

Freedom Summer

SUMMER OF 1964



Freedom Summer

- During the summer of 1964, thousands of civil rights activists, many of them white college students from the North, descended on Mississippi and other southern states to try to end the long-time political disenfranchisement of African Americans in the region.
- Although black men had won the right to vote in 1870, thanks to the 15th Amendment, for the next 100 years many were unable to exercise that right.
 - White local and state officials systematically kept blacks from voting through formal methods, such as poll taxes and literacy tests, and through methods of fear and intimidation (including beating and lynching.)
- Civil-rights officials understood the significance of voting – as a group, blacks would be able to effect social and political change.

Why Mississippi?

- Freedom Summer marked the climax of intensive voter-registration activities in the South that had started in 1961.
- Organizers chose to focus on Mississippi because of the state's particularly dismal voting-rights record:
 - In 1962 only 6.7% of African Americans in the state were registered to vote, the lowest percentage in the country.
 - Blacks outnumbered whites 4 to 1 in some counties and nearly all of them were denied the right to vote.



Goal of Freedom Summer

- Designed to call attention to Mississippi through a concerted state-wide voter registration drive.
- Recruited young, northern white college students to travel down to Mississippi for a summer project. Freedom Summer was organized by several of the national civil rights organizations (CORE, the NAACP, and SNCC.)
 - By mobilizing volunteer white college students from the North to join them, the coalition scored a major public relations coup as hundreds of reporters came to Mississippi from around the country to cover the voter-registration campaign.



Voter Registration Obstacles

- Mississippi's voter registration test required applicants to interpret a section of the state constitution. It was then up to the registrar to decide whether the interpretation was correct.
 - The Justice Dept. noted hundreds of examples of carelessly written tests taken by illiterate whites who "passed" as contrasted with meticulously accurate interpretations by educated Negroes who "failed."
 - As a general practice, the names of those who took the test were published in the local newspaper for 2 weeks, leaving them open to reprisals.
- Even against these formidable odds, many African-Americans went to the courthouse time and time again, determined to take the test until they passed. Some tried as many as a dozen times.
 - John Long owned his own business and home. A college graduate who tried to register to vote and to form a Negro Voters League in the 1940s. he was well-read and informed, especially in national, state and local politics. However, because the local registrar, who had no formal schooling beyond 6th grade, failed him every time he took the voter registration test, Long was not able to vote until his case figured in a Justice Dept. suit.



Civil rights workers discuss strategy in a "freedom house," a Summer Project office.



Mississippi police departments beefed up their forces in preparation for the Summer Project, which state politicians called an invasion by "outside agitators."

Volunteer Training & Orientation

In the words of Freedom Summer volunteer Terri Shaw: ... the weeklong orientation session at Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, should have prepared us for everything that happened this summer. We were exposed to every possibility and given guidelines for behavior in almost any contingency ... lessons were given in how to protect your vital organs while being beaten and what happens when a mob gets out of hand. In an auditorium more often used for assemblies and class days, stories were told of beatings and shootings and bombings, by the witnesses themselves ... The battle scarred veterans who tried to prepare us for what we might meet in Mississippi were mostly young field secretaries of the SNCC...

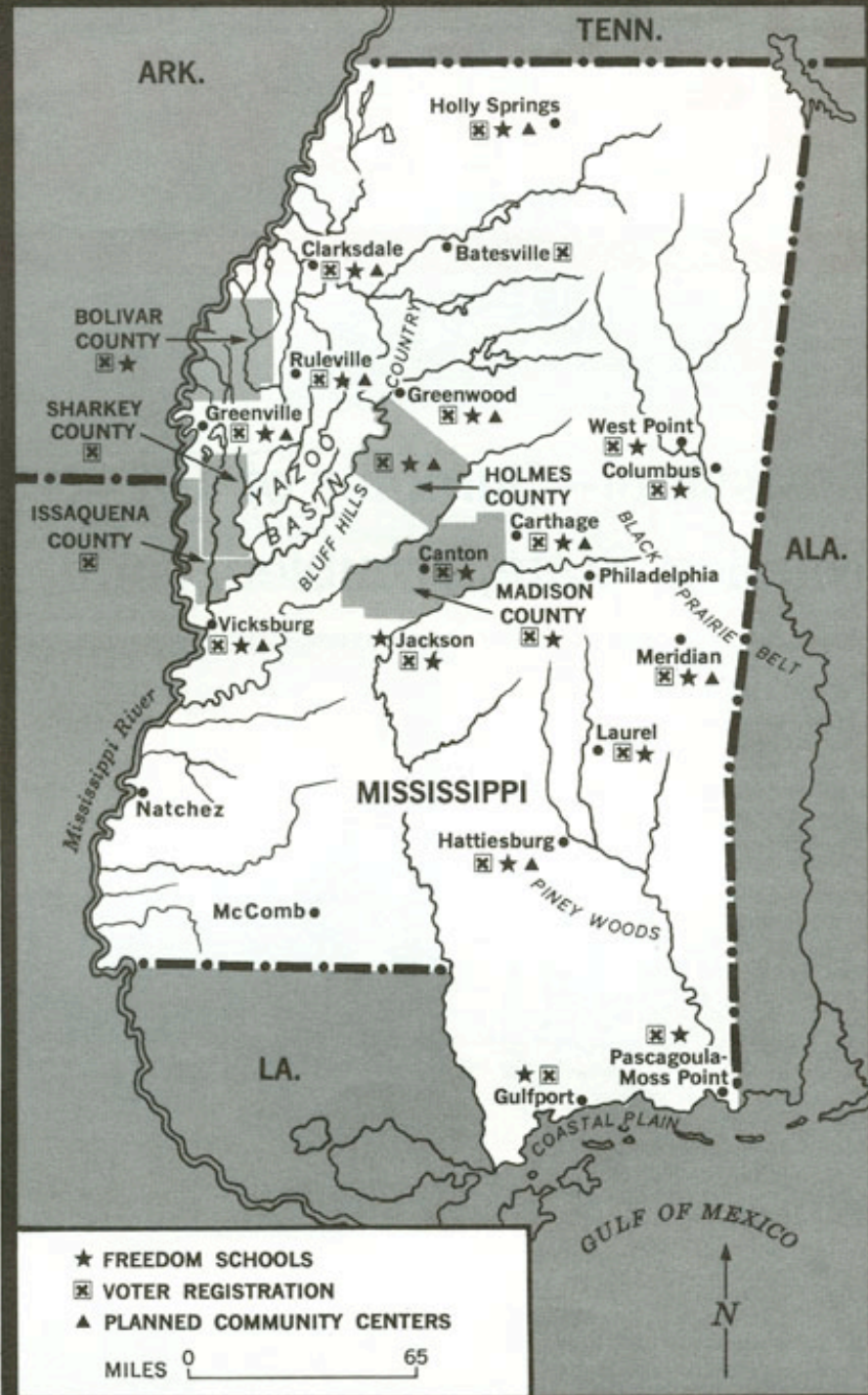


Staff members with SNCC & CORE demonstrate techniques of non-violent resistance and self-preservation.



SNCC and CORE staff members lecture the volunteers on conditions in the segregated South.





Bob Moses, leader of SNCC's voter registration efforts in Mississippi from 1960 through 1964 and a key architect of Freedom Summer.





Summer Project workers visit black Mississippians to discuss voter registration.



Freedom Schools

- The inability to vote was only one of many problems blacks encountered. Freedom Summer officials also established 30 "Freedom Schools" in towns throughout Mississippi to address the racial inequalities in Mississippi's educational system.
 - Mississippi's black schools were poorly funded and teachers had to use hand-me-down textbooks that often offered a racist slant on American history.
 - Many of the white college student volunteers were assigned to teach in these schools. The curriculum included black history, literature and art, the philosophy of the Civil Rights Movement, and leadership development in addition to remedial instruction in reading and arithmetic.
 - The Freedom Schools had hoped to draw at least 1000 students that first summer, and ended up with 3000.
 - The schools became a model for future social programs like Head Start, as well as alternative educational institutions.



Photo by Herbert Ransall



In the words of one volunteer: The oldest student was an 85-year-old man who had taught himself to read, but wanted to learn more in order to take the registration test... The community center staff was small, but talented, and a varied program was developed -- day care for younger children in the morning, recreation for the older ones in the afternoon, and classes in first aid, sewing and literacy in the evening. Mary Sue Gellatly, white, of Portland, Ore., taught eight persons to read and write and another eight to teach literacy. Phyllis Cunningham, white, RN, of Chicago, got a medical care program going and taught, hygiene and first aid... A library was set up next door to the office with homemade shelves and handwritten catalogue cards...

Southern Reaction to Freedom Summer



A volunteer encourages a black mother to vote, Mississippi, 1964.

Most black Mississippians had never met white people who would shake their hands or address them as equals.



...The ladies of the Negro community pitched in immediately to see that we were well taken care of. During the first few weeks of the summer they served huge lunches to all 60 volunteers every day in the office. Later, when the freedom schools were set up, equally huge lunches were served in four separate churches every weekday. Several ladies took in washing and one made her bathtub available to the volunteers who lived in Palmers Crossing and other areas without running water.

Southern White Response

- Freedom Summer activists faced threats and harassment throughout the campaign, not only from white supremacist groups, but from local residents and police.
 - Freedom School buildings and the volunteers' homes were frequent targets; 37 black churches and 30 black homes and businesses were firebombed or burned during that summer, and the cases often went unsolved.
 - More than 1000 black and white volunteers were arrested, and at least 80 were beaten by white mobs or racist police officers.

After the first meeting, held the day we arrived, two cars drove past the office tossing out handfuls of most scurrilous hate literature I have ever seen.

Another night a caravan of about a dozen cars drove slowly past the office. White men in cars, some carrying guns, followed the voter registration workers as they canvassed in the Negro neighborhoods. Other carloads of whites drove up and down in front of the office. Quite often these cars did not have license plates although we never heard of anyone being arrested for failure to have a plate on a car...

... There were a couple of small-time "bombings" which caused no damage but added to the atmosphere of fear. A few local supporters received anonymous telephone calls and threats of assassination. Many more were fired from their jobs or taken off welfare, although this supposedly is illegal. The welfare workers especially delighted in dropping "subtle" hints to Negro welfare recipients. One woman who had nothing to do with the movement was told that she might be taken off the rolls because they had to "cut off some good niggers as well as the bad niggers so it won't look so bad."

Local police soon came to know our cars and stopped them frequently. Payment of traffic fines -- many undeserved and others for violations which would have gone undetected if committed by anyone else -- took an important chunk out of the weekly budget....

The most serious incidents concerning volunteers were beatings. The first occurred on July 10 when the Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld of Cleveland, (a Ministers Project volunteer) and two white male college students were beaten while on their way to one of the churches where lunch was served after a morning of canvassing. They were attacked by two white men who had been following them in a pickup truck without license plates. Shouting "white nigger" and "nigger lover" they beat the rabbi and one of the students with an iron bar. The other student was kicked down an embankment, pummeled and kicked, and finally, his assailant shoved his canvassing notes into his mouth, shouting "eat this... nigger lover." All three were treated at a hospital and the rabbi was hospitalized over night. White people watched the beating from their porches and front lawns, but no one called the police until other volunteers returned to the scene to look for the rabbi's glasses. Both the police chief and the mayor issued strong statements, saying the assailants would be sought and prosecuted for "assault and battery with intent to kill," a felony. The FBI investigated and a week later, one of the assailants turned himself in. The two were charged with "assault and battery with intent to maim, also a felony, but the grand jury refused to indict them. The district attorney then charged them with simple assault and battery (a misdemeanor) and they each paid a \$500 fine. Each also received a suspended sentence of 90 days.


- The summer's most infamous act of violence was the murder of three young civil rights workers, a black volunteer, James Chaney, and his white coworkers, Andrew Goodman & Michael Schwerner.
- On June 21, Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner set out to investigate a church bombing near Philadelphia, Mississippi, but were arrested that afternoon and held for several hours on alleged traffic violations. Their release from jail was the last time they were seen alive before their badly decomposed bodies were discovered under a nearby dam six weeks later. Goodman and Schwerner had died from single gunshot wounds to the chest, and Chaney from a savage beating.

MISSING CALL FBI

THE FBI IS SEEKING INFORMATION CONCERNING THE DISAPPEARANCE AT PHILADELPHIA, MISSISSIPPI, OF THESE THREE INDIVIDUALS ON JUNE 21, 1964. EXTENSIVE INVESTIGATION IS BEING CONDUCTED TO LOCATE GOODMAN, CHANEY, AND SCHWERNER, WHO ARE DESCRIBED AS FOLLOWS:

	ANDREW GOODMAN	JAMES EARL CHANEY	MICHAEL HENRY SCHWERNER
			
RACE:	White	Negro	White
SEX:	Male	Male	Male
DOB:	November 23, 1940	May 21, 1940	November 5, 1939
POB:	New York City	Wentzler, Wisconsin	New York City
AGE:	23 years	24 years	24 years
HEIGHT:	5'10"	5'7"	5'7" to 5'10"
WEIGHT:	150 pounds	125 to 140 pounds	175 to 180 pounds
HAIR:	Dark brown, wavy	Black	Brown
EYES:	Brown	Brown	Light blue
TEETH:		Good; none missing	
SCARS AND MARKS:		1 inch cut scar 2 inches above left ear.	Small mark center of forehead, slight scar on bridge of nose, appendectomy scar, broken leg scar.

SHOULD YOU HAVE OR IN THE FUTURE RECEIVE ANY INFORMATION CONCERNING THE WHEREABOUTS OF THESE INDIVIDUALS, YOU ARE REQUESTED TO NOTIFY ME OR THE NEAREST OFFICE OF THE FBI. TELEPHONE NUMBER IS LISTED BELOW.


 DIRECTOR
 FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
 UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
 WASHINGTON, D. C. 20535
 TELEPHONE, NATIONAL 9-7117

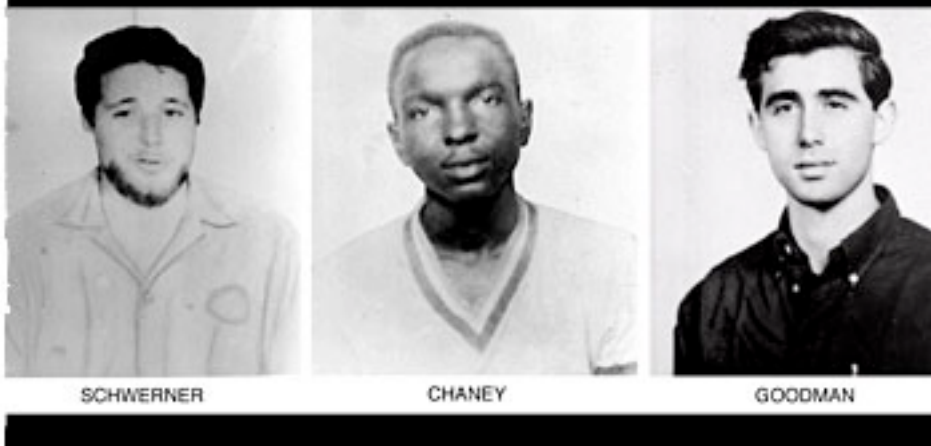
June 29, 1964



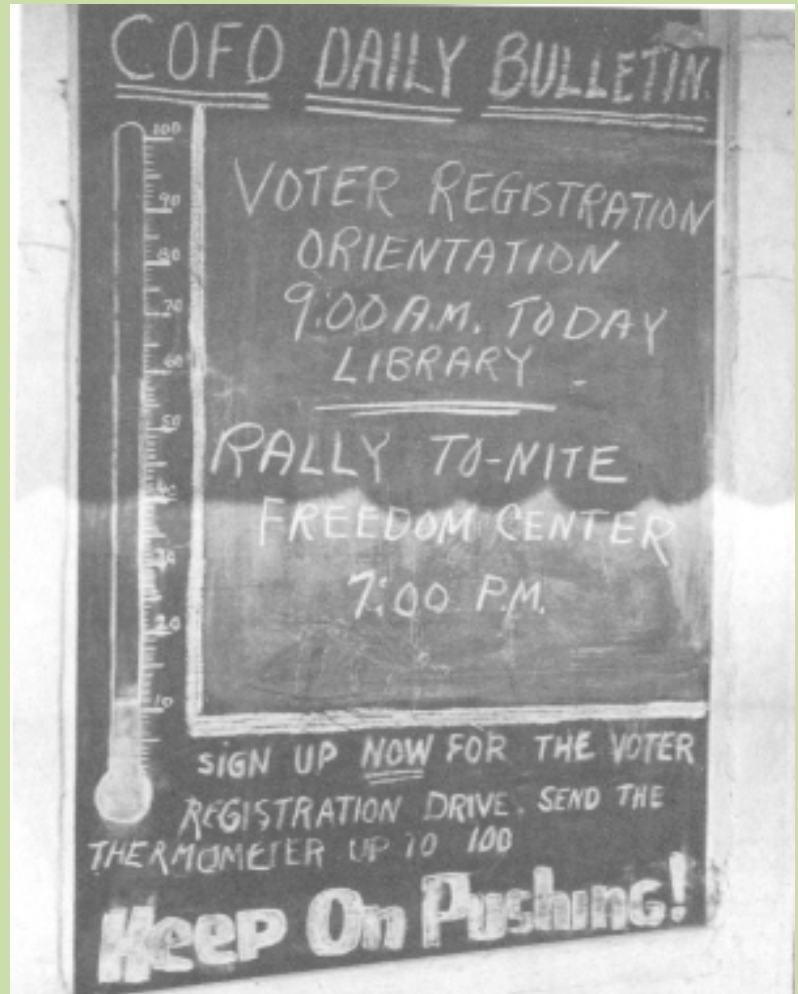
Rita Schwerner, wife of missing civil rights worker Michael Schwerner, waits for news of her husband in Oxford, Ohio.



Fanny Lou Chaney, mother of missing civil rights worker James Chaney.



Charred remains of the station wagon driven by missing civil rights workers.



The murders made headlines all over the country, and provoked an outpouring of national support for the Civil Rights Movement.

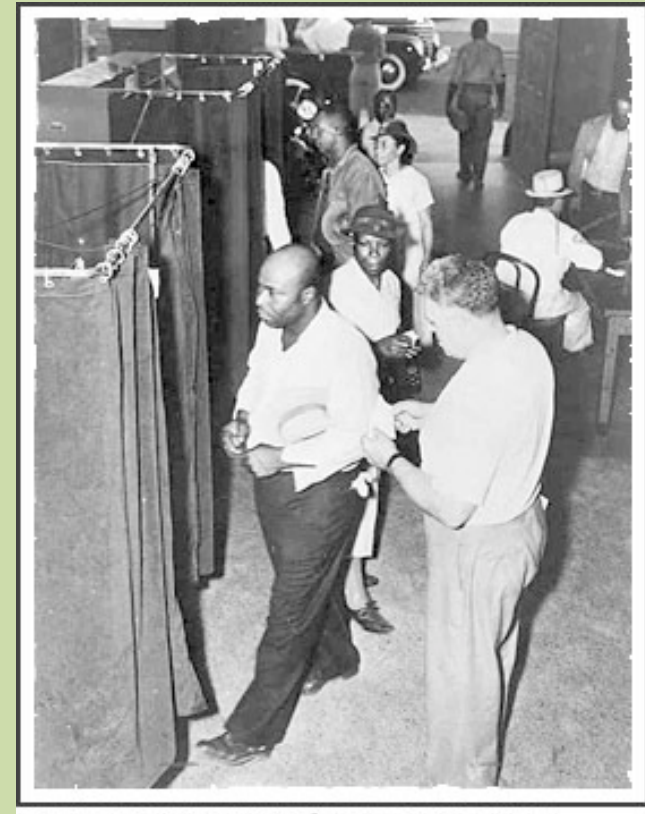
Trouble behind the scenes...

- Many black volunteers realized that because two of the victims were white, the murder of the 3 civil rights workers attracted much more attention than previous attacks in which the victims had been all black, and this added to the growing resentment they had already begun to feel towards the white volunteers.
- There was growing dissension within the ranks over charges of white paternalism and elitism. Black volunteers complained that the whites seemed to think they had a natural claim on leadership roles, and that they treated the rural blacks as though they were ignorant.
- There was also increasing hostility from both black and white workers over the interracial romances that developed the summer. Meanwhile, women volunteers of both races were charging both the black and white men with sexist behavior.



Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

- The organization of the Mississippi Freedom Party (MFDP) was a major focus of the summer program.
- More than 80,000 Mississippians joined the new party, which elected a slate of sixty-eight delegates to the 1964 national Democratic Party convention in Atlantic City, NJ.
- The MFDP delegation challenged the seating of the delegates representing Mississippi's all white Democratic Party.



- While the effort failed, it drew national attention, particularly through the dramatic televised appeal of MFDP delegate Fannie Lou Hamer.
 - Hamer spoke in front of the Credentials Committee in a televised proceeding that reached millions of viewers. She told the committee how African-Americans in many states across the country were prevented from voting through illegal tests, taxes and intimidation.
- Following the televised appeal, viewers sent telegrams to President Johnson asking for him to intervene on the MFDP's behalf.
- Fearful that the MFDP would disrupt his nomination and party unity, Johnson arranged for the tv network to interrupt coverage of the MFDP's testimony. He was also afraid that he would alienate southern white Democrats if he did support the MFDP.



MFDP delegate Fanny Lou Hamer speaks out for the seating of MFDP delegates, August 22, 1964.

- Compromise: two delegates of the MFDP were given speaking rights at the convention and the other members were seated as honorable guests.
 - The MFDP turned down the compromise. In Hamer's words, "We didn't come all this way for 2 seats when all of us is tired."
- The MFDP challenge did lead to a ban on racially discriminatory delegations at future conventions.

Legacy of Freedom Summer

- The well-publicized voter registration drive brought national attention to the subject of black disenfranchisement, and this eventually led to the 1965 Voting Rights Act (federal legislation that among other things outlawed the tactics southern states had used to prevent blacks from voting.)
- Instilled among African Americans a new consciousness and a new confidence in political action.
 - As Fannie Lou Hamer later said, "Before the 1964 project there were people that wanted change, but they hadn't dared to come out. After 1964 people began moving. To me it's one of the greatest things that ever happened in Mississippi."



Summer Project volunteers prepare to leave Mississippi at the end of the summer.