

## Part II: The Freedom Movement

For decades African Americans had resisted the system of white supremacy created after Reconstruction. They had carved out spaces of dignity and self-assertion, but white supremacy remained overwhelmingly strong. In the 1940s, developments in the United States created new opportunities to challenge Jim Crow.

In Part II, you will read about the rise of the mass civil rights movement in the United States. The reading will focus on the strong local movements that developed in Mississippi, the most racially oppressive state in the South. You will explore the strategies that activists used in their fight for racial justice, and the efforts of local whites to maintain white supremacy. You will also consider the responses of local, state, and federal governments to these issues.

### The Beginning of Change

World War II marked the beginning of the mass civil rights movement in the United

States. Tens of thousands of African Americans fought in the war. Although they faced discrimination in the military, these black soldiers experienced life without Jim Crow in Europe. Black veterans returned home to a country still deeply divided by race, but many had gained skills, status, and confidence that would help them fight for racial justice.

***“We got a chance to travel, go different places, meet a lot of different people from different backgrounds.... You saw in different countries how people...were living together, black and white.... It gave you something to look forward for. To hope for.”***

—Ezekiel Rankin, World War II veteran from Mississippi

Throughout the country, black veterans began to speak out against racism in the United States and join organizations dedicated to fighting against Jim Crow. NAACP membership in the South rose significantly—from 18,000

in the 1930s to 156,000 by the end of the war. Many of these new NAACP members were World War II veterans. Although NAACP membership was more concentrated in the less violent and oppressive states, NAACP branches across Mississippi began to set goals for statewide activism.

### ***What was the NAACP’s strategy for defeating Jim Crow and inequality?***

The courts were the battleground where the NAACP chose to fight Jim Crow. The Fourteenth Amendment (1868) of the Constitution had given all



U.S. Air Force photo.

Pilots of the 332nd Fighter Group known as the “Tuskegee Airmen” in Ramitelli, Italy, 1940s. The Tuskegee Airmen were the first black pilots to serve in the U.S. military.

## Part II Definitions

**Social Movement**—A social movement is a large group of people working together for social change. Examples of large social movements include the civil rights movement, the women’s rights movement, and the environmental movement.

**Community Organizing**—Community organizing is the process of bringing people from one group or community together to identify common interests and goals, and to work together for change.

citizens equal protection under the law and the right to due process, regardless of race. The Fifteenth Amendment (1870) had given all men, regardless of race, the right to vote. In the years after their ratification, the states, courts, federal government, and citizens disputed how these amendments would be interpreted. For example, the Supreme Court’s interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) made racial segregation legal throughout the country.

The legal disputes over the principles of these Amendments continued well into the twentieth century. In the 1944 Supreme Court case *Smith v. Allwright*, brought by the NAACP, the court ruled that preventing blacks from voting in state Democratic primary elections was illegal. Inspired by the Supreme Court case, black veterans attempted to vote in large numbers and helped organize voter registration campaigns throughout the South. As a result, more black southerners went to the polls in 1946 than at any point since Reconstruction.

### **What was the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case?**

In the early 1950s, the NAACP won a series of Supreme Court cases demanding that state governments provide equal educational opportunities regardless of race. Following these victories, the NAACP decided to challenge the legality of racial segregation itself.

The Supreme Court agreed to revisit the issue. On May 17, 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson*, making state-sponsored segregation illegal throughout the country. The case focused on public schools, and the court ruled that: “separate education facilities are inherently unequal.... Segregation is a denial of equal protection of the laws.”

Although it did not end Jim Crow, the *Brown* decision inspired black activists. African Americans began to actively protest segregation throughout the South. For example, in 1955, black activists including Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and members of the Women’s Political Council launched a citywide bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama to protest racial segregation in public transportation. Blacks refused to ride buses for months, putting economic pressure on the city. In 1956, in one of the first great victories of the movement, the Supreme Court ruled (*Browder v. Gayle*) that segregation on buses was unconstitutional.

To test out the *Brown* decision, the NAACP attempted to register black students in white southern schools. In 1957, nine black students were chosen to enroll in an all-white high school in Little Rock, Arkansas. The Arkansas governor tried to use the state’s national guard to prevent the integration of the school, but President Dwight D. Eisenhower sent in the U.S. Army to escort the students inside. The military remained in Arkansas throughout the school year. The governor responded by closing all the public schools in Little Rock the following year to prevent integration. The event focused national media attention on the question of school integration.

### **How did white southerners react to the *Brown* decision?**

Many southern whites opposed the *Brown* decision as an attack on the southern traditions of segregation and white supremacy. They believed that black and white populations should be kept separate, and that states had the right to make their own laws regard-



U.S. Army.

U.S. soldiers escort the “Little Rock Nine” students into the previously all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1957.

ing race relations. Although some whites did not believe in segregation, it was difficult for them to speak up in a culture rooted in white supremacy.

Alarmed at the increase in black activism, prominent whites in Mississippi organized white Citizens’ Councils to resist integration and black advancement. The Citizens’ Councils, which sprang up across the South, primarily used economic punishments rather than outright violence to intimidate black activists. When African Americans or white moderates supported civil rights activity, the white businessmen and government leaders in their communities would take away jobs, deny loans, revoke insurance, or boycott black businesses. For example, when black parents in Yazoo City, Mississippi signed a desegregation petition organized by the local NAACP, the local Citizens’ Council published their names in the local newspaper. The petition signers who worked for white employers quickly lost their jobs.

Southern state governments also took measures to keep segregation intact. They made voter registration requirements stricter, and threatened to shut down public schools rather than desegregate them.

***“The South will not abide by nor obey this legislative decision of a political court. Any attempt to integrate our schools would cause great strife and turmoil.”***

—Mississippi Senator James Eastland, 1954

Major newspapers only published stories sympathetic to white supremacy. Local television stations pulled the plug on national coverage of NAACP activity and other black activism. In 1956, the state of Mississippi created the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission—a secretive government branch devoted to preventing the enforcement of federal civil rights laws like the *Brown* decision. Throughout the mass civil rights movement, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission (and government branches like it in other states) spied on civil rights activists and worked with the Citizens’ Councils to prevent civil rights activity. In addition, local whites continued to use violence to suppress black resistance to white supremacy.

***How did the response to the Brown decision affect black activism?***

This fierce white backlash hurt black activism in the South. The national NAACP

decided to drop its desegregation campaign in Mississippi, where white resistance to the movement was particularly intense. The federal government was unwilling to intervene to enforce the *Brown* decision in the environments most hostile to integration. Federal officials did not want conflict with southern politicians who would stop at nothing to prevent integration.

But despite the intensity of white repression, black activists worked to improve the lives of African Americans and fight for change within their communities. In Mississippi, local NAACP chapters organized voter registration classes, petitioned local schools to desegregate, and boycotted white businesses that were hostile to African Americans. The NAACP also developed youth councils in towns like Jackson and Clarksdale, Mississippi to organize young people and prepare them to become political leaders. In December 1954, the NAACP hired Medgar Evers as its Mississippi field director. A World War II veteran, who had been denied admission to the University of Mississippi



Protest against school integration, Arkansas State Capitol in Little Rock, August 20, 1959.

Library of Congress. LC-DIG-ppmsca-19754.

School of Law earlier that year, Evers worked to expose the injustices carried out by the police and the courts.

Although they did not succeed in dismantling Jim Crow, local activists in the 1950s—most of whom were affiliated with the NAACP—laid a foundation for the movement that would develop in Mississippi in the early 1960s.

## A New Kind of Movement

The 1960s marked a new chapter in the

### The Murder of Emmett Till

On August 28, 1955, two white men in Mississippi murdered a fourteen-year-old black boy named Emmett Till for allegedly flirting with a white cashier. Pictures of Emmett Till's mutilated body were published around the country, and the trial became an international media event. Despite overwhelming evidence of their guilt, the two men were acquitted of all charges. Although most white Mississippians supported the verdict, thousands of people around the world protested the fourteen-year-old's death and the unjust acquittal. One year later, the two men publicly admitted their guilt when they sold their story to a national magazine. Because they had already been tried and acquitted, they could no longer be convicted of the murder.

African Americans throughout the United States witnessed the injustice of the highly publicized Emmett Till trial. The trial became a defining moment for a new generation of activists. Many historians see it as an important turning point in the black freedom struggle, uniting African Americans around the country in their desire for change.

black freedom struggle. While World War II veterans had led much of the activism of the 1950s, in the early 1960s, black high school and college students came to the forefront of the movement. This younger generation of civil rights activists aggressively confronted Jim Crow and forced the movement onto the front pages of newspapers across the country.

### ***What was the sit-in movement?***

On February 1, 1960, four black college students sat down at a “whites only” lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. By refusing to move, the students directly challenged racial segregation. Within weeks the “sit-in” tactic had spread to more than two hundred cities throughout the South. For example, in Nashville, black (and some white) students sat down at lunch counters throughout the city over the course of several months. The Nashville campaign resulted in more than 150 arrests and national media attention. In some cities, students were attacked by white mobs.

The sit-in protests often forced stores to desegregate or close down. The city of Nashville began to desegregate all public facilities in 1960 in response to the student protests. The sit-ins inspired black and white students

around the country to participate in the civil rights movement. It also helped to establish nonviolent direct action as a useful tactic for challenging white supremacy (see box).

### ***What important ideas did Ella Baker bring to the civil rights movement?***

In the spring of 1960, an activist named Ella Baker organized a conference for the sit-in activists at Shaw University in North Carolina. Two hundred students attended and heard speeches from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other black leaders. Ella Baker urged the students to channel the energy from the sit-ins into the larger fight against racism and segregation in all aspects of society.

***“[T]he current sit-ins and other demonstrations are concerned with something bigger than a hamburger.... The Negro and white students, North and South, are seeking to rid America of the scourge of racial segregation and discrimination—not only at the lunch counters but in every aspect of life.”***

—Ella Baker, 1960

## **What is Nonviolent Direct Action?**

Nonviolent direct action is a strategy for creating social change. A group of people creates a demonstration or disturbance that draws attention to a particular injustice, and forces people in power to respond. Protests, strikes, and sit-ins are all examples of nonviolent direct action. In 1930, as part of the Indian independence movement, Mohandas Gandhi and his followers defied the British government by marching in protest of a colonial tax on salt. Despite being beaten and arrested by government troops, the marchers remained nonviolent, earning them the support and sympathy of observers around the world. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, U.S. civil rights activists confronted segregation by intentionally violating regulations that excluded black people from public spaces, and demanding that the federal government enforce laws that protected civil rights. Some of the most famous nonviolent direct action protests were the “sit-ins” at segregated restaurants and lunch counters.

***“Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to so dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.”***

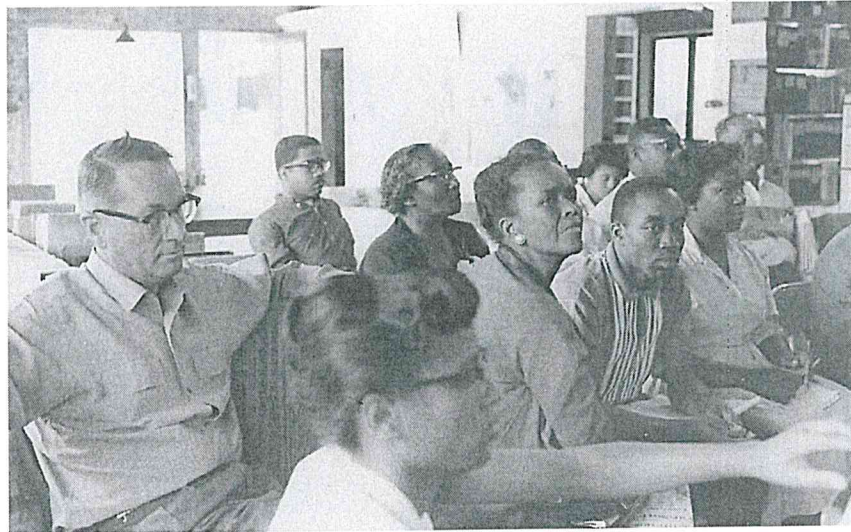
—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” 1963

From 1940 to 1953, Ella Baker had worked for the national NAACP. During that time she had grown frustrated with the organization. Baker felt that the NAACP's focus on national legal reform left the majority of NAACP members—poor blacks—with little role to play in its work. In 1957, she joined the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) as its executive director. Baker tried to get the SCLC to devote more of its attention to women and students, but most SCLC ministers resisted her ideas. Baker felt that the organization was limited by its dependence on its central leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

***“I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed people to depend so largely on a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight...such a person gets to the point of believing that he is the movement.”***

—Ella Baker, from “Developing Community Leadership,” 1970

The NAACP and other black organizations had long depended on a few individuals (usually educated, middle-class men) for political leadership. Ella Baker and other activists affiliated with the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee believed that the movement needed to organize poor black communities in the South to fight for change. They argued that the most oppressed people should play a more important role in the movement for racial justice.



Highlander Research and Education Center.

Septima Clark, Ella Baker (left to right in center of photo), and others meeting at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee in the 1950s. The Highlander Folk School provided training and workshops for activists. As part of her work with Highlander, Septima Clark started Citizenship Schools throughout the South that taught black adults to read. The Citizenship Schools empowered poor African Americans and helped them pass literacy tests designed to prevent them from voting.

At Ella Baker's urging, the sit-in students at the Shaw University conference created their own organization, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced “Snick”). SNCC set out to attack white supremacy in the South through non-violent direct action. The student activists also wanted to develop political leaders among the poor, black southerners at the bottom of Jim Crow society. Unlike the NAACP, the organization was made up primarily of young people, many of them women. SNCC worked to empower individuals, and all members had a voice in organizational decisions.

## The Student Movement Comes to Mississippi

During the Jim Crow era, Mississippi earned a reputation as the most dangerous state in the South for black activism. Although national NAACP leaders warned that direct action protests would be too dangerous in Mississippi, the new youth-led movement came to the state anyway. Young activists from organizations like SNCC and CORE (the Congress on Racial Equality) entered Missis-

Mississippi's small communities and worked with with local people to fight for change. Despite fierce opposition from white supremacist groups and the state government, Mississippi developed one of the strongest and most united movements in the country.

### ***How did the Freedom Riders bring nonviolent direct action to Mississippi?***

On May 4, 1961, thirteen activists brought together by CORE boarded two buses in Washington D.C. headed for the South. The "Freedom Riders" wanted to draw attention to racism in the South. They also wanted to challenge the federal government to enforce its own laws on racial integration. An earlier Supreme Court ruling had outlawed segregation in interstate bus terminals, but in practice transportation in the South remained segregated. In Alabama, white mobs attacked the activists, setting one of their buses on fire and savagely beating several people. Coverage of the event sparked international outrage at local police, who allowed the violence to occur. Energized by the events and ready to take action, black and white students from a variety of cities began riding buses into Mississippi.

### ***How did the federal government respond to the Freedom Rides?***

President John F. Kennedy tried to convince the Freedom Riders to abandon their efforts. Kennedy worried that the protests would lead to violence. He was also concerned that the Freedom Rides would tarnish the United States' international image. At the time, the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a decades-long struggle for



global power known as the Cold War. The Soviet Union used the poor treatment of African Americans to criticize the United States.

Kennedy agreed to allow Mississippi police to arrest the Freedom Riders if the state promised to protect them from mob violence. The activists chose to go to jail rather than pay their bail. The Freedom Rides into Mississippi continued, and by the end of the summer 328 activists had been arrested. Most of them were sent to Parchman prison, where they were beaten and abused by white guards. In prison the activists developed important relationships that would help the movement in the future. In September 1961, under pressure from civil rights activists and U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy, the Interstate Commerce Commission issued orders to desegregate all interstate bus facilities.

### ***How were SNCC activists divided about voter registration in Mississippi?***

In the summer of 1960, SNCC Field Secretary Robert (Bob) Moses, a former graduate student from New York, made a trip into Mississippi with a list of names given to him by Ella Baker. There he contacted a number of older NAACP activists who convinced him of the need for a voter registration campaign in their state (see box). Amzie Moore, a World War II veteran, told Moses that because blacks were the majority in many Mississippi communities, he believed they could win meaningful political power if they were able to vote. Moses invited Amzie Moore to speak at a SNCC conference, and the Mississippi leader made a pitch for a voter registration campaign in his state.

In the summer of 1961, as SNCC began operations in Mississippi, the young activists debated whether direct action or voter registration should be their primary tactic for confronting white supremacy. The Kennedy administration tried to encourage SNCC activists focus on voter registration. President Kennedy felt that voter registration would be less confrontational and lead to less violence than direct action protests.

Many of the students were concerned that the federal government was trying to undermine the movement. Reflecting on the success of the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides, they argued that direct action was more effective and empowering than voter registration. In the end, Ella Baker helped the students reach a compromise. SNCC developed two wings—one focused on voter registration and the other on direct action.

SNCC started its voter registration work in McComb, Mississippi. C.C. Bryant (the head of the local NAACP) and other local leaders helped SNCC workers run a voter registration drive. It soon became clear to the SNCC activists that, in Mississippi, registering voters could be just as confrontational and dangerous as direct action.

In McComb, for example, a local black leader named Herbert Lee, who was involved in the voter registration drive, was shot and killed by a white Mississippi legislator in broad daylight. A black man named Louis Allen witnessed the murder. When SNCC Field Secretary Bob Moses called the U.S. Justice Department and asked for protection for Allen, the Justice Department said it couldn't provide protection. Later Allen was also gunned down. No one was ever charged with these crimes.

SNCC volunteers realized whites could use violence against and even kill civil rights activists without fear of legal consequences. They also saw that even though the federal government was aware of the threat of violence in Mississippi, it did not provide the protection that activists believed was needed.

### ***How did COFO unite different civil rights organizations in Mississippi?***

In early 1962, representatives from three of the major civil rights organizations working in the South (SNCC, CORE, and the NAACP) met to plan a statewide voter registration campaign in Mississippi. They wanted to connect their efforts in the state and avoid competition between civil rights groups. The three groups united under an umbrella organization

### **The Role of Older Activists**

Students were at the forefront of the movement in the early 1960s. But older activists, including World War II veterans and members of the NAACP, continued the work they had been doing for years. Many young Mississippi activists came from families with long histories of Jim Crow resistance, and were inspired by their older family members. Older civil rights leaders served as mentors to younger student activists, and helped build trust between the young SNCC workers and local people who were skeptical about the movement. In addition, earlier NAACP work had laid a foundation of political connections that the student organizers in SNCC could use in their attempts to register voters and organize direct actions.



called the Congress of Federated Organizations (COFO). COFO agreed to send civil rights workers into communities with large black populations to encourage black voting and develop local leadership. Aaron Henry, the head of the Mississippi NAACP, was named president of COFO. SNCC provided the majority of the workers and direction for the campaign.

**How did COFO workers organize local communities?**

COFO workers received training in community organizing techniques at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee in the summer of 1962. The activists then prepared to enter black communities throughout the state, including the Mississippi Delta (see map)—a region marked by black poverty and violent white racism. They would learn many valuable lessons from the local people they met in these small Mississippi communities.

**“[SNCC] got [to the Delta] and we discovered...an extremely resourceful and courageous and heroic people, who had been resisting all along—contrary to the myth.... These were ordinary people without a great deal of formal education, but with resources of wisdom, resources of courage, of decency and nobility who educated and instructed us.”**

—Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, SNCC activist, recollecting in 2012

At first, most people in these small Mississippi communities were wary of the young organizers. COFO workers were seen as outsiders. Remembering the Freedom Rides, many black Mississippians were afraid that the arrival of COFO workers in their towns would provoke a violent white backlash.

**“People would just get afraid of me.... They said, he’s a Freedom Rider.... I was just there to stir up trouble.”**

—Samuel Block, SNCC organizer in Greenwood

COFO organizers understood that if they were going to be successful, they needed to earn the respect and trust of the community. Organizers lived in the homes of local people and participated in the day-to-day life of the community. Canvassers, often the youngest activists, went door-to-door getting to know every resident on the block and talking to them about voting rights. They revisited homes repeatedly in order to build strong relationships with people before encouraging them to register.

**“Go to their homes, eat with them, talk the language that they talk, associate with them on a personal level. Then go into your talk about the vote.”**

—Instructions to SNCC organizers at a training at the Highlander Folk School, June 1962

**Self-Defense**

SNCC and other civil rights organizations used nonviolent direct action as a political tactic, but that did not mean that local people in Mississippi were committed to a philosophy of nonviolence in their daily lives. Black Mississippians, who had been living under the threat of violence for years, did not hesitate to use weapons to defend themselves from white attacks. Most black families in Mississippi owned guns.

**“I wasn’t being ‘non’ nonviolent. I was just protecting my family.”**

—Hartman Turnbow, describing why he shot at night riders who had tried to burn down his house in the spring of 1963

Through these relationships with local people, COFO organizers gained essential knowledge about local life, town power structures, and the nature of white supremacy in Mississippi.

Organizers would hold mass meetings to give an emotional boost to the slow canvassing work. Drawing on the black religious traditions of Mississippi, the meetings featured fiery speeches, bible readings, and personal stories about racism. Organizers explained voting rights and helped local people understand the voter registration forms. Leaders brought news of the struggle from around the country to connect their local efforts with the national movement.

In mass meetings, often held in churches, people came together to sing freedom songs—songs about the civil rights movement that were influenced by old religious spirituals. These songs helped unite the community and

inspired local people to overcome their fears about participating in the movement.

***“The most essential movement business was nurturing the people who had come.... Singing was the ‘bed’ and the ‘air’ of everything, and I had never before heard or felt singing do that on that level of power. In mass meetings I was alive and I knew what I was supposed to be doing and where I was supposed to be.”***

—Bernice Johnson Reagon, SNCC worker and freedom singer, recollecting in 2010

COFO organizers also established Citizenship Schools in towns throughout Mississippi. The schools empowered many local people who had very little formal education. Organizers taught local blacks how to pass voter registration tests, and helped black Mississippians analyze the history of white supremacy.



Herbert Randall. McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.

Local teenager Doug Smith (left) and SNCC Field Secretary Sandy Leigh (right) urge Hattiesburg resident Felix Smith to register to vote. Summer 1964.