time. Voter registration canvassing turned into more political organizing, freedom schools became more focused around the issue of public service, and African Americans took their new found voices and made them public. The Civil Rights Movement in Holmes was in full swing, and blacks were now standing on their own against the forces of structural inequality.

Public complaint and opposition to white power was practically unheard of in Holmes before the Movement. However, once Movement activity began, blacks all across the county began to speak up, publicly against inequality. Protest on behalf of the citizens emerged in many forms. For example, in the December 16th edition of the Lexington Advertiser, the black community wrote a letter titled, “An Open Letter...To the White Business Men and Leaders of Lexington”. In this letter, blacks in Holmes spelled out their discontents, some of which read, “The following are some of the reasons why we ARE NOT SATISFIED...1. With having the Public School boycotted by the Whites 3. With segregated restrooms, cafes, offices, and waiting rooms, and all conveniences within the supposedly public facilities 4. With jobs only as janitors and not as clerks, and cashiers with equal positions, responsibilities, and
wages as white employees."\textsuperscript{102} Although these are just a few on their list, they provide a look at what daily life for African Americans looked like, and what areas of society blacks were expelled from. It is also a good indication that there was a change in attitude taking place in the African American community. They were no longer quietly disgruntled, they were actively publishing their demands. In terms of direct action, many citizens of Holmes County filed lawsuits. These suits reflect the deep existing structural inequalities existing in Holmes, as well as the black community’s attempt to use the legal system to correct them. For example, in 1965, after the \textit{Brown} case had already gone through, citizens of Holmes brought the Holmes County Board of Education to trial in \textit{Alexander, Beatrice vs. Holmes CNTY BD of ED}. This suit was filed against the superintendent and as well as the school system. They were issuing complaints that all curricular and extra-curricular activities, school budgets, and scholastics were all being segregated based on race, giving African Americans the short end of the stick. The court ordered that the plaintiffs come up with their own plan for desegregation, and the idea of “school choice” was born. This would allow for students in grades one through four to choose their own school, yet for obvious reasons, this plan made little headway. Traditionally “white” schools, of Lexington, Durant, Tuchula, and Goodman found that their number of white students plummeted. For, “By September 9th of 1965, white parents and children were boycotting the desegregated grades at these four schools.”\textsuperscript{103} Whites were clearly, and in great numbers, leaving the schools, refusing

\textsuperscript{102} “An Open Letter...To the White Business Men and Leaders of Lexington”, Lexington Advertiser, December 16\textsuperscript{th} 1964, SNCC Papers, Reel 37.

\textsuperscript{103} Alexander, Beatrice vs Holmes CNTD BD of ED, Southern Civil Rights Litigation Records, Reel 133.
to attend with black students. While the law had technically desegregated these schools, white people were perpetuating de facto segregation, often found creating their own white-only schools. Even white teachers were being allowed to break their contracts for the sole purpose of allowing them to find jobs teaching at white-only institutions. Though a failed attempt, this case shows that blacks in Holmes were fed up, and willing to attempt to get the law on their side. An additional suit was filed against the Mississippi Board of Education shortly thereafter. *Carthan, Willie vs MS State BD of Ed*, was a fight against the fact that the “…Mississippi legislature enacted a bill providing that all children not living with either a parent or guardian must pay tuition to attend the public schools of Mississippi”. Though absent in the language, this was a clearly a bill designed with color in mind. For, this bans children from foster homes, orphans, those living with extended families, or those living with relatives as the result of a broken home. More times than not, children in these situations were black. For, the case states, “The percentage of Negro children who do not have a natural or adoptive parent residing within the state greatly exceeds the percentage of white children…”. Discrimination against African Americans in Holmes County often found themselves having to leave the area in search of work. There was no chance for upward mobility, and many mothers and fathers were forced to go north and leave their children with family members. This case directly reflects these deeper structural inequalities I have mentioned previously. For, “As a result of the caste system and of their exclusion from effective political participation, both of which have been and are officially sanctioned and promoted by the State of Mississippi, the median income of Negroes is appreciably lower than that of white
citizens...”104 Enforcement of this bill would lead to a vast number of African American children who would not be able to attend school, for most could not afford the tuition. Simply because the bill did not state anything concerning color, its disguise was not good enough. Citizens of Holmes stood up and took it to court, and were willing to stand up to the State. This was something many would have been fearful of before the Movement. It was changing mindsets, and it was helping people to realize that they deserved equality at any cost.

Forms of protest were not limited to written discontents or law suits. Marches and public demonstrations were also common. Boycotts and selective buying campaigns were popular means of desegregating southern stores and restaurants. Haytte Gatson remembers boycotting a cafe, “…who had the signs in the windows saying ‘Colored’ and ‘White’”. She claims that while there was no huge march, the boycott, “…grew, and everybody cooperated here so nicely. And they caused the business to go out, you know.”105 Gatson and her community worked together to eliminate this restaurant, proving their effectiveness as a unified people. Additionally, African Americans organized marches against stores who would not hire African American employees in the Lexington area. Bea Jenkins remembers, “We were trying to get people hired…working in the store, and because the only people at that time worked in the store, we called them broomsweepers. They would

104 Carthan, Willie vs MS State BD of ED, Southern Civil Rights Litigation Records, reel 138.

sweep the stores and just in the stores...Didn’t have ay jobs other than that...”

During these marches, the police would arrest the demonstrators. Yet this did not stop them or harm their spirit. They kept reserves on the sidelines of the demonstrations, providing the role of bondsmen. They were a strong network, and had learned how to effectively work together. African Americans in Holmes, before the Movement, would have had a much more difficult time organizing something like this. With the looming threat of the white world constantly present, many blacks in Holmes would have preferred to stay away from any attention-grabbing action like a march. It was a way to use their voices and it was their refusal to be ignored. The Movement action may not have changed much on paper in terms of laws, but it changed an entire population of people. It changed the way in which they believed they fit into society; change became something they wished to achieve on their terms.

With their new community center up and running, meetings and projects in Holmes County became more frequent and efficient. They now had a place to call their own, and could use it at their own discretion to organize and discuss the direction of the Movement. One of the first major developments came to be the organizing a branch of the Freedom Democratic Party in Holmes. Blacks in Mississippi had been denied access to the vote, silencing them politically. Neither the Democratic nor the Republican Party held anyone whom fully represented the needs and wants of blacks from Mississippi. Black Mississippians were realizing with each

---

day that the government’s “assistance” through acts were hallow promises. Again, African Americans realized the need for a parallel institution to the Democratic Party, and hence the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was born, “To challenge successfully the legitimacy of the Democratic Party in Mississippi, FDP needed to prove that blacks were systematically excluded from participating in the regular party’s selection of delegates to the national convention”\textsuperscript{107}. Dittmer discusses the organizing and planning that went behind the creation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. They needed this parallel institution that would provide for African Americans what the Democratic Party couldn’t. The Freedom Democratic Party belonged to African Americans, and spoke on their behalf. In January of 1965, the held elections to elect an FDP County Executive Committee, each “beat” in the county receiving representation. Mrs. Bernice Montgomery was elected secretary, and Ralthus Hayes was elected the new county chairman\textsuperscript{108}. Not only does this provide evidence of their ability to organize themselves, but organize themselves in a democratic manner. The FDP restored a democratic system that blacks had been consistently excluded from. Also something to note was that women were being elected to positions of power within the party, something that was uncommon during this era anywhere. Once Holmes FDP was established, they worked hard in their dedication to the party’s activities, and this included their contribution to supporting the 1964 MFDP Congressional Challenge. Dittmer makes the point that that, “The 1964 Democratic convention was in fact a turning point in the black struggle”. Up

\textsuperscript{107} Dittmer, 273.

\textsuperscript{108} SNCC Papers, Reel 37.
until Atlantic City, African Americans had previously thought of themselves working within the Democratic Party for change. For example, there is evidence of strong support for those going to represent the FDP in the Congressional Challenge. On July 23rd, 1965, the FDP in Holmes wrote a letter directly to President Johnson. They wrote:

"As Negro citizens of Holmes County, Mississippi we are vitally concerned about the outcome of our Freedom Democratic Party Challenge to the seats of the five present Mississippi congressmen. We are Negro. We live in Mississippi. We work in farming. We are poor. The FDP is our party. The FDP is our voice. This is the first time any of us has had a voice. This is the first time any of us had a change and a place to use our God-given voices and have it mean something. Talking with ourselves is important and good. It helps us help ourselves. But our problems in Mississippi are so many that we need the help of others. Our FDP Congressional Challenge is the biggest and most important thing we have said and tried to do. We need the help of others to do it. If we don’t win, what will happen to our new found voice? If we don’t win, how long will we be able to keep our voice?"

This letter is significant in terms of the Movement for a number of reasons. First, this is evidence, as the letter states, of the use of their newly established voice. Blacks in Mississippi had been kept on the outside of politics since the days of slavery, and now they were demanding the right of representation. They were no longer going to put their heads down in defeat and allow people whom they did not (could not) vote for sit in the seats that should belong to them. This letter is also significant because it provides some evidence that the Movement was, in fact, a success. African

109 SNCC Papers, "FDP Challenge Response from Holmes County", Reel 37.
Americans, in a county as small as Holmes, were willing to get involved in something that was of national importance. They were not discouraged, but felt that they owed it to themselves to work towards change. And while the FDP Challenge did not end as many had hoped, it still was able to bring national attention to what was going on in Mississippi, as well as put some heat on the President to take responsibility. The presence of self-worth in a community, whom previously struggled with it, while intangible, is concrete success for the Movement as a whole.

After the unsuccessful attempt to obtain congressional representation at the Challenge, the FDP in Holmes took steps towards changing politics locally. In 1967, the decision to run a candidate for state legislature was made in Holmes. The FDP chose Robert Clark, a high school teacher in Lexington to be that person. Walter Bruce, chair of the Holmes County Freedom Democratic Party, recalled, “...at that time, we didn’t have anybody else that probably would have even wanted to run...and he always stood out some way, that you could see it in him, and he didn’t hesitate to run for it...He always would speak out, and was always considered a good speaker” 110 With Clark on the ticket, blacks who had registered to vote came out in full support, dispelling any question over their desire to vote. Robert Clark was elected that year, and he was the first African American since reconstruction to come into the state representative seat. Now that Clark was in, he faced the challenge of getting anything actually accomplished. Clark recounts, “And my main planks of my

platform, when I came here, was health care, justice under the law, and education. And I pursued the education issues of early childhood education and compulsory school attendance, introducing bills but knowing I wasn't going to get it out of the floor or out of the committee to the floor of the House...But I found it very difficult to get recognized on the floor of the House. When I would stand, the speaker at the time would look over me to a certain extent."\textsuperscript{111} It seems as though every time an African American clears one wall, there is another almost immediately in his path. Yet this was a huge step in the right directions for African Americans, especially those living in Holmes. It started with Clark, and despite his struggles in the House, more and more African Americans got up and ran for political offices both locally and state-wide. Holmes County became an example for surrounding counties to follow. Bruce explains, "We would go around to other communities, you know, and tell them about Holmes County. And we was invited to a whole lot of other counties to let them know...how we would go about getting black peoples elected". Other counties were then able to elect their citizens into positions of power. Holmes County broke through the barrier. Their branch of the FDP got a black man into the House of Representatives, something that would have been unimaginable less than ten years back.

Lastly, community service programs, like "Head Start" have been a major project of local organizers in Holmes. This program gave black children, age three to six, the chance to experience what a school environment is going to be like. Haytte

Gatson, who worked for this “Head Start” program describes it as, “...a head start on what school would be like and to get a chance to meet other children and be ready for school and to get rid of the fright...And the nutrition part was very good, because the children got a chance to eat hot meals there...”

Children in Holmes had been constantly deprived of an equal education. Their facilities were unacceptable in comparison with what white children were given. The Head Start Program thus allowed education to begin early for black children, providing a combination of play and learning. They learned the alphabet, how to write their names and addresses and even some learned to read. They were able to get a taste of what was to come, hopefully easing the transition between home and the first round of learning. This pre-learning would also help place them on a more equal footing as white children, as they would be entering school with a set of basic skills black children often are not taught. In addition to this program, the FDP also worked towards furthering economic opportunity to the poor in Holmes. Drawing from FDR’s New Deal, which had sold land back to black farmers in 1940, the FDP drafted what was called the, “Resolution to Purchase Land”. It was a plan to “...urge the Federal Government...to purchase a minimum of 100,000 acres of good delta farmland and sell it back to qualified farmers over long periods of time and low interest...to meet then land needs of thousands of...citizens who have been evicted due to mechanization, political purposes, or for other reasons”

Redistribution of land would result in more

---


113 SNCC Papers, “Resolution to Purchase Land”, Reel 37.
independent farmers like those in Mileston who were the catalyst to the Movement in Holmes. Many of the blacks who the redistribution of this land would benefit were those who were punished by whites for joining the Movement. The FDP was doing its best to represent their constituents and improve the lives of those who hold the majority in numbers but not in power.

Where do blacks in Holmes believe they stand now that traditional Movement fervor has faded? People seem to be both positive and negative in their assessment. Walter Bruce seems to take pride in the fact that the FDP is still alive and active in Holmes today and no where else. He says, “…we always have something going on in Holmes County, and if you keep going, and keep motivating people that you will always have somebody who wants to come, and you’ve got a segment of people just be looking forward to that third Sunday to come to the meeting and share our ideas.”

People are still dedicated and donating to the survival of the FDP in Holmes, and continue to be motivated around its causes. He takes pride in the fact that people in Holmes are so organized, and are systematically able to reach out to other counties. Bruce’s beliefs, however, only represent one side. Estelle Harvey, looking at it through the lens of public educational sees that there is still a huge gap between white and black institutions. She comments on the lack of motivation on behalf of students, claiming, “Yeah. Something is wrong. And a lot of times the students will say, ‘Well, some of the teachers are acting like students.’”

---

114 Bruce, USM website.

of these black students are still not doing their jobs. These teachers are most likely the least qualified, assuming those with the best credentials are immediately placed within white schools. The fact that school segregation, thought not by law, still exists is proof that Holmes needs more. Lastly, there are those that seem to fit under the category of being hopeful. They are aware of the hard work and dedication that was put into getting Holmes this far and believe that it has the chance to go farther. Evidently, the path has been dug, and the tracks have been laid; the next generation needs to continue on with this digging process. Bea Jenkins hopes, “...they will come in and take a role. And I believe we still have some good black children out there. White ones, too...It would be great to see us working together...”

Jenkins believes in the work of a coalition, and its potential in carrying on the work of the Movement. While there are few that can look at Holmes and can deny the progress that has been made, the jury is still out on whether or not it will continue to progress.

Holmes County today is not the Holmes County that existed in the 1950’s. The Civil Rights Movement In terms of whether or not I can see the Movement in Holmes as being determined a success,. I suppose it also depends on my own personal definition of the term “success” as it applies to Civil Rights. I know from what I have looked at so far that Holmes began a county of African Americans who had accepted their position of inferiority for so long. I also know that many of these fears within the community were broken through their participation and involvement and to me, that is an enormous gain. They began to believe in themselves and educate one another, cultivating a sense of strength. They found their voice and

\[116\] Jenkins, USM website.
exercised it in anyway that could allow them to be heard. African Americans stood up to the face of inequality and refused to back down coming a long way from their acceptance and willingness to let whites decide when they should be given rights. So in terms of its effect on the local, everyday black citizens in Holmes, I would say it had a profound impact and could thus be coined a success. In terms of tangible, visual changes in the law or placing blacks in positions of prestige, I feel I have to do more research on the matter before I can assess that. But overall, the change in mindset is there and strong.
Works Cited

Alexander, Beatrice vs. Holmes CNTD BD of ED. Southern Civil Rights Litigation Records.

Reel 133.

“An Open Letter...To the White Business Men and Leaders of Lexington”.


Carthan, Willie vs. MS State BD of ED. Southern Civil Rights Litigation Records. Reel 138.

Clark, Georgia. Interview with: Harriet Tanzman. “An Oral History with Georgia Clark”.


Gallison, Elea se. “Messages From the Staff: What the Community Center Means to Me”.

86
Papers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Reel 37.
http://www.usm.edu/crdp/html/transcripts/manuscript-gatson_hattyeh.shtml
(May 9, 2009).
http://www.usm.edu/crdp/html/transcripts/manuscript-harvey_estell.shtml
(May 9th 2009).
Head, Rosye. “Messages From the Staff: What the Community Center Means to Me”. Papers of
the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Reel 37.
http://www.usm.edu/crdp/html/transcripts/manuscript-jenkins_bea.shtml
(May 8th 2009).
Kohn, Mary Helen. “Messages From the Staff: What the Community Center Means to Me”.
Papers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Reel 37.
Papers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Reel 37.
“Memo to Jessie Harris and FBI”. Papers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.
Reel 37.
Moses, Robert. Radical Equations Civil Rights From Mississippi to Algebra Project. Boston:
Osheroff, Abe. Interview with: Robert Jensen, “Abe Osheroff: On the Joys and Risks of Living
in the Empire, Third Coast Activist Resource Center”.
Payne, Charles. “The View From the Trenches”. Debating the Civil Rights Movement 1945-


The Movement’s Invisible Heroes

“I want to tell you about Mrs. Hazel Palmer, who is a lady who works with the Freedom Democratic Party in Mississippi. She was working for ten, fifteen dollars a week as a maid most of her life. She stopped and changed last summer. And if you want to write her, and I suggest you do—a lot of you—drop her a line. Ask her, ‘What did you use to do? What do you do now? How come you changed? What gave you the courage to do that? What makes you think that instead of being a cook in somebody’s kitchen you could help run a political party? Where did you learn how to do that? Did you go to school?’

- Bob Moses, 1965

“Yeah guys, I had to sign up for this course on civil rights, this is going to be so lame”. This was me about seven years ago during my freshman year in college. Gosh darn you registration process! You see, the seventeen year-old me believed I had learned just about all I needed to know about the Movement in high school. I mean come on, I could basically recite King’s “I have a Dream” speech in my sleep, and I would obviously never forget the arrest of poor, old, tired Rosa. Let’s fast forward ten weeks later. I emerged from that class both an enthusiast and a skeptic. Let’s start with the positive here shall we? I became a Civil Rights Movement “junkie”. I took at least one reading and writing intensive course a semester on the topic. I became close with my professors and got involved in reading groups and local discussions on race and politics. But, something else began bubbling in my brain as well: skepticism of what I learned in high school. Clearly, I had been had.

Let’s continue this trip down memory lane. I’ll take you into the classroom of my advanced placement United States history class my junior year of high school. If my memory serves me correctly, it’s about the beginning of May, and we are scrambling to prepare for the AP test as well as the Regents. We get to the Civil
Rights Movement. And in about four days we travel at light speed from 1954’s 
*Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the March on 
Washington, King’s “I Have a Dream” Speech, a few pieces of Johnson’s Civil 
Rights legislation, the “radical” words of Malcolm X, and the 1968 assassination of 
Martin Luther King. So as a high school graduate, I crossed the stage with the 
following notions about Civil Rights:

1.) Martin Luther King was the leader of the Movement
2.) Rosa Parks was a little lady who was simply tired and just did not want to 
move
3.) The Movement’s events were all centered on the concept of non-violence
4.) Government legislation meant immediate results and success for African 
Americans
5.) The Civil Rights Movement had an official end date

Looking back at this now, I feel sad that a time period so important has been so 
watered down. But I also feel angry that educators and state test makers have let it 
boil down to this skeleton as “knowing enough” to graduate. As a current high school 
history teacher, I am working to change that within my own room. I want them to 
know about those whom history textbooks leave out. I want them to recognize the 
Movement’s invisible heroes.

“Stokely Carmichael, Ella Baker, Hartman Turnbow, Septima Clark, Fannie 
Lou Hamer”. These are the names I recited to my students on our first day of our 
Civil Rights unit. My kids looked at me like I was taking attendance in some 
alternate universe. “Recognize any of these names?” I asked them. Again, I was
answered with silence and a giggle. I decided to let them in on the secret; “These are all major players in Movement history”. Well after a few minutes of stirring and “what’s Delaney saying now?” I asked them to quickly take a look through their textbooks to find these names. The pages began turning, and flipping, and flying, but the only name they could find was Stokely Carmichael next to the words “Black Power”. I asked them to tell me the names they could find and I got replies of “Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Huey Newton”. I shouted “EXACTLY” and thus began our study of the Movement.

My classroom goal is to get my kids to think critically about the Movement and understand that there is so much more to it than what the textbook deems as the final truth. It is important to me that my kids leave my class recognizing that so much of what was accomplished during the Movement was due to the work of local ordinary men and women most oftentimes left out of popular history. The sacrifices of the Movement’s invisible heroes tend to be forgotten, and I want to put an end to this. Additionally, I want my students to reflect back on the meaning of words like success and hero and question what determines its achievement. That being said, this requires me to find the outside sources and the information to bring into the classroom. In this section, I hope to shed light on resources that are available for you to use in your own classrooms. These will hopefully establish the understanding that this was a movement generated by ordinary people who put their lives on the line to achieve extraordinary things.
Background Reading

Simply just going off the textbook for background knowledge of the local organizing tradition of the Civil Rights Movement isn’t going to cut it here. Here is a list of some excellent pieces from the bottom-up perspective on the Movement that will provide you with a solid base of knowledge that will not bore you to tears.


All of these books help build a knowledge base for understanding what the organizing tradition really stood for and highlights the work and bravery of everyday local African Americans.
Beginning Before the “Beginning”

I believe that it is difficult to grapple with establishing a level of accomplishment and success without any knowledge of the starting place. This sentiment is echoed in Holmes County, Mississippi activist Hartman Turnbow’s advice for white activist Susan Sojourner, “You need to tell it how it was before the Movement what led up to it, how life was for a Negro in Mississippi back before they Movement come…and how it built up to the Movement that come.” I believe this thought process applies directly when teaching about the local organizing work of African Americans during the Movement.

But how does one paint this “pre-Movement” picture? The textbook details Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation as a great victory for African Americans. Slavery was no more! But then what happened? The hardships and firsthand accounts of the newly freed slaves are often left up to the imagination. Reconstruction seems to be written more as a tale of politics rather than race relations. That being said, fast forward a couple chapters to the *Brown v. Board Ruling* in 1954 and magically this is popularly labeled as the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. And I’ll ask again, what was life following the Emancipation that kept African Americans in a state of second-class citizenship? Why was there a need for a Movement at all? I generally like to begin my unit on the Movement by going back in time for a moment, reminding/sharing with my students a taste of what life was like for the newly
freed. One tends to think that Emancipation for African Americans ultimately resulted in immediate positives. But this was not the case for most blacks in the rural south. Presenting students with an account from an Emancipated slave is a great way to begin this conversation. For example, using a section from former slave Elvira Boles narrative is a great way to assess how Emancipation worked for most African Americans, and establish a starting point to understand the implications of the Movement itself.

I would generally start this type of introductory activity by asking students to do a quick word association with the term “Emancipation Proclamation”. I would break them into groups to come up with a list of three words they all agree on. The group leader would then come up and list the words on a piece of poster paper for the entire class to read. I assume words like “Freedom”, “13 Amendment”, “Lincoln”, and “End to Slavery” would be among the more popular responses. I would have them By having students establish a visual common thread of ideas, among one another will be important for reflection later on. I will then have them read Boles account of what Emancipation meant to her. Because the syntax can be difficult to understand, we will read it aloud, and I have underlined essentially the most significant piece.

Figure 1

Elvira Boles Slave Narrative
“Freedom was give Jan. 1, 1865, but de slaves didn' know it 'till June 19. We'se refugees. Boles, our marster, sent us out and he come from Holmes County to Cherokee County in a wagon. We was a dodgin' in and out, runnin' from de Yankees. Marster said day was runnin' us from de Yankees to keep us, but we was free and didn' know it. I lost my baby, its buried somewhere on dat road. Died at Red River and we left it. De white folks go out and buy food 'long de road and hide us. Dey say we'd never be free iffen day could git to Texas wid us, but de people in Texas tol' us we's free. **Den marster turn us loose in de world, without a penny. Oh, dev was awful times. We jus' worked from place to place after freedom. When we started from Mississippi, dev tol' us de Yankees 'ud kill us iffen day foun' us, and dev say, 'You ain't got no time to take nothin' to whar you goin'. Take your little bundle and leave all you has in your house.' So when we got to Texas I jus' had one dress, what I had on. Dat's de way all de cullud people was after freedom, never had nothin' but what had on de back.** Some of dem had right smart in dere cabins, but they was skeered and day lef' everything. Bed clothes and all you had was lef'. We didn' know any better den. “

After reading Boles’s memory, I would ask my students to revisit the collective list they had originally created. Do any of those words describe or relate to Elvira’s story? JOURNAL MOMENT!! This would be a perfect time for students to reflect on possible discrepancies. Where does this disconnect come from? Why does the textbook not include a story like Elvira’s? Should it even be included? Is her story important why or why not?

This introductory activity accomplishes a few important building blocks for understanding the history of the Movement. First, it brings in the importance of what every day, ordinary people contribute to history. Elvira’s narrative sheds light on the important issue of legislation failing African Americans from the beginning, yet it is not included in the popular discussion. Second, it forces students to question why their textbooks include certain elements of history above others. And third it sets a
scenario of WHY their needed to be a Movement at all and possibly suggests why African Americans could not organize until much later.

How we Remember: View from the Trenches

The Elvira Boles narrative highlights the significant, but often hidden, contribution “ordinary” people make to Movement history, but there is more uncovering to be done in these early stages of the unit. I firmly believe that in order to develop a critical eye within my classroom, we must first establish a framework from which to do so. This is where I like to bring in quotes and excerpts from Charles Payne’s essay, “The View from the Trenches”, from the book, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement* 1945-1968. The focus of Payne’s essay is to bring the audience to take a second look at the way they read and interpret the sources written about the Movement. He point being, “Our understanding of social change, our conceptions of leadership, our understanding of the possibilities of interracial cooperation are all affected by how we remember the movement”(pg. 144). Our textbooks tend to “remember” the Movement through national, well publicized events and government legislation. It tends to frame the entire Movement as being very “King-Driven”, and makes little noise about the local heroes organizing their neighbors and community members. Payne writes, “Placing so much emphasis on national leadership and national institutions minimizes the importance of local struggle and make it difficult to appreciate the role ‘ordinary’ people played”(Pg. 125). That being said, I want my students to bring attention to these invisible heroes.

Students will be broken up into small groups to work on a “Civil Rights Wall of Fame” project. Each group will be given a name they most likely will not have found within their textbook reading. Names like Septima Clark, Ella Baker, Robert Moses, Sam Block, Fannie Lou Hamer, Stokely Carmichael, and Hartman Turnbow will be assigned to the groups. Each group will then have to create a “Facebook” page for their local hero. A template will be provided, something like in Figure 2 on a piece of poster board. They will be required to find as much information to fill out their template as possible and “friend” others in the class.
Figure 2. Civil Rights Hall of Fame “Fakebook” Template
This "Fakebook" activity will bring both the faces and the actions to these otherwise invisible local organizers. Students will not only be required to practice their research skills, but they will work within a familiar framework of social media to do so. This will help make ordinary grassroots organizers relevant and visible and allow students to see another side to the story of the Movement.

**Ella Baker and the Youth Movement**

As far as personal heroes go, Ella Baker is towards the top of my list. Not only did she help teach others to speak the language of grassroots organizing, she was a woman with a strong voice in movement lead by mostly men. Now you may find
yourself asking, who is this lady and how does she fit into this larger conversation about teaching the story of local organizing?

Baker’s legacy begins after the 1960 Greensboro sit-in movement. Students and young people across America fed off the energy and fervor created by the sit-ins, yet found they had no way of channeling their excitement into something constructive. Enter Ella Baker. Baker, a civil rights worker herself, recognized this absence of a purely youth driven organization. Sure, organizations like the NAACP and King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) existed, but Baker knew a young person’s voice could easily be muted in larger groups like these. There had to be some type of organization to harness the ideas and spirit of the youth and transform it into something revolutionary for civil rights. Ella Baker began by encouraging students to develop their own democratic vehicle of change where value was placed on every voice. Students took Baker’s advice and created the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, popularly known as SNCC (“Snick”). After its founding, Baker became an influential advisor, helping its staff to hone a number of its core ideals. SNCC wanted more than to just gain access for African Americans to lunch counters and restaurants; SNCC wanted to completely change the fact that African Americans were seen as inferior to whites, eliminate white supremacy, and wanted to spread a new sense of equality throughout the South.

Now that there is a touch of background on Baker and SNCC, how would one apply this to the classroom scenario to teach the Movement? Why even include it at all? Well let’s first start with the “Why?” question. Highlighting Ella Baker’s work in the Movement does a few things. First, it brings a woman of color into the classroom as a leader. I think any chance a social studies teacher has to do something like this they should go for it. It seems that our history texts and historical memories tend to leave out women, let alone women of color. Second, it introduces the basic, but most influential, fundamentals of developing local leadership that form the foundation of both SNCC and the grassroots organizing tradition. It allows students to learn how a youth driven organization came to be established, and the process it went through to reach an effective level of national social action. And third, it sheds light on what kids like your students can do. It is SO important to emphasize that
these SNCC kids who were organizing local ADULTS to register to vote were their age (sometimes younger)! A lot of times kids see history as “adults that did important things”. The Civil Rights Movement is a great way to wake up your class and help break down their apathy and “I’m only 16, what can I do to change things?” mentality.

The materials I find most effective come in two forms: a primary source document and a film. The primary source document would be Ella Baker’s article, “Bigger than a Hamburger”. In her article, Baker sheds light on the backbone of SNCC and the ideals it would be based on. Reading this with your students introduces Baker’s mentality, gives her a voice, and will require them to search for the broader goals of the Movement.

Figure 3 Ella Baker’s “Bigger Than a Hamburger”

The Student Leadership Conference made it crystal clear that current sit-ins and other demonstrations are concerned with something much bigger than a hamburger or even a giant-sized Coke.

Whatever may be the difference in approach to their goal, the Negro and white students, North and South, are seeking to rid America of the scourge of racial segregation and discrimination—not only at lunch counters, but in every aspect of life.

[...]

"We want the world to know that we no longer accept the inferior position of second-class citizenship. We are willing to go to jail, be ridiculed, spat upon and even suffer physical violence to obtain First Class Citizenship."

By and large, this feeling that they have a destined date with freedom, was not limited to a drive for personal freedom, or even freedom for the Negro in the South. Repeatedly it was emphasized that the movement was concerned with the moral implications of racial discrimination for the "whole world" and the "Human Race."

[...]

It was further evident that desire for supportive cooperation from adult leaders and the adult community was also tempered by apprehension that adults might try to "capture" the student movement. The students showed willingness to be met on the basis of equality, but were intolerant of anything that smacked of manipulation or domination. This inclination toward group-centered leadership, rather than toward a leader-centered group pattern of organization, was refreshing indeed to those of the older group who bear the scars of the battle, the frustrations and the disillusionment that come when the prophetic leader turns out to have heavy feet of clay.

[...]

After reading this document with your students getting their first reactions as to why they think Baker titled this document as she did is always interesting. They must determine the underlying message of Baker’s speech. Engage in a discussion asking kids questions like, What exactly is Baker talking about? Why a hamburger? Is she talking about something beyond the scope of civil rights for African Americans? You can then go on to speculating with students how Baker may have felt about the already pre-established groups of King’s SCLC or the NAACP. This primary source breakdown allows students to see the makings of a youth-driven organization, and helps them understand why there was a need for one in the first place.

The film I referred to above is titled Freedom Song, and is based on Robert Moses and SNCC’s early organizing work in McComb, Mississippi. If you want to show your students what the process of “local organizing” looked like, this is the film. Freedom Song brings the primary sources, images, and lectures of history class to life, and allows students to see how many scenarios of organizing local blacks may have played out. The film begins just as the “Robert Moses” character arrives to a small town in Southern Mississippi. The film does an excellent job depicting the immense blanket of fear and oppression suffocating African Americans in the South. For example, in the beginning, the extreme fear of white backlash kept the local Black sharecroppers from wanting to be seen speaking to Moses, whom the white community regarded as “outside agitator”. Simply registering to vote was an unimaginable task for most blacks in the South during this time period. White
retaliation could come in many forms, and initially most African Americans were unwilling to risk the life they had struggled to build as second-class citizens. The film takes you on the ups and downs of the organizing journey, gathering the youth under SNCC and developing a sense of local leadership among the everyday African Americans. The sit-ins, protests, white backlash, the imprisonment, is all included. Additionally I love the exposure students get to the Freedom Songs of protest and pride, which I believe gave the Movement a soul. While not a documentary, Freedom Song is an accurate depiction of the fear, intimidation and oppression African Americans were facing in the South. Students tend to enjoy it because it is not produced by the History Channel, and I enjoy it because it is a solid visual interpretation of the local organizing tradition.

Because Freedom Song is not as well-known as say, Mississippi Burning, I like the idea of having students popularize it themselves. I give them the option of creating a movie poster for the film, creating a preview to attract an audience, a collage, writing film inspired poetry, or anything involving social media to accomplish the task. Anything that gets them thinking about the larger meanings of the film, and applying that to something creative is always a positive in a classroom. Having something then like a “gallery walk” where students walk around the class to admire what others had done is always a nice community exercise.

The Power of Interviews

My grandmother is 92 and while she is still technically “with it”, her memory seems to be fading a bit. And recently I’ve found myself kicking, well, myself for not
utilizing her more as an historical artifact. I mean the woman has practically seen just about everything but the signing of the Constitution (kidding gram). But in all seriousness, as I worked through the curriculum of my own US history class this year, it hit me that she would have been a great person to interview about quite a few of the timer periods we cover. Having someone who was there, experiencing the actual event, retell a story holds a special kind of magic. It blows reading a secondhand textbook paragraph out of the water. I think it’s that personal touch, those unique memories, and the identifiable voice that adds depth and richness to our discussion of history; but even more importantly interviews open the door for that human connection to be made.

That being said, I used quite a few interviews when doing research on the local organizing tradition in Holmes County, Mississippi. They give a direct link to someone who was there on the front lines, and there is so much to be gained from studying their words. Interviews with local participants in the Movement shed light on how ordinary people really felt about what was taking place around them. Were they frightened? Excited? Always nonviolent? Weary of white retaliation? Their responses answer a wide variety of questions concerning hopes, fears, death, success, racism and personal achievements. For example, interviewing people like Estelle Harvey, give us direct insight as to how local African Americans felt about volunteers, sometimes white, coming into their homes and community and aiding with Movement activity. Interviews with Reverend Russell gives us details of how the voter registration process got on its feet in Holmes, and how all the canvassing and “knockin” on everybody’s door evolved. Basically, in it’s purest form, it’s the
idea of giving a voice back to those who were left out of the textbooks. Interviews with the everyday, sharecropping African Americans give a new angle to the popular discussion of the Movement.

When teaching the Movement to the students, like I said before, I believe interviews will add depth and character to the unit. Why wouldn’t students want to read first-hand accounts of what actually happened? It places them in the role of detective, and kids love to take control of their own learning. The University of Southern Mississippi has a WONDERFUL collection of interviews with those who participated in the Movement. Any type of activity using this website would work. This would be a great time for students to break their belief that every African American in the Movement was comfortable with practicing King’s nonviolence. Having students research men like Hartman Turnbow or Robert Williams would be quite the contrast to what popular history teaches about the way the Movement played out. A critical thinking reflection paper or group discussion would be great after learning that all African Americans did NOT practice nonviolence, but many practiced self-defense. You could ask your students to put themselves in the shoes of a local organizer and think like them. Would they have been nonviolent or would they have fought back? Why? Which is more effective? Why does your textbook oftentimes present the Movement is one giant nonviolent, peaceful protest? All of these questions get students to think critically and question what they thought they knew about civil rights.

Interviews are also great for waking kids up to the fact that they have history right at home. Unlike men who did not realize it until now, they have moms, dads,
grandmas, grandpas, neighbors etc, who have been a part of SOMETHING. Even
having your students interview someone about 9/11 is a start to teaching them that
history does not just come in the form of a textbook. Get your kids to make a local
history and work on their interview skills. Your class could even put together a book
of the interviews they collect and publish it as a local history artifact. The
possibilities with interviews are truly endless, and they put students in the driver’s
seat of their education.

The End?

On our final days discussing the Civil Rights Movement, I like to ask my
students a simple question: When did the Movement end? Well, if they looked in
their textbooks, they may see that the concluding year is generally placed around
1968, the same year Martin Luther King was assassinated. Let’s pause for a moment
and ask a few questions. So, after 1968, all the goals of the Movement had been
reached? Or after 1968, because King was no longer there to serve as the lead,
everyone just gave up? How can this be? By communicating that there is an official
“end”, the textbook seem to be saying that all problems of racial inequality had been
solved, and that the war in Vietnam took center-stage. But is the Movement really
over? This is where I like to ask my students to get current and get honest about what
they see today. Sure it is EASY to say we have full racial equality now, and thank
goodness those twelve years of civil rights took place. But are we truly being honest
with ourselves. Look around boys and girls! Have we reached full racial equality in
our society? Are our schools, high-paying careers and communities completely
integrated? What is it that we really see going on here and what does that mean for current race relations?

An interesting way to go about looking at race make-up of schools is having them simply look at their own. I find this exercise especially effective in suburban schools. Who are the majority? I know my high school was a suburban school of mostly white students. Yet, if I traveled not even twelve miles down the road, I would find myself in the city of Rochester public schools with the majority of students being people of color. I need students to recognize that something is up, and white and blacks still live in segregated areas. If this is still happening how can we possibly say that the Civil Rights Movement is over? Sure, things have gotten better since the sixties for Black Americans, but have we as a nation reached the finish line. Is a finish line even possible? I know this section seems to be a rapid fire of questions, but I want my students to think about the world they live in and ask why?

After discussing many of the questions above, I like my students to write a letter to someone in the Movement. This person can be currently living, or have passed away. For example, students can write to Ella Baker, or Stokely Carmichael. In the letter I would like to see the following topics covered as well as including a piece of current news in the letter (explained below).

The End Letter

1.) Give an update on the world you see around you. What has been accomplished since the early organizing days?

2.) Has the way racism looks changed or stayed the same over the years?
3.) What is still broken in our system? Are minorities still being oppressed? How?

4.) Do you think this person would be proud or ashamed of our current standing on race relations?

5.) What area in YOUR community seems to be the most disconcerting?

6.) And what are YOU going to do to carry the spirit of the Movement in this area?

7.) Include one current piece of news that either shows racial progress or shows we have much more work to do.

I want students to link the goals they have learned about from the local, everyday African American heroes with what they see around them. I also want them to recognize that race relations in this country are not all rainbows and puppy dogs. We still have work to do. I refuse to let them live with an “ignorance is bliss” mentality. I want all my students to be touched by the Movement, walk away with a critical eye and a taste for social justice.
Connecting Research to Teaching

In the world of education, the term, “Best Practice” is a difficult one to nail down. However, there are quite a few specific learning theories that, over time, have stood out as being consistently effective in the classroom. And quite a few of these coincide with how I found teaching the Civil Rights Movement would be most successful.

Developing critical thinkers is an immense goal for me as an educator. I want my students to leave my classroom with the ability to question the world around them and ask questions that go beyond the scope of their textbooks. That being said, the unit I teach on the Civil Rights Movement falls under the umbrella of honing critical thinking skills among my students. The Conversation Frame, as discussed in Robert J. Marzano, Debra J. Pickering and Jane E. Pollock’s Classroom Instruction that Works piece under the “Summarizing and Note-Taking” chapter, seems to have found a home in my unit. The Conversation Frame organizes questions into more of a dialogue or discussion of what the teacher hopes to get across to the class (Marzano et al. 2001). I believe the more a teacher can get their class engaged in a discussion with one another, the more students will take control of their own learning and internalize the material. Additionally, the ability to question and respond to someone else are extremely important skills for students to have. A Conversation Frame guides students away from being a passive learner, and leads them down a path where learning comes from direct participation.

In addition to the development of critical thinking and discussion skills among my students, I found myself designing my unit around helping students generate and
test their own hypotheses. Marzano states, “Although the process of generating and testing hypothesis is commonly associated with the scientific method, teachers can use the process in different tasks across all disciplines” (Marzano et al. 2001). And I specifically used the “Historical Investigation” and “Decision Making” scenarios. I wanted my students to see that the textbooks they are given are not necessarily the end all be all of knowledge, especially when it comes to the Movement. Therefore, asking them to do a Historical Investigation of events or people seemed to be an excellent strategy. For, “Students are engaged in historical investigation when they construct plausible scenarios for the events of the past, about which there is no general agreement. To engage in historical investigation, students need to use their understanding of the situation to generate a hypothetical situation” (Marzano et al. 2001) and then see if they can prove it through analyzing outside information. Now I supplied a majority of the outside information, but I mostly wanted students to investigate through a comparison between what their textbooks said and what the primary source documents said. For example, I want my students to do an historical investigation as to how textbooks determine who the “Heroes” of the Movement were compared with similar conversations taking place among local organizers. Who decides whose story is most important? From here is where I wanted them to design a hypothesis as to WHY this discrepancy existed. For example why do the textbooks frame the Movement in a particular way that leaves out a lot of what local African Americans were experiencing etc. When I saw “Decision Making” in the research, at first I was a bit lost. But after I read through the descriptions, I could actually see its role within what I was trying to accomplish with my unit. For example, in the final
part of my unit I ask students to get honest with themselves and the world around them. How do they see today’s world within the framework of the goals of the original Civil Rights Movement? Can we make the decision that the Movement is technically over? According to Marzano, “…using a structured decision-making framework can help students examine hypothetical situations, especially those requiring them to select what has the most or least of something” (Marzano et al. 2001). Students use a series of decision making, problem solving, and investigation to come up with their ideas. So when students have to write the letter at the end of the unit, they are going to have to decide about today’s world. What are they going to tell the civil rights worker of their choice about the state of race relations in America today? How are they going to come up with that information or decision (having to use a current piece of news), and how are they going to place themselves within that conversation.

Finally, I found myself using quite a bit of the theory based on cues and questions. I find using the analytic questions to be most effective for my unit on the Movement. Marzano lists the three different types of analysis as being, “analyzing errors, constructing support, and analyzing perspectives” (Marzano et al. 2001) and I found use for all three. For example, when analyzing textbook information, we were analyzing errors by asking questions like, “How is this information misleading?” I wanted my students to question the information they are most often spoonfed and take it a step further to examine it critically. Students also constructed support for their arguments when they were asked to think why something presented in their textbooks would be different from something they read in an interview. Why would
this story make the pages of their book over someone else’s? And finally, the use of analyzing perspectives was HUGE in this unit. The way the Movement is written about is entirely based on perspective. Whose story is more important and from what perspective should the Movement be told from? Asking these types of analytic questions forces students to take their thinking a step further and ask “Why?” That is a lot of what I wanted kids to take away from my unit on the Movement, the “Why?” element.

Overall, quite a few of the “best practice” strategies were used throughout my unit to ensure the internalization of the material. Studying the Civil Rights Movement comes with a lot of complex elements that requires one to think in ways they may not have been asked to before. My unit may force students to re-examine what they thought they had previously knew to be Civil Rights, asking them to reorganize ideas, ask new questions, and construct new frameworks.
Works Cited

Marzano, Robert J., Debra J. Pickering, and Jane E. Pollock. 

*Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement.* Alexandria: McREL, 2001.