

Juneteenth to Freedom Summer. The 60th Anniversary of the African-American Civil Rights Movement During 1964

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On June 18 in Detroit at the St. Matthew's-St. Joseph's Episcopal Church, five veteran women organizers from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Northern Student Movement, spoke on the significance of their struggles during 1964.

These panelists were Dorothy Dewberry-Aldridge; Martha Prescod Norman Noonan; Diane Lewis; Muriel Tillinghast; and Marilyn Lowen. All of these women have decades of experience and study related to the movements for Civil Juneteenth, a more than a century-and-a-half commemoration which marks the end of chattel enslavement of African people in the state of Texas, has since 2021 been designated as an official national holiday. In recent years Juneteenth has been widely celebrated in various iterations.

The holiday had been celebrated largely in the southern U.S. and eventually spread rapidly throughout the country. Just four years ago in the midst of the demonstrations and rebellions in response to the police execution of George Floyd, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in various municipalities to reclaim the holiday.

Nearly a century after the conclusion of the Civil War (1861-1865) and the failure of Federal Reconstruction (1866-1877), the modern mass Civil Rights Movement would emerge. By 1963-64, the movement led by African Americans, had won the attention and support of millions throughout the U.S. and internationally.

When the African American youth and workers went into the streets of numerous cities including Birmingham, Alabama; Cambridge, Maryland; Danville, Virginia; Somerville, Tennessee; to only mention a few, it would set the stage for a campaign to register tens of thousands of disenfranchised people living in the state of Mississippi. The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) had been formed in Mississippi as early as 1961-62 as a coalition of groupings including SNCC, the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), the state National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

[According to the SNCC Digital archives](#) it says of the formation of COFO that:

“Youthful activism began accelerating in the ‘closed society’ of Mississippi in the early 1960s, and it increasingly centered on community organizing. Bob Moses, sent by SCLC’s executive director Ella Baker, had quietly entered the Mississippi Delta in the summer of 1960 and began conversations with local NAACP leader Amzie Moore. He promised to return to Mississippi the following year. When Moses returned, Amzie Moore sent him to McComb. Moore had introduced the Harlem-native to the need for a voter registration program, and Moses began that work in McComb as a SNCC field secretary; it was SNCC’s first voter registration project. Bob Moses, now developing Moore’s ideas, began forming a grassroots community organizing template that became key to SNCC and later COFO’s organizing efforts across the state.”

Noonan described visiting Greenwood, Mississippi during 1963 when while walking down the street returning from purchasing paper for printing flyers, she and another activist, Willie Wazir Peacock, witnessed Byron De La Beckwith being congratulated by white people in the city. She was told that he was the man who had murdered NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers just weeks before.

Image: Marilyn Lowen speaks at Juneteenth and Freedom Summer forum, June 18, 2024



The assassination by De La Beckwith of Evers prompted anger throughout the South and the rest of the U.S. In Detroit on June 23, 1963, the largest demonstration for Civil Rights in U.S. history was held where an estimated crowd of 125,000-250,000 were in attendance. Just two months later, the March on Washington convened where the turnout was comparable to what transpired in Detroit.

By 1964, planning for the Freedom Summer campaign was well underway. Aldridge noted that she had been charged with signing up volunteers in Detroit. She was working at the Friends of SNCC office in the city. Prior to this Aldridge was also a member of the Northern

Student Movement along with other activists including Frank Joyce of Detroit and William Strickland of New York City.

Now retired Atty. Denise Lewis recounted that in 1964, she was an undergraduate student at Barnard College in New York. Her work in Mississippi during that summer was centered around the Freedom Schools.

“It was an education for me because of the knowledge acquired through the orientation for the project,” she said. Lewis pointed out that the classes taught in Mississippi documented the historic denial of political and economic rights for the African American people. Since this time period, Lewis emphasized that the teaching of African American history has remained an important aspect of her professional life. ([\(18\) Freedom Schools WIP - YouTube](#))

Tillinghast spoke about her work with COFO which was spread throughout three counties in Mississippi. She would later serve as director of the COFO office in the state capital of Jackson. Prior to working in Mississippi, Tillinghast had spent time in the South American state of Guyana where she saw first-hand the efforts of the U.S. aimed at demonizing the progressive forces as “communists”. She said the motivation of the Civil Rights Movement was to break down all aspects of discrimination and oppression in the U.S.

A central focus of the Freedom Summer project was to recruit people into the alternative Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The party challenged the segregationist exclusion from electoral politics by the all-white Democratic Party. 80,000 people signed up for the MFDP.

The MFDP took its delegation of 68 people to the Democratic National Convention held that year in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Their objective was to appeal to the credentials committee to unseat the racist Democratic Party delegation from the state of Mississippi. In an attempt to work out a compromise, the Johnson administration offered two seats at-large to the MFDP while pledging to change the rules to abolish discrimination by the next convention in 1968. (See [this](#))

A meeting was held at the Union Baptist Church prior to the conclusion of the DNC where national leaders including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., President of the SCLC; Atty. Joseph Rauh, Chief Counsel for the UAW and the MFDP delegation; among others, attempted to convince the MFDP to accept the compromise offered by the credential committee. Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, the Vice-Chair of the MFDP, had spoken to the credentials committee outlining the racial terrorism the Civil Rights Movement activists were subjected to in the state.

After the delegation voted to reject the compromise, Mrs. Hamer said “we did not come this far for no two seats. We are tired.” The MFDP left the DNC after making attempts to occupy the seats vacated by the segregationist Mississippi delegation which refused to accept the pledge to end discrimination within the state party. They, in fact, left Atlantic City angry and later openly campaigned for the Republican Party candidate Barry Goldwater who opposed the Civil Rights Act passed just one month before in Washington. (See [this](#))

Lowen went to Mississippi after Freedom Summer in the Spring of 1965. She worked in the Child Development Group or Mississippi which was established as a concession from the Johnson administration resulting from the mobilizations of the Civil Rights Movement. (See

[this](#))

Lowen at the June 18 meeting read a poem paying tribute to Ben Chaney who passed away in February 2024 and was eulogized in an obituary published by the New York Amsterdam News. Chaney had left the state of Mississippi and moved to New York in the aftermath of the murder of his older brother. Chaney would later join the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the Black Liberation Army (BLA). He served over a decade in prison as a result of his political activities. (See [this](#))

The Murders of Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner and James Chaney

During the first week of the Freedom Summer Project while many volunteers were still undergoing orientation at the Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, news came of the disappearance of three Civil Rights workers. Two of the volunteers missing were white and from New York City, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner. James Chaney was an African American from the state of Mississippi.

The media reports on the apparent kidnapping and possible lynching of these three youth sent shockwaves to the Freedom Summer volunteers and their supporters throughout the country. Aldridge said that despite this horrible news, all of the people who had committed to the project vowed to continue.

After 44 days of searching, the bodies of Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner were found in an earthen dam. Their murders were carried out by white police officers, many of whom were members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson into law. Theoretically it provided for equal access to public accommodations, voting and employment while prohibiting discrimination based upon race, religion, national origin and gender. At the time it was hailed as the most comprehensive legislation on Civil Rights since the period of Reconstruction between 1866-1875.

Nonetheless, discrimination and other forms of national oppression continued in the areas of school segregation and voting rights. The Voting Rights Act of 1965, passed in the aftermath of the Selma Campaign which reached its zenith in March of that year, ostensibly outlawed discriminatory practices regarding access to the franchise and the capacity of African American communities to register and elect representatives of their own choosing.

Implications of Freedom Summer Six Decades Later

Aldridge mentioned that the U.S. Supreme Court in its decision in the Shelby V. Holder (2013) ruling struck down the enforcement provisions of the Voting Rights Act. Today in 2024, there are ongoing challenges from the right-wing in the South and other regions of the country to repeal the principles outlined in the original bill signed into law on August 6, 1965, by President Johnson.

In the realm of education, there are efforts to once again restrict and eliminate the teaching of African American Studies along with the actual history of other oppressed groups including Latin Americans and Women. Book bans have been instituted in various municipalities in the U.S.

All of the panelists agreed that the struggle for full equality and self-determination

continues. This discussion was important in light of the upcoming national elections in November where the outcome remains uncertain due to the divisions within the Democratic Party electorate and the threats posed by the Republicans headed by former President Donald Trump.

Resources on Freedom Summer and the Civil Rights Movement:

- [Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts of Women in SNCC](#)
- [Mississippi's Exiled Daughter: How My Civil Rights Baptism Under Fire Shaped My Life, By Brenda Jarvis](#)
- [SNCC Digital Gateway](#)

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