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Learning in the light of freedom: The Mississippi freedom schools of 1964

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Learning in the Light of Freedom: The Mississippi Freedom Schools of 1964

An Honors College Project Presented to
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College of Arts and Letters
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by Emma Elizabeth Appleton

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*To Papa. Your faith in me became my very own freedom school
and enabled me to do something I never imagined was possible.*

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Preface

I uncovered these incredible stories from Mississippi almost three years ago in a historical research methods class. In the fall of 2016, I was looking for a topic to write my first “real” history research paper. I stumbled upon a newspaper clipping from the summer of 1964, depicting the “Mississippi Three,” James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, the three young men lynched at the beginning of the summer. I had learned about the Civil Rights movement many times, and yet I had never heard of the movement in Mississippi beyond Freedom Riders making their way to Jackson. As eager, young sophomores do, I jumped right in to Mississippi in 1964. Little did I know that my first history paper would become the springboard for another year and a half researching and writing about that eventful summer.

Each time I stuck my nose in a book or found a new collection of sources online, I found more about the Mississippi Summer Project that intrigued me. Phone conversations with my grandfather, who had followed the stories from Freedom Summer in his local California newspaper, propelled me deeper and deeper into this Civil Rights movement in Mississippi. While I could get completely lost investigating, historical research methods classes have deadlines and due dates that must be adhered to. I wrote about the summer program in general, but I knew this was just the tip of the iceberg. Once I finished that paper, I moved on to other classes, continuing my historical studies and taking education classes. I kept seeing themes in my education coursework that mirrored elements of the curriculum and pedagogy from the freedom schools. As I developed my own teaching philosophy and interests in education, I realized as an educator, I could learn so much more from the Mississippi freedom schools and the students who attended them.

Finally, in early 2018, I saw the opportunity to write my honors thesis as an even greater chance to bring together two passions: history and implementing skills-based curriculum in my future classroom. As I researched, I saw more parallels between the purposes of the freedom schools and my goals as a future educator. While writing this thesis has been an incredible opportunity to hone my skills as a historian, I hope this paper has a much more profound legacy. I want to use what I have learned from the freedom school organizers and students to hone my skills as an educator and to inspire hope and self-confidence in each life I will be privileged enough to teach. As my first “real” history paper was the springboard for this thesis, I hope this thesis becomes the springboard for a lifelong career of teaching students to walk (and learn) in the light of freedom.

The Mississippi freedom schools during the summer of 1964 were potent academies of change for a few key reasons. First, Civil Rights leaders carefully analyzed the problems facing Mississippi African American students and devoted long hours to develop a meaningful curriculum that targeted student needs and satisfied student interests. Instead of focusing on a content-based curriculum, freedom school organizers developed a skills-based curriculum that could prepare students for life outside the classroom. Second, they developed and trained volunteer teachers to follow an educational pedagogy that created the space for academic liberty and exploration of student talents and interests. Lastly, freedom school students’ determination and perseverance multiplied the effects of the skills-based curriculum and student-focused pedagogy.

The introduction to this thesis details the history of post-Reconstruction racial injustice and the growth of the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi, prior to the summer of 1964. It

emphasizes the scope and effects of racial inequality in Mississippi and explores how the white power structure in Mississippi was so effective in preventing racial justice. It also reveals the importance of local leadership and how movement leaders settled upon the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964 and the use of northern, white volunteers.

Chapter one explores the planning and preparations for the summer. It details the extensive planning for the state-wide project over the course of a few short months and how organizers raised financial support and collected needed resources. In this chapter, I also explain challenges related to recruiting young, northern volunteers and the systems the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) set up to protect movement workers throughout the summer. Finally, it covers the first half of the training for the volunteers who would work on voter registration drives and help establish community centers.

Chapter two opens with the story of the “Mississippi Three” and how their disappearance influenced the remaining freedom school volunteers in training. It continues with their training as freedom school teachers and their experiences as they came to Mississippi and details the development of freedom school pedagogy and curricula. This chapter explores freedom schools and the African American communities freedom school teachers lived in from the volunteers’ perspectives.

In chapter three, I look at the freedom school experience through the eyes of the freedom school students. The chapter begins with the daily activities and lessons students participated in and illustrates how the specialized pedagogy and curriculum combined with student determination began to empower students. It continues and describes the dangers these students faced at the hands of white supremacists and demonstrates the students’ willingness to learn and

better themselves at any cost. Finally, this chapter explores the effects and legacy of the freedom schools. The conclusion connects the freedom schools to education today and offers some ways to incorporate the freedom school pedagogy and curriculum to educational practices today.

The existing historical literature regarding civil rights and the movements in Mississippi has been an incredible resource for me as I wrote this thesis. For a general overview of Civil Rights movements across the country and to place the Mississippi movement in context, Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992* and William T. Martin Riches, *The Civil Rights Movement: Struggle and Resistance* are excellent. I relied heavily on John Dittmer's widely acclaimed account of the Mississippi movement, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*. Historian James P. Marshall wrote two books that analyzed the Mississippi movement of the early 1960s. His works coupled with Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, give an in-depth analysis of the movement as well as a deep analysis of the Mississippi Freedom Summer. While research on the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project is readily available, most studies focus on voter registration and political gains. In contrast, Jon Hale, *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement* is one of the rarer examples of an analysis of the freedom schools. He challenges misconceptions of the volunteers and the summer and discusses how the summer inspired change throughout Mississippi. While I do explore the legacy of the schools in my thesis, my focus on educational pedagogy and curriculum make it distinct from other works in the historical literature.

In my research, I found three online collections of primary sources that enabled me to write this thesis. The first collection, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, holds hundreds of scanned primary source documents online from various movements throughout the United

States. They have an extensive, organized collection of Freedom Summer and COFO documents that enabled me to piece together the events of the summer. Additionally, I found the Freedom Summer Digital Collection from the Wisconsin Historical Society. This collection features images of hundreds of primary source documents as well as photographs from the movement. Lastly, Kathy Emery, Sylvia Braselmann, and Linda Reid Gold created a website, called Education and Democracy to house any documents they found in their own research regarding the freedom school curriculum. The documents housed in these collections were invaluable in researching and writing this thesis.

In my studies, I have learned that any time I explore the past, there is always more to discover. The Mississippi Freedom Summer Project and freedom schools are no different. While this study presents an in-depth look at the freedom schools, there is still so much more to explore about the summer and the lives influenced by this movement. I hope this thesis can contribute to the existing historical literature about the Civil Rights movement within Mississippi. I sincerely hope to have another opportunity to return to researching Mississippi Civil Rights history someday and I know the freedom schools have forever changed my perspective and goals as a future educator.

Acknowledgements

I never could have completed this thesis without the incredible support, help, and guidance I have received over the past year and a half. First and foremost, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Raymond Hyser. I am so grateful for the countless hours you spent checking footnotes, approving outlines, and reading my drafts. Your office door was always open, and you have consistently given much-needed advice. When life hit me hard, you gave me the freedom to focus on my personal needs and reminded me what is truly important. You have been so patient, and your steadfast support has been an incredible gift to me. It has been such a privilege to learn from you.

I would also like to thank my readers, Dr. David Dillard and Dr. Alison Sandman. Your time reading my work and providing constructive feedback is greatly appreciated. You have helped me grow as a scholar, historian, and future educator.

Thank you to the JMU Honors College and the Department of History for providing this opportunity. Writing this thesis has been one of the highlights of my academic career and has been both a challenging and rewarding pursuit.

Mom and Dad, thank you. You have both been willing to “go” to Mississippi with me as I shared my research with you. Your constant encouragement and faith in me enabled me not only to complete this thesis, but to be proud of my work in these pages. You have shown me what hard work looks like, and I am forever grateful for your example.

Thank you, Morgan and Laura. You have been on this journey with me – letting me vent, encouraging me, and celebrating every milestone. I think it is time for one last celebration... ice cream?

Abstract

This paper investigates the “freedom schools” of the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964. It argues through a combination of a powerfully designed curriculum, the implementation of student-centered pedagogy, and a focus on relationship building and personal efficacy, freedom school students were given the skills and confidence needed to become young leaders in their communities and bring change to Mississippi. Through this paper, I hope to encourage current educators apply freedom school principles and practices in their own classrooms to inspire our students in the same way.

Chapter One

The Rise of Jim Crow and African American Resistance in Mississippi

After the Civil War and the end of Reconstruction, white Mississippians who returned to power in the mid-1870s stripped away any political and social gains black Mississippians earned from northern intervention. Mississippi whites responded to their changing society by trying to return to the order they had so meticulously crafted before the Civil War. While they could not re-institute slavery, they could pursue white supremacy through segregation, discrimination, and violence. Over the next fifty years, the black community in Mississippi suffered immensely. Carefully crafted Jim Crow laws and prejudiced courts segregated all public spaces, entrenched African Americans in debt as sharecroppers, and enabled whites to deal out unprecedented violence towards African Americans without any consequences.¹

Reconstruction allowed a short period of partial respite for Mississippi African Americans; however, it quickly ended due to a lack of Northern support in the late 1870s. African American political and economic success was moderate but terrified the white community. During Reconstruction, white Mississippi became obsessed that they needed to strike back and enforce restrictions on African Americans' freedoms to maintain some semblance to the old "order." White Mississippians' fear lead them to believe they needed to quickly restrict African Americans' freedoms in order to maintain some semblance of the old "order." Within a decade of the end of Reconstruction, Mississippi courts began legalizing

¹ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 9-15; James P. Marshall, *Student Activism and Civil Rights in Mississippi: Protest Politics and the Struggle for Racial Justice, 1960-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 7-14.

segregation. By 1890, Mississippi whites drafted a new constitution that finally kicked out the few remaining African Americans in office and legalized disenfranchisement of African American voters. These were all attempts to maintain white control of the government and society. Over the next few decades, most African-American businesses and companies failed, African-American farmers lost their farms, and lynchings increased. Whites organized in the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) to unleash a reign of terror on black communities across the state.²

White supremacists also targeted black communities through their schools. Reconstruction established the first public-school system in Mississippi, and whites could not leave any hope for African American children to advance themselves beyond their parents. Segregation allowed the state to funnel resources and money from black schools to white schools. State-designed black school curriculum conspicuously ignored any mention of civic rights or African American history. The state limited access to materials and failed to maintain black school facilities. By the early 20th century, most Mississippi whites believed they had returned the African American community to an acceptable state of servitude and degradation.³

Aside from drafting Mississippi citizens, World War I largely left Mississippi untouched and the status quo remained unchallenged. In contrast, the Second World War brought dramatic change. The federal government funneled economic support into the state through military bases established to train soldiers; however, Mississippi whites feared how these changes would affect their state. White Mississippi worried increased federal funds could give African Americans greater economic independence. Additionally, black soldiers wielding guns was a white Mississippian's worst nightmare. To keep the black community "in its place," the local whites

² Dittmer, 12-18; Marshall, *Student Activism*, 8-9.

³ Marshall, *Student Activism*, 7-9; Dittmer, 9-18.

increased the amount of violence and lynchings dealt to Mississippi blacks. Occasionally, the federal government sent FBI agents to investigate these crimes. In the rare event the FBI would actually follow through on their investigation and charge someone, white juries carefully avoided convicting guilty defendants. Across the country, African American soldiers in World War II found themselves in segregated bases as second-class soldiers. Despite the inequality, they served their country with distinguished honor and valor.⁴

African American World War II veterans who risked their lives to ensure protection of civil liberties for people across the globe came home to the same oppression and “closed society” they left when they went off to war. When these veterans tried to register to vote, white Mississippi met them with threats, intimidation, and increased violence. White mobs chased away potential registrants and local election officials refused to allow them to register. Faced with constant fear and disappointment, Mississippi blacks were desperate for change. While little changed in Mississippi in these years, the rest of the United States was slowly coming around to the understanding that conditions in the South contradicted American values of freedom and equality; however, no one outside of Mississippi really understood the extent of bad conditions.⁵

A spark of hope and change came in 1954 when the Supreme Court ruled segregated schools were unconstitutional in the famous *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* case. The court concluded “separate but equal” was inherently unequal and required the desegregation of all public schools. This case became a huge wakeup call for both blacks and whites in Mississippi. African American communities hoped this was their chance to break down

⁴ Dittmer, 10-18.

⁵ Dittmer, 1-2, 19-28; William T. Martin Riches, *The Civil Rights Movement: Struggle and Resistance*, 4th ed. (London: Palgrave, 2017), 3-5.

institutionalized racism in schools while the white community realized their way of life was being threatened again. The white community's fear of federal intervention seemed to become a reality. In response, the Mississippi state legislature intentionally defied federal rulings and refused to desegregate their schools. They even prepared legislation to close all public schools if the national government tried to intervene.⁶

Encouraged by the *Brown* ruling, local African Americans rallied around the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to push Mississippi to enforce this new ruling. Unlike many civil rights organizations in other states, the NAACP emphasized developing local leaders to establish and direct local branches of the NAACP. These new branches emphasized school desegregation and voter registration. These local branches received support from the national NAACP office; however, they were essentially organic, local groups and often established a pattern of homegrown leadership as well as planning for specific programs that targeted the distinct needs of the various communities in Mississippi. These branches typically started under urban middle-class leadership, and quickly attracted membership in the working classes. As the movement continued, white pressure on the small Mississippi middle-class caused many of the leaders to step down and abandon the movement, while the working classes and farmers had little left to lose. These working classes and landowning farmers carried the movement.⁷

⁶ Dittmer, 34-45, 50-53; Iwan Morgan and Philip Davies, eds., *From Sit-Ins to SNCC: The Student Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 10-12; Marshall, *Student Activism*, 7-9; Riches, 14-21.

⁷ Dittmer, 41-45; Manfred Berg, *"The Ticket to Freedom": The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 70-72.

With national NAACP assistance, the local branches all worked tirelessly to push Mississippi school desegregation. The decision to pursue school desegregation came after a decade of failed attempts to increase the number of African Americans on the voting rolls. The national and local offices turned their attention to the schools in a hopeful attempt to break through the wall of segregation. After a national NAACP conference in Atlanta, Georgia in the summer of 1954, local leaders in Mississippi came together to adopt a school desegregation plan called the “Atlanta Declaration.” This declaration called for Mississippi African Americans to petition their schools to desegregate and “reorganize” in compliance with the *Brown* decision. If the schools resisted or ignored the requests, the NAACP would bring these Supreme Court violations to the federal courts. Black organization and action again threatened fearful white Mississippians, and the whites turned to their own form of organization to combat the rising tide of change.⁸

Rising black activism terrified Mississippi whites. The 1950 census reveals there were nearly one million African Americans living in Mississippi, making up over 45 percent of the population. Blacks typically made up around 30 to 40 percent of urban Mississippians, and in many counties, African Americans made up the majority.⁹ At the same time, two-thirds of black Mississippi women found employment as domestic workers in white homes. There were less than 1000 black professionals from pastors and teachers to lawyers and doctors and these earned about a third of their white counterparts. In public education, the state spent three-fourth of the education budget on white students and the remaining quarter on black schools each year. It was

⁸ Dittmer, 41-48; Timothy B. Tyson, *The Blood of Emmett Till* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 103-106.

⁹ The US Census defined “urban” as a location with 2,500 or more people. Jackson was the largest city in Mississippi in 1960, with a total population of 144,422. It was the only city in the state with over 50,000 people., U.S. Census Bureau, “Urban and Rural Definitions,” U.S. Census Data, accessed April 4, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/population/censusdata/urdef.txt>.

demonstrably clear, even to stalwart segregationists, that there was no equality in the “separate but equal” segregated world they had constructed. As African Americans joined the NAACP and voiced their complaints, white Mississippi feared this huge portion of the population and the power they could wield together.¹⁰

In response to the *Brown* decision and the rising tide of Mississippi African Americans challenging the state to honor a federal ruling, white Mississippians organized Citizens’ Councils to preserve their way of life. Unlike the violent KKK, Citizens’ Councils began a new approach to halt black activism. They pursued legal and economic repercussions for African Americans who stepped “out of line.” The first unofficial council of 11 Indianola men organized a public rally, which turned into the first Citizens’ Council meeting. Soon, over 20,000 whites joined the organization. Members included well-educated whites like lawyers, bankers, and politicians. The council in Walthall County targeted NAACP school desegregation petitioners with subpoenas and economic pressure and quickly stamped out their petition. In Columbus, the Citizens’ Council encouraged banks to refuse credit to NAACP leaders and forced their black employees to either boycott these leaders or lose their jobs. Without federal protection and help, there was no way Mississippi African Americans could effectively stand up to the Citizens’ Councils. By

¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, “Table 39. Mississippi - Race and Hispanic Origin: 1800 to 1990,” *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for Large Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States*, by Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, February 2005, accessed March 5, 2019, <https://census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2002/demo/POP-twps0056.pdf>; U.S. Census Bureau, “Table 25. Mississippi – Race and Hispanic Origin for Selected Cities and Other Places,” *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for Large Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States* by Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, February 2005, accessed March 5, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0076/MStab.pdf>; Dittmer, 19-35; Berg, 155-157; George Lewis, *Massive Resistance: The White Response to the Civil Rights Movement* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), 39-47.

the end of 1955, the NAACP gave up on school desegregation within Mississippi and turned their attention to other states with more successful programs.¹¹

As black Mississippians turned back to voter registration drives as an alternative to the failed attempts to desegregate schools, the Citizens' Councils followed closely with intimidation. Additionally, groups like the KKK followed economic and legal intimidation with violence. Two local African American men were murdered in 1955 after urging others to vote and holding voter rallies and whites shot at another civically-minded black man in his store after resisting economic pressure from the Citizens' Council. The FBI investigated; however, no one was charged or convicted. The violent climax of the summer focused on the death and lynching of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi.¹²

Emmett Till was a fun-loving, confident 14-year-old African American boy from Chicago who travelled to Mississippi in the summer of 1955 to visit his great uncle, Moses Wright. One afternoon, Till and some peers spent the afternoon together outside the local country store. After jokingly bragging about a white girlfriend back in Chicago, the other boys dared him to ask Carolyn Bryant, the shopkeeper, on a date. They likely did not expect that Till would accept the dare, but he did. After growing up and interacting with white women in Chicago, he presumably never thought his innocent joke would ever be taken seriously. Conflicting testimonies blur what truly happened in the store; Carolyn Bryant testified during the trial that a "man" came into the store, asked her on a date and "wolf-whistled" at her. Till's friends that day denied the whistling, and his family believed Bryant intentionally mistook his speech impediment for a "wolf-whistle". Moreover, over fifty years later, Bryant recanted her trial

¹¹ Tyson, 94-103, 110-112; Dittmer, 45-52; Morgan, 60-67; Berg, 155-157; Lewis, 27-31.

¹² Dittmer, 50-55; Tyson, 103-114; Berg, 150-151.

testimony and said in an interview, “Nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him.” Whatever the case, Till unknowingly broke one of white Mississippi’s deepest laws. When Bryant’s husband, Roy, returned from a business trip and heard about the story a few days later, he grabbed his half-brother, J. W. Milam, and turned up at Moses Wright’s home in the middle of the night and demanded to see Till. In spite of Wright’s appeals to protect his nephew, the men took Emmet Till in their truck and drove off.¹³

Three days later, on August 31, 1955, a young man discovered a body tied to a cotton gin fan in the Tallahatchie River. Locals helped drag the body out of the river. Multiple people, including Till’s mother, identified the body as the young Chicago boy. The brutal lynching of such a young boy caught the nation’s attention. Hundreds of reporters from across the nation and even the world came to Mississippi to cover the story. Due to overwhelming evidence, local officials actually charged and arrested Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam. After compelling testimonies by Moses Wright and emotionally charged statements from both sides, the jury stepped out to discuss their decision. After about an hour, they returned to the court room and declared Bryant and Milam “not guilty.” A few months later, both admitted to a reporter that they did, in fact, lynch Emmet Till.¹⁴

The nation responded in shock and horror to the story. Thousands protested the decision across the country. Even some whites in Mississippi acknowledged the injustice and lamented the condition of their state. Most Mississippi whites just hoped the storm around the case would die down quickly and that Emmet Till would be forgotten. No one knew just how much of an influence Emmet Till’s story would have on the black Mississippi youth – just under the surface,

¹³ Tyson, 51-55, 8-12; Lewis, 47-50.

¹⁴ Tyson, 122-135; Dittmer, 56-57; Lewis, 47-50.

a new determination took root in the hearts and minds of young African Americans. They identified with Emmet Till and came to the realization that they needed to stand up to the system and bring change themselves. These middle and early high schoolers grew up to become the inspirational student leaders of the 1960s, with a new passion for change and a boldness to keep up the fight for equality, regardless of the dangers.¹⁵

Meanwhile, the Mississippi state legislature passed a series of laws to maintain the status quo with even greater resolve. In 1955, the legislature removed legal provisions for Mississippians to register to vote at satellite locations, forcing all potential voters to register at the county courthouse, the symbol of white power and racism. Then, state officials began a campaign to remove unqualified voters from the voting rolls. They also re-evaluated and removed most black voters. In 1956, the state government removed compulsory school attendance laws in a preemptive measure against federal enforcement of the *Brown v. Board* decision. The legislature also passed a series of laws that enforced segregation at bus and train stations, enabled the police to investigate any “subversive” organizations (like the NAACP), and established a “breach of the peace” law that placed severe penalties on those who encouraged others to disobey Mississippi customs, traditions, and laws. That same year, the state government organized the State Sovereignty Commission – a government sanctioned “secret police” charged with spying on their black and white neighbors. The prevalence of intimidation, violence, and legislation took a huge toll on the civil rights movement.¹⁶

Mississippi blacks continued to leave the state, and in the late 1950s, many were NAACP leaders and community leaders running from the Citizens’ Councils. Voter registration also

¹⁵ Dittmer, 57-58; Tyson, 125-127, 210-212; Lewis, 47-50.

¹⁶ Lewis, 50-52; Dittmer, 58-70; Marshall, *Student Activism*, 8-10.

declined dramatically, as almost 10,000 black registered voters were removed from the voter rolls from 1954-1955. The remaining NAACP leaders looked to the small black middle class for support and found very little. The threat of violence terrified the teachers, pastors, and businessmen of the African American middle class. Their livelihoods depended on whites, and they feared if they joined the NAACP and demanded change, they would lose everything. Their choice to sit out during the fight caused division and more trouble within the movement. This frustrated field workers in the NAACP, who had fought Mississippi whites to better conditions for all Mississippi blacks, including the middle class. While some of the most influential leaders in the black community were ministers, they also avoided association with the civil rights movement.¹⁷

A developing front of contention grew, not between black and white Mississippians, but between various civil rights organizations. The national office of the NAACP wanted an exclusive presence in Mississippi. This would concentrate financial, political, and social support for the organization; however, the civil rights movement across the South was partially characterized by many organizations working toward the same goal. The first perceived challenge came from the Mississippi grown organization called the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL). Formed in 1951, their goals aligned closely with the NAACP; however, the relatively small size of the RCNL lessened the perceived threat and the national NAACP office finally began to cooperate with them in the mid-1950s. Then, a new “threat” grew out of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The national NAACP office feared if SCLC stepped into Mississippi, the NAACP would lose

¹⁷ Dittmer, 70-76; Berg, 155-157.

effectiveness. While the national office feared cooperation, local NAACP fieldworkers yearned for permission to work with these other organizations. Despite the local fieldworker's arguments, the national office pushed against Dr. King and his new organization. The SCLC kept out of Mississippi until the 1960s.¹⁸

The late-1950s were a frustrating time for the civil rights fieldworkers and black communities, yet they sparked a glimmer of hope that would carry the civil rights movement through the mid-1960s. While the movements in other states seemed to be gaining ground through events like the Montgomery bus boycott in Alabama, white violence remained a constant threat and paralyzed most Mississippi blacks. At least 10 Mississippi African Americans were lynched between 1955 and 1959. In addition, the national office of the NAACP stepped out of Mississippi and focused their energy on their work in other states. Local fieldworkers sensed abandonment as the national office stopped creating new programs and prohibited them from cooperating with other organizations. In this disheartening time, the Mississippi black youth, who had watched their communities struggle and fight their entire lives, began to stir. Their desire for equality and for change inspired them to organize and take up the baton from the older generations. NAACP youth councils gained popularity, and the NAACP fieldworkers helped educate and inspire these eager students.¹⁹

The civil rights movement in Mississippi took off during the 1960s, riding on the hopes and determination of black students. The spark for the Mississippi movement came from Greensboro, North Carolina in early 1960. On February 1, four local black college students sat down waiting for service at an all-white lunch counter. The employees told them to leave and

¹⁸ Berg, 168-172; Dittmer, 30-33, 70-74.

¹⁹ Dittmer, 77-90.

refused to offer service, but the four freedom fighters stayed until the store closed. Over the next few days, they continued to bring more and more students to “sit in” at the lunch counter. Angry whites threatened them and dumped food and drinks on the protesters, yet they persisted. In contrast, some supportive white students even joined them, and as their numbers grew, they branched out to other stores and lunch counters. Within weeks, students across the South were staging sit ins. This inspired the students in NAACP youth councils across Mississippi, and they began requesting to take part in these active protests. The NAACP leaders, scarred from the past decade of violence, feared this new form of protest would further anger Mississippi whites and provoke a new wave of violence. These leaders dissuaded students from participating in sit ins, but local workers like Medgar Evers pushed the state NAACP office to plan some kind of direct action protest. With the failure of voter registration, these local leaders, inspired by the youth, were desperate to find a new way to break the Mississippi power structure.²⁰

Some African American youth pushed to challenge segregation in Mississippi. Only three months after the Greensboro sit ins, the NAACP organized a boycott of segregated stores in Jackson, Mississippi. On April 14, a small group of African Americans started “wade-ins,” attempts to desegregate the all-white beaches on Mississippi’s gulf coast. Police ordered them off the beach. When the protestors returned ten days later, a group of forty men assaulted them while police watched. Even the NAACP returned to take an active role in Mississippi. Aaron Henry, a proponent of peaceful, direct action protest, stepped up as the new NAACP Mississippi state

²⁰ Riches, 50-52; Lewis, 130-134; Rebekah J. Kowal, “Staging the Greensboro Sit Ins,” *The Drama Review* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 135-137, accessed March 7, 2018, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,cpid,athens,shib&custid=s8863137&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.4488599&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

president and the national office initiated “Operation Mississippi” in early 1961 aimed at desegregating public places in Mississippi.²¹

This vision changed drastically from the goal of the 1950s. In the 1950s, the NAACP pursued voter registration and election campaigns because they believed if African Americans could exert influence politically and legally, they could slowly bring about change. They also believed if they could give the federal government proof of the horrific conditions in Mississippi, the government would have to step in. The federal government never responded. Despite their best efforts, the white power structure and lack of federal protection prevented Mississippi blacks from exercising their right to register and vote. In the 1960s, inspired by success in desegregating public areas through direct action protests across the South, the NAACP began to move towards organizing these peaceful protests, hoping to find the same success in Mississippi.²²

Two new civil rights organizations found their place in Mississippi during the early 1960s. Riding on the success of the student sit-in movements, students and veterans of other civil rights organizations like the NAACP and SCLC formed a student organization. In late 1960, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was created to be a temporary organization to coordinate sit ins and other forms of direct action protest; however, in 1961, after a conference with representatives from the other major civil rights organizations and representatives from every state, the organization became a permanent feature of the movement. Another organization, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) began to take part in these direct action protests. CORE was founded in the early 1940s and had played a large role outside

²¹ Dittmer, 85-87; Marshall, *Student Activism*, 12-14.

²² Berg, 172-179; Dittmer, 85-90.

Mississippi, but with the rising tide of action and hope, they planned new projects to move into Mississippi.²³

In the decisive *Boynton v. Commonwealth of Virginia* (1960) case, the Supreme Court declared segregation of interstate transportation services as unconstitutional. CORE quickly designed a plan to test this ruling with a “freedom ride” through the South. A group of twelve CORE activists, including the organization’s national director, left Washington D.C. in May 1961, on buses and headed to New Orleans. As they entered the deep South, angry crowds waited at bus stations for them, and in Alabama, the crowds turned to violence. One bus was stopped by a mob and burst into flames after someone threw a bomb inside. The mob brutally beat the fleeing activists. A mob in Birmingham stopped the other bus and the public safety commissioner waited fifteen minutes to intervene as mobs beat the riders with baseball bats and chains. The battered and beaten group chose to end their freedom ride there. SNCC students from Tennessee decided to continue their rides, but changed the destination to Jackson, Mississippi. Hoping to avoid another national scandal like the beatings in Alabama, the federal government forced state troopers to protect the buses as they passed angry crowds. When the freedom riders reached the bus terminal in Jackson, they attempted to desegregate the “whites only” platform. They were immediately arrested by the same guards who escorted them through Mississippi.²⁴

After the arrests, more and more freedom riders came to Mississippi, following the first group. Over the course of the summer, Jackson police arrested over 300 more freedom riders. Many spent their summer in Parchman jail. The jailed riders described this prison as the last

²³ Dittmer, 90-95; Marshall, *Student Activism*, 20-24, 26; Berg, 168-172.

²⁴ Dittmer, 91-99; Lewis, 137-145; Marshall, *Student Activism*, 13-18; Riches, 58-60.

remnant of slavery in the South. Prison guards followed prisoners through their work days in the cotton fields with rifles, and prisoners worked long hours. The freedom riders caught media attention, and northern reporters came to investigate. White Mississippi feared northern intervention, and these “yankee” reporters, because their reports could inspire the North to act. Governor Ross Barnett ensured that the Parchman prison wardens knew to give the freedom riders an easier time so that the northern reporters would have little to report. Over the next few years, civil rights organizations would try to use outside reporters to their advantage to gain national support.²⁵

The freedom rides initiated a new phase in the Mississippi civil rights movement. CORE spearheaded the program; however, in early 1961, they had no presence in Mississippi. This was due mostly to the NAACP’s insistence that other groups not intervene in Mississippi. The NAACP’s “monopoly” caused problems for the movement and left little support for the freedom riders in Jackson, as CORE could not organize within the state. The African American communities in Jackson were unsure of how to organize and help these freedom riders. Many found these movements stirring and life changing; but the white community was quick to dismiss these responses. Despite this, the civil rights movement began to grow, first with SNCC and CORE. As some freedom riders were finally released from Parchman, SNCC workers set up an office in Jackson. CORE also sent a field secretary to Jackson to try and coordinate support.²⁶

Soon, a young, northern math teacher named Bob Moses found his way into Mississippi through SNCC. The sit-in movement inspired him to leave teaching and pursue civil rights work in the deep South. He connected to the hope within the student movement and headed to

²⁵ Lewis, 137-145; Riches, 58-60; Lewis, 137-145.

²⁶ Dittmer, 91-98.

Mississippi for voter registration drives. He lived in southern black communities, in homes of local, prominent NAACP members and built relationships with the local people. He asked to hear their opinions and listened attentively. He seemed to grasp that this was everyone's project, not just the few. He raised community and financial support for a new voter registration program in McComb before beginning the program. He looked for local leadership, and soon after his arrival, a few more SNCC fieldworkers came and joined him. They began a voter registration class that prepared voters for the registration test and started canvassing door to door. Southern whites quickly caught on and began to target him; however, he stayed strong and resisted their means of intimidation, even filing legal complaints against his attackers.²⁷

Meanwhile, other SNCC workers began a direct action campaign in the same area of southwest Mississippi. Their sit-ins incited more violence against the civil rights workers and any local blacks who supported them. In addition, this muddied the waters of federal intervention and community support of SNCC. SNCC contacted the federal government, requesting protection for voters and civil rights workers for their voter registration drive, and the federal government actually seemed to be on-board and ready to step in. However, after the direct action campaigns started, things changed drastically. The federal government once again sided with Mississippi whites trying to keep the peace because they understood the Constitution gave them no grounds to support direct action protests aimed at mass desegregation. Violence increased, and even a member of the Mississippi state legislature murdered Herbert Lee, a prominent black man known to support the civil rights movement. After this murder, a student-lead sit-in resulted in a few students being arrested. When they were released from jail, their principal refused to

²⁷ Dittmer, 100-107; James P. Marshall, *The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement and the Kennedy Administration, 1960-1964* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018), 10-12.

admit them. Around one hundred students joined them in a school “walk-out.” They marched to the SNCC base where the SNCC fieldworkers were themselves divided on what to do.²⁸

Leaders like Bob Moses tried to dissuade students from the walk-out, while those who supported direct-action protests gave the students the go-ahead. The students marched to the court house with the SNCC fieldworkers. The police arrested all of them. When the students tried to return to the school later, the principal denied them re-entry unless they signed a pledge, promising to abstain from civil rights activity. Over fifty students refused to sign the pledge. SNCC fieldworkers organized the first “freedom school” where they taught these students throughout October until the students could enroll in a local college that offered high school classes. The freedom school teachers then served out their sentence in jail for inciting the youth to rebel. These freedom schools opened doors for these students and encouraged them to take pride in themselves.²⁹

The direct action protest in McComb divided the local black community. Some supported the young students taking part in the movement, while others responded in outrage that the movement would “use” their vulnerable children. SNCC experiences in McComb showed the workers how direct action protests could cause a huge outburst of white violence and repression as well as division in the black community. Due to the community division, SNCC lost McComb’s trust and pulled out of the area until 1964.³⁰

²⁸ Dittmer, 106-115; Marshall, *Student Activism*, 29-24; Marshall, *The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, 6-8, 14-15.

²⁹ Jon N. Hale, *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 34-36; Dittmer, 106-115; Marshall, *Student Activism*, 29-24.

³⁰ Dittmer, 109-115, Marshall, *Student Activism*, 18-21.

Now that CORE and SNCC held a significant presence in Mississippi, the various organizations needed to come to an understanding with the NAACP. In 1962, as each organization continued programs and continued fighting white resistance, the local and state leaders of each organization realized the need for unity in the movement. Bob Moses from SNCC, a representative from CORE, and two state NAACP representatives, Aaron Henry and Medgar Evers, gathered together in early 1962 to bring these major movements together to create a united front against white oppression. They resurrected the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) to unite all the various organizations through all levels of the movement. COFO was originally established in 1961 to meet with the governor to lift the charges on the freedom riders; however, Governor Barnett refused to pardon the “outsiders.” Additionally, if COFO focused on voter registration, they were able to receive additional funding from outside organizations. National offices feared that COFO would undermine their ability to function in the state, but ultimately, the state and local leaders’ understanding of a need for unity and cohesive programs pushed the national offices to allow this cooperation in Mississippi.³¹

With the unification of the civil rights organizations under COFO, the civil rights movement continued to forge on with greater strength. Where the NAACP had always targeted middle class black Mississippians, CORE and SNCC rallied the poor delta sharecroppers. They canvassed door to door, holding freedom meetings, planning voter registration drives, holding night voter registration and civics classes, and organizing boycotts of white businesses and

³¹ Berg, 182-185; Marshall, *Student Activism*, 33-37; Dittmer, 118-120.

stores. When faced with white retaliation, CORE and SNCC could count on the support of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC as well as financial or legal support from the NAACP.³²

White resistance continued to intensify, with more murders, arrests, false charges against workers and threats. In one instance, SNCC workers in Greenwood saw eight white men carrying shotguns pour out of their car, late at night outside their office. They desperately called the Justice Department, who offered no help and simply suggested they get out of the building. The three workers fled out of the upstairs bathroom window onto the roof, jumped onto another roof, and barely escaped. On June 11, a white man waited in secret for NAACP leader and US veteran Medgar Evers to come home after a rally in Jackson. As Evers' children and wife waited for him at the door, the sniper shot and killed one of the movement's greatest heroes. Mississippi African Americans mourned across the state. The continued, intense violence from the white community demoralized many African Americans who stepped down from the movement.³³

In 1963, new and expanding programs required more fieldworkers. SNCC looked to the North. They brought down the first few white fieldworkers to their Greenwood office to help with planning. The next crew of white volunteers came during the fall to help with a statewide campaign. Various programs and movements across the state withered under constant white violence. The movements struggled to continue when their leaders were jailed or placed on the KKK's target list. COFO realized they needed to pursue a program that would force federal protection for civil rights workers and demonstrate how many Mississippi blacks were ready and eager to vote. Instead of another voter registration campaign, COFO created the "Freedom

³² Dittmer, 130-133, 140-156; Marshall, *Student Activism*, 46-47; Riches, 80; Marshall, *The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, 193.

³³ Dittmer, 130-135, 140-156, 163-169; Riches, 71-75; Marshall, *The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, 165-169.

Ballot” campaign. COFO created its own party and platform and selected two movement leaders, NAACP leader Aaron Henry to run for governor and Tougaloo College chaplain Ed King to run with Henry for lieutenant governor. Henry, King, and dozens of fieldworkers travelled around the state speaking to black Mississippi about their platform: racial justice, school desegregation, and ensuring the right to vote. COFO quickly realized they needed more fieldworkers to run the campaign and after heated debates, allowed one of their northern, white allies to recruit students from Ivy League schools.³⁴

SNCC, CORE, and NAACP workers collected “Freedom ballots” for three days leading up to the election. Some people cast their ballots at makeshift ballot boxes set up in churches on Sunday while COFO provided mail-in ballots to others in more dangerous areas. Eighty-five thousand black Mississippians voted in this alternate election. COFO considered this a success. It was well below their goal of 200,000 but for a first-time effort to unite Mississippi blacks in a state-wide campaign, the turnout was encouraging.³⁵

While COFO celebrated the success, they also recognized the problems the campaign exposed. First, while this was the first attempt at a state-wide program, civil rights workers realized they needed a much larger force if they were to reach African American communities across the state. Second, the white volunteers attracted media attention to the campaign, which allowed the rest of America to see the black communities’ desperation. However, journalists

³⁴ Marshall, *The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, 187, 196-197, 200-205; Dittmer, 174, 199-207; “Freedom Ballot in MS (Oct-Nov),” *Civil Rights Movement History 1963 (July-December)*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 7, 2019, <https://www.crmvet.org/tim/tim63b.htm#1963msballot>; “Freedom Ballot Registration Form,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 7, 2019, <https://www.crmvet.org/docs/freedom-vote1.pdf>; “Freedom Ballot in MS,” March 7, 2018, <https://www.crmvet.org/docs/freedom-vote1.pdf>.

³⁵ Dittmer, 204-206; Marshall, *The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, 200-205.

focused their attention on the white volunteers instead of COFO workers or the campaign participants. This issue understandably left bitterness within the movement's activists. They needed these white students to win American and then federal support, but these white volunteers quickly "stole the show". Lastly, these college students frequently held a "savior" attitude and assumed they were there to lead. This flew in the face of the SNCC and COFO goal of developing local leaders to carry the movement and intensified class and racial differences between the campaign workers.³⁶

Before the Freedom Ballot campaign ended, SNCC and COFO leaders started thinking of their next, statewide campaign. COFO held a staff meeting and workshop after the Freedom Ballot campaign in Greenville to debrief, organize, and start planning the next event. Most SNCC workers wanted to do another statewide program but did not want to invite more white volunteers. A few leaders, like Bob Moses and Fannie Lou Hamer, supported bringing in more white volunteers. They were desperate for more volunteers but even more desperate for the civil rights movement to be integrated itself. Some of the workers would invite white volunteers if they understood they would assume any leadership positions. Race relations within the movement could be even more complicated than outside of the movement. More and more workers did support the planning of a summer event. Some pushed for black community centers, others, like SNCC worker Charlie Cobb, pushed for freedom schools to remedy the horrific educational opportunities available to black students.³⁷

³⁶ Dittmer, 201-207; Hale, 69-71.

³⁷ "COFO Notes on Mississippi Staff Meeting," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 7, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/6311_cofa_min.pdf.

The next few months were chaotic and exhausting for freedom fighters in Mississippi. President John F. Kennedy was assassinated only a few days after the Freedom Ballot campaign ended. As the shocked country grappled with his assassination, civil rights leaders in Mississippi looked ahead to the next president, Lyndon B. Johnson. While Kennedy seemed to support the national civil rights movement and promised to pass the civil rights act working its way through Congress, in Mississippi, he never offered federal protection to civil rights workers and frequently sided with the white southerners. COFO's eyes turned toward Johnson, hoping against hope that a conservative southerner would actually continue Kennedy's plans. By the end of 1963, veterans of the civil rights movement were exhausted. Years of threats, imprisonments, beatings, and fighting left many hopeless and broken. On top of the frustration and weariness, the Ku Klux Klan reemerged, poised and ready to strike.³⁸

White intimidation in the 1950s typically looked like disorganized groups of angry white men with guns and bombs or organized, calculating Citizens' Councils taking economic or legal action against the black community and individuals who stood up for their rights. The KKK revival in early 1964 grew out of the failure of the Citizens' Councils to push out the civil rights organizations and a fear that change was coming. In January, the KKK targeted 6 black businesses, two homes, murdered one man and wounded a 14 year old boy. February began with four white men attacking a husband and his friend trying to get his wife to the hospital and continued with a house bombing that lead to the kidnapping and murder of the homeowner. Not one white man was arrested or charged. The state government feared the Klan revival would attract negative attention to Mississippi, and voiced their opposition; however, they never acted.

³⁸ Dittmer, 207-214; Riches, 71-74.

The vulnerability of the black communities to KKK violence forced many SNCC and COFO activists to recognize their need for outside help and group movements.³⁹

In January 1964, COFO held a meeting to make a final decision about a statewide campaign in the summer. While the two largest branches of COFO, in Greenville and Canton, opposed using white volunteers, the others favored inviting as many volunteers as it would take, regardless of skin color. Moses eventually won over these branches through the support of the older workers. COFO authorized and began planning the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. As the project took shape, COFO realized three main goals: to run statewide voter registration campaigns, to establish “freedom schools,” and to create centers to unite the African American communities.⁴⁰

³⁹ Dittmer, 215-218; “Further Incidents in Southwest Mississippi at Time of Louis Allen Killing and Shortly After,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 7, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_sncc_swms-incidents.pdf; Bob Moses, “Report Concerning the Louis Allen Case, 1964,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 7, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_moses_allen-case.pdf.

⁴⁰ Dittmer, 215-219; Marshall, *The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, 276-280.

Chapter Two

From Summer Camp to War: Freedom Summer Planning and Orientation

COFO leaders wanted to use this summer project to touch every part of the state – not just a few large cities and counties. These leaders had experience with Mississippi police forces ending smaller programs by rounding up all the workers and imprisoning them, economic sanctions by the Citizen’s councils, and extreme violence at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan. Clearly, the white power structure was strong enough to withstand these smaller programs. Civil rights veterans hoped a state-wide program like the Freedom Summer could finally break down the white power structure in Mississippi, and they planned to use voter registration and freedom schools to do so. The voter registration campaign and the freedom schools required a coordinated operation, money to feed and house the large number of volunteers as well as to post bail for arrests, locations to meet, and materials to make an effective difference. However, in early 1964, COFO had a significantly reduced budget, a team of worn out home-grown volunteers, and less than six months to bring together the largest civil rights program Mississippi had ever seen.¹

The voter registration drive quickly became the priority. While the summer program would include freedom schools, community centers, and even a few programs in white communities, during much of the early planning, civil rights workers focused almost entirely on

¹ Jon N. Hale, *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 69-79; “Minutes COFO Convention,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 7, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/6402_cofa_minutes.pdf; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 207-214; Bob Moses, “Prospectus for the Mississippi Freedom Summer,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 7, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/fs64_proposal.pdf; Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 36-40; James P. Marshall, *Student Activism and Civil Rights in Mississippi: Protest Politics and the Struggle for Racial Justice, 1960-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 90-91.

the voter registration campaign. They wanted to change Mississippi through legal action but could not do so without registered voters. In early 1964, after years of small-scale voter registration drives, less than 3 percent of eligible black voters in three of the five Congressional districts were on the registration rolls. District 5 had the greatest number of registered black voters at only 11.5 percent. If the African American community hoped to gain access to the political sphere through voting, they needed a new course of action.²

In addition to a more traditional and state-wide voter registration campaign with registration efforts in each county, COFO also began planning for an alternate and parallel voter program in support of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The MFDP was established in 1960 as an alternative party to the Mississippi Democratic Party (MDP) because of the institutionalized racism and discrimination within the MDP. COFO and the MFDP set three goals for the summer: freedom registration, freedom candidates, and the Convention Challenge. Any Mississippi citizen could register to vote in the MFDP elections, and the MFDP planned to follow state procedures with their campaigns and elections. They planned for a primary and general election to select the candidates that would run against the MDP Congressional candidates in November. They also planned for elections for party representatives to challenge the seating of the MDP in the Democratic National Convention in August. This part of the Freedom Summer program was designed to help give the African American community access

² Hale, 69-79; "Mississippi Voter Registration Statistics by Race 1964," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 7, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/ms_voter_stats.pdf; MS Summer Project Staff, "Overview of the Community Centers," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 7, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_cofa_overview-cc.pdf.

to the political process and to show the nation that Mississippi blacks were eager and ready to participate in real electoral processes.³

As the voter registration plans came together, a few civil rights leaders, like Charlie Cobb, connected education with civic duty and political participation. Cobb proposed a “Prospectus for a Freedom School Program in Mississippi” in December 1963 that outlined his goals for an educational program that would supplement African American children’s educations across the state, give them unique experiences to take back to school with them and to teach to their peers, and to give them experience with and inspiration for social action. While the voter registration drives would challenge the existing power structure, the leaders who pushed for the establishment of freedom schools as a Freedom Summer program saw the need for long-term plans. By inspiring and educating the youth too young to vote, they planned for the future and raising a generation of activists who would carry the movement in the years to come.⁴

Freedom Summer organizers faced some major problems. They needed to recruit, train, house, and feed over 1,000 northern volunteers, raise money to run the whole summer program and post bail, develop plans for the various projects, find locations to hold freedom schools and civil rights meetings, acquire cars for voter registration and transportation, set up safety and communication systems, reach out to the federal government for protection, and find lawyers who would volunteer their services to fight the unjust legal system in Mississippi. This was a

³ “Challenge of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 7, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/mfdp_conv_challenge.pdf; “Proposal for MFDP Convention Challenge,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_cofa_convention-proposal.pdf.

⁴ Charlie Cobb, “Prospectus for a Summer Freedom School Program in Mississippi,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/fs64_prospectus.pdf; Hale, 68-72, 76-79.

daunting task and determined movement veterans worked tirelessly to make the summer program a reality.⁵

Initially, COFO focused on determining where and how they would recruit large numbers of white volunteers and what role the volunteers would take in the program. While COFO had already determined to use white volunteers, the relationship between the white volunteers and local African American activists in the program was not secure. The white volunteers' presence in the "Freedom Ballot" campaign and the attention they drew in late 1963 demonstrated they were both useful for helping run civil rights programs and one of the best tools to attract national attention and show the rest of America the terrible conditions in Mississippi. However, many civil rights workers resented the need for the white volunteers. White America should have cared when Mississippi racists killed any American; however, the truth was clear that the rest of America only cared when one of "their" white sons or daughters faced violence. Bob Moses stated the matter succinctly: "these students bring the rest of the country with them... The interest of the country is awakened and when that happens, the government responds."⁶

COFO recognized the benefits and the risks of recruiting upper-class white college students. First, they would quickly grab national attention and would be a strong incentive for the federal government to offer protection for the Freedom Summer project as a whole. Second, upper-class white students would have financial resources to provide for themselves throughout the summer. COFO had no money to spare and could not afford to cover the cost of meals for the

⁵ McAdam, 39-40; Betty Garman, "Dear Friends, Fundraising letter from SNCC (Betty Garman)," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/640000_sncc_fos_msfs.pdf; Richard Haley, "Memo to George Raymond," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/640615_core_letter.pdf.

⁶ McAdam, 38-41; Hale, 70-77.

volunteers during their stay in Mississippi. Volunteers were required to have at least \$150⁷ to cover living expenses as well as an extra \$500 in bail money in the likely event of arrest. Arrests almost always followed severe beatings – COFO was painfully aware of the dangers to the white volunteers and the ethical responsibility of bringing these idealistic and naïve volunteers to such a dangerous place. While the risks of both physical danger from whites and stunting local black leadership within the movement were high, the potential benefits of having such a large task force outweighed these risks and the program moved ahead with recruitment.⁸

Once the summer organizers knew which students they intended to target as volunteers, they quickly set to work trying to recruit them. COFO reached out to Al Lowenstein, who had helped recruit white volunteers for the “Freedom Ballot” campaign in 1963. He had contacts with Yale and Stanford students and had even been telling those who wanted to return that they would be contacted again for a summer program, long before COFO decided to use white volunteers to help run the summer program. The NAACP sent brochures to northern universities, aiming to recruit students and professors. COFO also sent word to pastors through the National Council of Churches and reached out to many professors and lawyers that would be able to fight the white judicial and legal systems in Mississippi.⁹

Meanwhile, COFO turned their attention to raising funds to run the extensive summer programs. COFO needed funds to run the state-wide voter registration drive, pay for the MFDP

⁷ \$150 in 1964 is equivalent to over \$1,200.00 in 2019. “CPI Inflation Calculator,” *Databases, Tables & Calculators by Subject*, United States Department of Labor: Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

⁸ McAdam, 38-41; Hale, 73-77.

⁹ Dittmer, 243-247; NAACP, “Operation Freedom: Mississippi – 1964,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_naACP_msfs_brochure.pdf; Hale, 69.

campaigns, pay for travel expenses to bring volunteers to Mississippi and throughout the state, stock freedom schools with materials and books, to post bail for arrested staff workers and volunteers, and to cover general expenses. They estimated these costs required a total of \$200,000¹⁰ to run the Freedom Summer program. Due to COFO's structure as an organization, it had no money to support the plan and relied on the member organizations to supply the needed funds. While the NAACP and SCLC were technically part of Freedom Summer planning, they were not as supportive as organizers hoped and were reluctant to contribute financially. CORE supported the program but only focused their efforts in one of the five congressional districts. As a result, they only pledged to raise one-fifth of the funds for the project. That left SNCC to raise the remaining \$160,000. In order to raise the needed funds and acquire materials, SNCC sent out letters to Friends of SNCC organizations and individuals who supported the cause across the country, encouraging them to host fundraisers and supplies drives to support the movement.¹¹

COFO also set to work planning the programs and finding locations to hold meetings and freedom schools. Bob Moses's "Freedom Summer Prospectus" and Charlie Cobb's "Freedom School Prospectus" were both crucial documents that helped organizers solidify plans for the summer. Projects in the fifth congressional district were delegated to CORE, while SNCC

¹⁰ \$200,000 in 1964 is equivalent to \$1,623,948.39 in 2019. "CPI Inflation Calculator."

¹¹ Marshall, 85-87; McAdam, 38-39; Betty Garman, "Dear Friends, Fundraising letter from SNCC (Betty Garman)," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/640000_sncc_fos_msfs.pdf; "Supplies Needed for Mississippi Freedom Project," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/640000_sncc_fs64_supportflyer.pdf; Stephen Bingam, "Fund Appeal Letter to Ladislaus Michalowski," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/6407_msfs_michalowski-let.pdf; Harry Webb, Jr., "Dear Friend (Report on Address from Judy Michalowski)," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/640625_msfs_newbritain.pdf; Betty Garman, "Urgent Memorandum re Mississippi Summer Project Fund-raising and Support Work," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/640500_sncc_fos_msfs_fund.pdf.

prepared to lead projects throughout the rest of the state with assistance from other COFO member organizations. COFO also needed to make plans to train the huge northern volunteer force. The Western College for Women in Ohio offered to host the training sessions, allowing COFO to prepare the volunteers outside Mississippi before their “baptism in fire” within the state. They also prepared presentations, developed training sessions, printed pamphlets and booklets, and invited speakers to prepare these naïve volunteers for Mississippi.¹²

No civil rights program was complete without community meetings to bolster morale, communicate with, and encourage support from the community. In many communities, pastors invited COFO to use their church buildings in the evenings to hold meetings and offered their buildings to house freedom schools during the days. In a few needy towns, COFO planned to build community centers that would become meeting places and freedom school buildings. African American families across the state generously opened their homes to these volunteers, enabling COFO to use financial resources to support programs instead of paying for long-term housing.¹³

Local communities embraced the summer project. However, as families opened their homes, businesses gave money and support, and churches welcomed freedom fighters, they also faced intensified white violence. The KKK began threatening families, businesses owners, and churches that prepared to welcome the Freedom Summer volunteers. Many businesses and churches, like Mount Zion Church in Neshoba County, were targeted, bombed, or burned by the KKK after offering to welcome or support programs. It was clear that white Mississippi would

¹² Moses, “Prospectus for the Mississippi Freedom Summer”; Cobb, “Prospectus for a Summer Freedom School Program in Mississippi”; Marshall, 91.

¹³ Webb, “Dear Friend (Report on Address from Judy Michalowski)”; Marshall, 80-84.

not permit Freedom Summer to come to Mississippi without a fight; however, Mississippi African Americans also faced this violence with a new resolve and unity. This summer, they would not back down, and they would not give up.¹⁴

Freedom Summer planners also needed to work out how to best protect both movement workers and local African American communities from the violence and intimidation they would face at the hands of white Mississippi. In the face of relentless violence, COFO looked to the federal government for protection. Charles Evers, head of the Mississippi branch of the NAACP informed Attorney General Robert Kennedy of the escalating racial tensions in Mississippi in early 1964. In early June, the head of the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, Burke Marshall, travelled to Mississippi to investigate Klan violence and later recalled Mississippi was about to explode. COFO staff, members of “Friends of Mississippi” groups across the nation, concerned parents, professors, and freedom summer volunteers themselves requested President Lyndon B. Johnson grant federal protection in Mississippi. Despite being fully aware of the intense violence and intimidation, the president remained silent. When COFO requested a public hearing with the president, he refused to acknowledge it. His assistant sent the freedom fighters away saying, “The President’s schedule at this particular time is unusually heavy.” When the federal government and FBI refused to offer any kind of protection for the Freedom Summer workers, volunteers, and black communities, they turned to creating an extensive communication network and advanced protocols to ensure safety.¹⁵

¹⁴ Marshall, 84; Hale, 105-107.

¹⁵ Dittmer, 237-241; “Mr. President (Letter to Lyndon B. Johnson),” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/640609_msfs_parents-lbjlet.pdf.

Mississippi freedom fighters learned throughout the past few years that communication within the state that spread to publicity outside the state was one of their best defenses against white violence. Because of this, COFO established a communication system using the WATS (Wide Area Telephone Service) system.¹⁶ There were specific lines in the COFO, CORE, and SNCC offices reserved for calls within the state as well as specific lines reserved for use to an office in Atlanta, the Justice Department, and national news agencies. This system enabled SNCC and COFO to simultaneously handle problems within the state (such as dispatching help in the form of doctors, additional workers, and lawyers) and spread word of violent incidents outside of the state to the federal government and news agencies across the country.¹⁷

Freedom Summer WATS operators had specific instructions to file reports of every call and incident and to call the Jackson office with updates every two hours, day and night. These reports emphasized creating clear headings, taking note of what happened in the incident, where and when the incident took place, who was involved, why the incident took place, and how it unfolded. After every incident, operators were instructed to call the Justice Department in Washington D.C. If they did not get through or if the incident occurred late at night, they called officials' home numbers. Then, they called the FBI offices in the state (for severe incidents, they

¹⁶ The WATS system enabled COFO to pay a flat fee for unlimited calls within a large geographic region instead of having to pay for individual long-distance calls. Any pay-phone call to a WATS line was also automatically charged to the organization, enabling poor Mississippi blacks or stranded workers to use pay phones without cash on hand. Additionally, local lines within the state were operated by white, racist operators who would intentionally drop, disconnect, or misdirect calls from freedom fighters or calls to the COFO offices. By using the WATS system, freedom summer activists could bypass these operators. Most of these WATS lines were tapped by local police who shared the information with the local KKK and Citizens' Councils. COFO tried to use scramblers when possible, but this did not eliminate the threat of interception. "WATS and Incident Reports," *Civil Rights Movement Documents*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, <https://www.crmvet.org/docs/wats/watshome.htm>; Marshall, 87-90.

¹⁷ Marshall, 87-89; James Forman, "SNCC WATS Line Instructions and Policies," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/wats/64_wats_instructions.pdf.

also needed to call the Atlanta FBI office). If workers or volunteers were jailed, WATS operators should call the jails pretending to be a reporter from outside the state. This could reduce the severity of beatings. The WATS instructions communicate the urgency and importance of this operation and clearly state, “a lapse of hours between the time Atlanta is notified of an incident and time when Jackson was notified, may have an effect on peoples' lives.” In Mississippi, small conflicts could escalate into intense beatings or even murder in a matter of hours.¹⁸

In many areas across the state, there was little or no access to telephones to call the main COFO and SNCC offices in Jackson or Greenwood. COFO turned to using two-way walkie talkies in order to stay in contact and communication with the volunteers and workers throughout the summer. They had twenty-five stationary walkie talkies in offices across the state and another twenty-five walkie talkies installed in COFO cars. This security system was active twenty-four hours each day and ran every day of the summer program. The security system would only function as necessary if both volunteers and movement workers took serious precautions to maintain communication with leaders and offices. Any time volunteers or workers left an office or a community, they needed to complete a Security Check-Out Form. This form listed the driver, all passengers, information about the car, their destination, what time they left, their estimated time of arrival, and the main roads they planned to take. When the workers arrived at their next destination, they checked in with any local offices or workers and called back to the office they left to confirm their arrival.¹⁹

¹⁸ Forman, “SNCC WATS Line Instructions and Policies”; “Incidents Reported to the Jackson Office During a 24 Hour Period, June 25 1964,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/6406_cofa_incidents.pdf.

¹⁹ Marshall, 87-90; “Security Check Out Form For WATS Operators,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/wats/64_wats_securityform.pdf.

News of this Freedom Summer project leaked out to Mississippi whites. They, too, began planning to resist and stop this “invasion”. Mississippi whites in the state government down to individual community members spent the early months of 1964 preparing to break this new wave of civil rights activism. The white approach to preventing Freedom Summer differed greatly between the elites in government and frustrated, rural Mississippians. Elites and government officials knew America was looking at Mississippi and they were determined to present the picture that they were a modern, liberal state that malicious civil rights activists slandered and maligned. They tried to silence stories of violence and persuade Mississippians to use economic and political pressure instead of reckless violence. However, rural Mississippians were determined to use their tried and true measures of violence to keep the status quo.²⁰

In an attempt to cart off the protestors to Mississippi jails and “peacefully” stop the movement, the Mississippi legislature enacted a series of new laws infringing on civil rights guaranteed in the Constitution and targeting civil rights actions. They passed laws to prevent civil rights activists from picketing and passing out movement materials, enabled police forces to set curfews, gave the governor the ability to grant local jurisdiction to state highway patrol officers, and laws that reestablished the poll tax through exposing legislative loopholes in the 24th Amendment. The state legislature also debated laws that would make freedom schools illegal, segregate schools by gender, give support to private schools (in the event that they needed to close the public schools or face desegregation), to prohibit northern volunteers from

²⁰ Marshall, 94-97; Robert E. Lockett, Jr., *Joe T. Patterson and the White South's Dilemma* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 154-164; Dittmer, 237-241; Hale, 106-107.

entering the state, and changing qualifications of those called to jury duty to prevent African Americans from sitting on juries, to name only a few.²¹

Mayor Allen Thompson of Jackson prepared by using his \$2.2 million dollar budget to create a veritable army of policemen, purchase a few hundred new guns, stockpile tear gas and gas masks for each officer, and acquire transport vehicles for police and arrested civil rights volunteers. The jewel of his “army” was “Thompson’s Tank,” an enormous, armored vehicle to end protests. Small town and rural Mississippi whites maintained their traditional practices of violence and intimidation. Local organizations of the KKK targeted black people, their homes, businesses, and churches when the Klan learned they were supportive of the Freedom Summer project. The Klan also created propaganda calling Mississippians to rise up and protect their state from the northern aggressors.²²

The dangers the white northern volunteers might face paled in comparison with the dangers and fears of daily life for many black Mississippians in 1964. In the face of threats and intimidation, COFO and their army of volunteers set their sights for Mississippi to bring change that was long overdue. COFO staff prepared two, week long orientation sessions for the

²¹ Lockett, 154-164; Marshall, 94-97; “Anti-Picketing Law Passed in Mississippi to Combat Civil Rights Activities,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_ms_picketinglaw.pdf; “Current Status of Mississippi Legislation,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/ms_laws64.pdf; “Mississippi State Bill Attempt to Stop Freedom Schools,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/640600_sncc_fskool-bill.pdf; “Mississippi Legislature – 1964,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 8, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/6406_cofa_ms_leg-rpt.pdf; McAdam, 26-29.

²² McAdam, 27-29; Marshall, 94-97.

volunteers, to help them understand the goals of Freedom Summer and their responsibilities as volunteers. The intensity of the summer started early in the Ohio orientation.²³

These eager, young volunteers who gathered at the Western College for Women for the summer orientation sessions made up a fairly homogeneous group. They largely came from wealthy families with annual incomes almost 50 percent higher than the national average. Students came from over 200 schools across the country, but nearly 60 percent of the applicants came from the top twelve universities in the country. About 40 percent of the volunteers were women. Around 80 percent of the volunteers were college students, and of the college students, most were juniors or seniors, likely because they had greater freedom and resources as older students. Less than 10 percent of the volunteers were African Americans, and the majority of African American volunteers came from southern universities. The most consistent feature of the Freedom Summer volunteers, however, were not their social or physical characteristics.²⁴

The Freedom Summer volunteers largely shared attitudes and values. Most had previous experience, either directly or indirectly through their parents, with civil rights activism. Most also indicated they believed their parents would be supportive, or at least proud of their commitment to their fellow Americans in the South. Even more telling, the application to join the movement included one free response question asking the volunteers why they wanted to join the movement in Mississippi. Nearly every single applicant gave the same kind of answer. They were idealistic, optimistic, and influenced by the growing New Left. The applicants expressed a perceived responsibility to fix the race problem in the South as well as a hopeful determination they could be part of the process that could succeed in ending racism and prejudice. Most of the

²³ McAdam, 66-68; Hale, 101-107.

²⁴ McAdam, 41-44; Marshall, 93-94; Hale, 79-88, 101-107.

applicants made no mention of a specific political agenda and were surprisingly apolitical. They were driven by a sense of duty, empathy, and religion.²⁵

Finally, many of the volunteers, while joining the movement for noble causes, also brought with them some damaging assumptions. Still believing they were the saviors and martyrs of the “white man’s burden,” they believed it was their duty to give the deficient Mississippi African Americans their time and knowledge. While they were trying to fight racism, they were subtly prejudiced themselves. Many, like the volunteers who helped run the Freedom Vote campaigns the year before, struggled under black authority. Instead of coming as the support system to enable Mississippi blacks to rise up as their own leaders, they believed they were the saviors and should have been the leaders of freedom in Mississippi. After the summer, volunteer Liz Fusco, bluntly stated, “Some of us did some damage.” Despite any harm done, for many volunteers, their experiences in Freedom Summer did confront their subtle and sometimes subconscious biases.²⁶

The first week-long orientation session was designed to train the volunteers who would work primarily with voter registration. As students gathered in Ohio on June 13, many received a cold or hostile welcome from the black staff workers who also gathered in Ohio to train them. Naïve and unaware of the reality these workers faced in Mississippi and the strained history even between supportive whites and civil rights workers, the volunteers expressed in letters home they just wanted to be accepted. One volunteer, Lew, wrote home, “Intellectually, I think many of us whites can understand the Negroes’ resentment but emotionally we want to be ‘accepted’ at face

²⁵ McAdam, 44-53; Hale, 88-90.

²⁶ Hale, 88-91.

value.” He continued, “I never detected a ‘difference’ [between whites and blacks] ... But what I am finding here is a different situation and perhaps a more honest one....”²⁷

A few days into the training, the movement workers showed a video about Mississippi. Many of the volunteers laughed at the “ridiculous” Mississippi whites, but were surprised when some of the workers left the room. One worker stood up and explained the workers’ response. He pointed out two volunteers, one who survived being shot six times and another who was beaten so badly he was unrecognizable. He continued pointing out what black Mississippians have seen and experienced and even if they were not friendly and outgoing, the workers loved and were grateful for the volunteers. He finished, saying, “We love you and we are afraid of you... Somebody walked out of a movie, but you won’t see anyone walk out on your picket line. When you get beaten up, I am going to be right behind you.”²⁸

The first orientation week was a daunting lineup of, assemblies, work group meetings, and training sessions. The COFO staff needed to communicate a history of the civil rights movement in the Magnolia state as well as the current status of civil rights and race relations, how to interact with whites and blacks, and legal and safety information. Early in the week, the Justice Department representative, John Doar, gravely informed the volunteers there would be no federal protection throughout the summer. As the week progressed, the Freedom Summer staff efficiently dispelled any misconceptions of safety for the summer ahead.²⁹

²⁷ Marshall, 93-94; Lew to Mom and Joe, Oxford, Ohio, June 14, 1964 in Elizabeth Martinez, ed. *Letters from Mississippi: Reports from Civil Rights Volunteers & Poetry of the 1964 Freedom Summer* (Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2007), 5.

²⁸ Marshall, 93-94; Bill to Folks, June 16, 1964 in Martinez, 8-9.

²⁹ McAdam, 66-72.

The Freedom Summer planners' primary goal throughout the orientation week was to inundate the volunteers with the horrors and violence they would meet in Mississippi. Every Mississippi veteran and native shared their stories. COFO workers led volunteers through role-play lessons where they practiced protecting their faces and stomachs from beatings. Volunteers began to write home to their families about the impending danger they were walking into. The volunteers' anxiety and fear were countered by the passionate and hopeful freedom songs they all sang together during evening assemblies. These moments of unity and strength fueled the volunteers' resolve and brought unity between the civil rights workers and the volunteers. On June 20th, the first group of 250 volunteers packed up, climbed into busses and cars after one last chorus of freedom songs, and set off towards Mississippi. One volunteer remarked, "It was a strange [combination] of children headed for summer camp and soldiers going off to war."³⁰

³⁰ McAdam, 66-72; Hale, 101-107.

Chapter Three

“The Freedom Schools Will Not Operate out of Schoolhouses”:

Freedom Schools through the Teachers’ Eyes

On June 22, as the first group of volunteers arrived in Mississippi and, as the second group of volunteers gathered for their orientation session in Ohio, news of the disappearance of three young men, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman, rippled through the movement. The news spread rapidly from Neshoba County, Mississippi, to COFO offices across the state and north to Ohio. Chaney was a Mississippi born and raised black CORE activist and Schwerner and his wife Rita were a white couple from New York who just joined CORE earlier that year. Before Freedom Summer orientation, Chaney and Schwerner boldly came to the community of Mt. Zion Methodist Church in Philadelphia, Mississippi, the very heart of Klan country, to make plans for hosting a freedom school.¹

The Klan quickly uncovered the plans and moved to destroy the movement before it could begin. While the CORE activists were in Ohio preparing for the orientation sessions, the KKK attacked the congregation after a meeting and set the church on fire that evening. Upon returning to Mississippi on June 21, Chaney and Schwerner invited Goodman, a twenty-year-old student volunteer from New York, to join them as they went to investigate the burned remains of Mt. Zion Methodist Church. They never made it back.²

¹ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 245-251; James P. Marshall, *Student Activism and Civil Rights in Mississippi: Protest Politics and the Struggle for Racial Justice, 1960-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 97-102; Jon N. Hale, *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 104-107.

² Dittmer, 245-251; Marshall, 97-102; Hale, 104-107.

Their disappearance shocked veteran COFO staff and terrified the other volunteers. Within a few days, the search changed from trying to find the men to combing the swamps to find their remains. As soon as the news reached Ohio, four teams of SNCC workers left to join search parties in rural Neshoba County. One civil rights leader, Dave Dennis, expressed the lasting effects of the lynchings almost twenty years later: “you never get over that. I guess I will live with it until the day I die.” On the day the volunteers went missing, a group of voter registration volunteers in Meridian waited for any news of the three men while hiding in the COFO office from circling cars of Mississippi thugs. One of the volunteers wrote, “Everyone now is very quiet, just sitting, and watching out of the darkened windows... watching the cars that circle... I’ve been reading *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Somehow, it’s appropriate.”³

In Ohio, volunteers were requested to write to their parents and congressmen to pressure President Lyndon Johnson, again, to offer federal protection. As parents received letters from their children, they began using any power they had to push the federal government to action. A group of parents from the East Coast formed the “Parents Mississippi Emergency Committee” in Washington D.C. They kept up pressure on the president and sent out letters to the other parents and families with information and instructions on how to help. Bob Moses also sent a letter to all of the volunteers’ parents stating what they need to do to pressure the federal government to action and what COFO was doing to try and prevent another situation like the Philadelphia disappearances. President Johnson finally responded. He initially sent 5 FBI officers to

³ Dittmer, 248-250; Edna to Stark, June 21, 1964 in Elizabeth Martinez, ed. *Letters from Mississippi: Reports from Civil Rights Volunteers & Poetry of the 1964 Freedom Summer* (Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2007), 29-30.

Mississippi to take over the investigation. By the end of the summer, there were over 150 FBI agents in the Magnolia State.⁴

The young volunteers in Ohio came face to face with the severity of the situation in Mississippi. One student wrote, “The reality of Mississippi gets closer to us every day. We know the blood is going to flow this summer and it’s going to be our blood. And I’m scared – I’m very scared.” Another student wrote a few days later, “Bob Moses just told us now is the time to back out. Should I? I don’t know – I am scared shitless. I don’t want to go to Mississippi.” Many of the prospective teachers believed they would be safer than the volunteers canvassing; however, news of the disappearances proved quite the opposite. Mississippi whites bombed a church because it would hold a freedom school and demonstrated they were just as likely to respond to freedom schools with violence as they were voter registration.⁵

While some volunteers did leave the movement because of fear, most stayed with a renewed sense of commitment and determination. Many volunteers remarked on the power and unity they felt, standing hand in hand, singing freedom songs. These bittersweet moments knit hearts together and revived the volunteers’ passion and drive. One volunteer wrote home after singing together with other volunteers, “I knew better than ever before why I was going to Mississippi and what I am fighting for. It is for freedom... freedom to be a man with integrity so

⁴ Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 70; “Dear Parents: Letter to Parents Mississippi Emergency Committee,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/6400_msfs_parents_bulletin.pdf; Bob Moses, “Letter to Parents of Freedom Summer Volunteers,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_msfs_parents_letter.pdf; Dittmer, 248-251.

⁵ Dittmer, 248-250; Hale, 104-107; McAdam, 69-74; Letter, June 26, 1964 in Martinez, 38.

that there is no need to try to take others' integrity from them." Facing their fears, these volunteers persisted and finished their training as freedom school teachers.⁶

The orientation session for the freedom school teachers focused on helping them understand their main purposes and goals, and to have a firm foundation of freedom school curriculum and pedagogy. The main purposes of the freedom schools, as outlined by Charlie Cobb in his freedom school prospectus, were to supplement and remediate the poor education the students received from the state, and to form a strong base for student-led activism within Mississippi. Cobb believed students were powerful forces of social change. He designed these schools to encourage and raise up the next generation of civil rights activists.⁷

CORE organized a meeting with the National Council of Churches and civil rights leaders in mid-March to create the freedom school curriculum. Developing a clear and comprehensive curriculum was essential to the success of the freedom schools. Most freedom school volunteers had no experience teaching; however, even the few who had previous experience in a classroom could never have imagined what their students were coming from and how to create a classroom that would meet all of their needs. Many of the leaders who worked together to create the curriculum had experiences in these schools or working with these students. They intimately understood students' needs and had personal experience trying to meet those needs.⁸

⁶ Letter, June 27, 1964 in Martinez, 36-38.

⁷ Hale, 71-72, 92-100; Charlie Cobb, "Prospectus for a Freedom Summer School Program in Mississippi," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2018, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/fs64_prospectus.pdf.

⁸ Hale, 92-96.

The freedom school curriculum and learning objectives were guided by principles that would enable black students to become independent learners and leaders and built on a strong foundation of reading, writing, and math skills, as well as a comprehensive understanding of civics. Civil rights leaders wanted to inspire students to become engaged learners and empower them to become confident, empathetic leaders. Some of the learning objectives emphasized helping students develop “self-worth and self-confidence in his ability to learn, achieve, and contribute.” Freedom school planners wanted teachers to foster an attitude of independence, confidence, inquiry, and critical thinking skills in each student, in order to help them break out of the oppressive system they were born into.⁹

The freedom schools’ most important guiding principle or purpose was to inspire students to question and to express their thoughts. The Mississippi public school system was designed to silence black students and to punish inquisitive thought because it could challenge the Mississippi “way of things.” In contrast, freedom school organizers challenged the prospective teachers to create classroom environments that encouraged questioning and learning through inquiry. Because most students were already indoctrinated to silence and acceptance, this task could raise challenges for the freedom school volunteers. In order to help prepare them, COFO and the planning committee developed a wide variety of activities that could “break the ice” and help students find their voice. These activities emphasized facilitating discussions and asking deep questions of the students. In some cases, teachers were encouraged to ignore technical corrections, like grammar and spelling, in order to make students comfortable with sharing their

⁹ “Curriculum Planning for Summer Project,” in Council of Federated Organizations Panola County Office -- Freedom Schools - Memos and Staff Documents, 1964, *Freedom Summer Digital Collection*, Wisconsin Historical Society, accessed April 4, 2019, <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15932coll2/id/8056/rec/16>; Hale, 92-95.

own ideas. As necessary as grammar and spelling are to a student, COFO challenged teachers to understand that a student's freedom to think and question was an even greater priority.¹⁰

Through various memorandums, notes, and guides, COFO illustrated other guiding principles for freedom school teachers. Civil rights leaders wanted teachers to avoid traditional classroom styles that would remind students of their experiences in state schools. This involved creative, resourceful, and inventive lesson plans to give students a completely new experience. These volunteer teachers also received training on crafting interdisciplinary lessons that applied to students' lives. Teachers could create math problems working with percentages of registered voters, encourage writing skills through freedom school newspapers, and challenge oral skills through class speeches or plays. Teachers were also challenged to build relationships with students through honesty. Most students had never encountered a trustworthy white person, and they would be reluctant to trust these crazy northerners. Each teacher needed to demonstrate they were worthy of trust and were there to support their students. Only after deep relationships formed could students feel the freedom to truly learn.¹¹

¹⁰ "Curriculum Conference Subgroup Report," *Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum*, Education and Democracy, accessed March 22, 2019, http://educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/B_06_CurrConfSubgrReport.htm; Hale, 92-95, 122-124; "Part I: Academic Curriculum," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_fs_1aca.pdf; "Part II: Citizenship Curriculum," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_fs_2citizenship.pdf; "Non-Material Teaching Suggestions for Freedom Schools," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_fs_suggestions.pdf; "Some Notes on Leading Discussions," in Council of Federated Organizations Panola County Office Records, 1964, *Freedom Summer Digital Collection*, Wisconsin Historical Society, accessed April 4, 2019, <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15932coll2/id/8056/rec/16>.

¹¹ COFO, "Memorandum to Freedom School Teachers," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/fs64_memorandum.pdf; Mississippi Summer Project Staff, "Overview of Freedom Schools," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/640505_cofa_fskool_overview.pdf; "Notes on Teaching in Mississippi," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2018, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_fs_notes.pdf; "Non-Material Teaching Suggestions"; Hale, 119-124.

Once the curriculum planning committee had developed guiding principles and behavioral goals for students, they turned to developing content. They divided the curriculum into two parts: the first emphasized reading, writing, and math skills; however, the largest portion of the content curriculum was devoted to civics and civic engagement. The committee designed the curriculum to use many different kinds of teaching methods but favored interactive and discussion-based activities. The curriculum outlined learning goals and teaching strategies to help develop oral and written communication skills and to enable students to develop into effective communicators and leaders. Regarding mathematics instruction, the committee gave freedom school teachers a diagnostic pre-assessment they could use to understand each student's level of proficiency and meet students' needs individually. The diagnostic assessment began with simple addition and subtraction and continued through more complicated problems like solving polynomial expressions and geometric equations (like the area or perimeter of a shape). The note in the introduction reminds teachers that in order to keep students engaged, they need to be original with instructional methods, and ends with the hopeful statement that if teachers are creative, "The students will love it."¹²

The second part of the curriculum held seven individual units, all focusing on civics and citizenship. The initial four units centered first on helping students understand their own experiences in light of others' experiences. The curriculum encouraged students to compare their own lives with poor Mississippi whites, with African Americans in the North, and lead to deconstructing the white power structure and its effects on all Americans. Then, the curriculum

¹² "Part I: Academic Curriculum"; "Mathematics Note to Freedom School Teachers," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_cofa_fs_mathtest.pdf.

proceeded to analyze the fears and goals of both Mississippi whites and blacks, the goals and history of the civil rights movement, and aimed to give them practical information on what they can do in Mississippi to bring change. The purpose of the civic portion of the curriculum was to “encourage the asking of questions, and the hope that society can be improved.” The committee wanted students to take a critical look at the world they lived in, discuss and understand problems, and then seek ways to solve those problems and improve society, ultimately through the civil rights movement.¹³

A few freedom school teachers struggled with the civics portion of the curriculum. While the college volunteers did not seem to notice, many of the volunteers who were already teachers believed education for the purpose of “radicalization” was unethical. These teachers understood the emphasis on politics and activism took away time from teaching the skills and knowledge these teachers believed would better serve students. Despite these disagreements in pedagogy, COFO and these teachers were able to come together through their overarching goals. Both wanted freedom school students to receive an education that included meaningful experiences that would be useful considering their life experiences. As life for Mississippi African Americans centered on political and social inequality, an education that addressed the reality of students’ lives would be inherently political.¹⁴

¹³ “Part II: Citizenship Curriculum”; “Unit V: The Poor Negro, the Poor White, and their Fears,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_fs_5bw.pdf; “Unit VI: Material Things and Soul Things,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_fs_6soul.pdf; “Unit VII: The Movement,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_fs_7movt.pdf.

¹⁴ Hale, 92-96.

Above all, curriculum planners and COFO leaders wanted students to enjoy learning. The Mississippi school structure was created with the purpose of preventing African American academic advancement. The state school systems allowed no deviance from their established curriculum and punished teachers who tried to push the limits. In contrast, the freedom schools were designed with independence and creativity in mind. Freedom school teachers were instructed, “You, your colleagues, and your students are urged to shape your own curriculum.” The teachers were challenged to use their own creativity and to focus on students’ interests. Freedom school director, Staughton Lynd, compared the curriculum to a bank account, “that you could use if you needed to.” The emphasis on questions and debate was designed to inspire students to experience the thrill of inquiry-based learning and to validate student voices and experiences. While the curriculum was thoroughly developed, COFO leaders wanted the freedom school teachers to diverge if students wanted to explore something new. They designed the curriculum to be flexible. This emphasis on student initiative and interests intended to make the freedom school an exciting place where a love of learning could be developed. The movement leaders believed if students loved learning, they would be able to educate themselves and continue to develop skills that would bring social change.¹⁵

COFO repeatedly told prospective teachers aside from their curricular materials, freedom school materials would be extremely scarce. COFO simply lacked the budget necessary to furnish all freedom schools with blackboards, pens, paper, books, etc. for all of the freedom

¹⁵ “Freedom School Data, July 1964,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_fskool_data.pdf; “A Note to the Teacher,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_fs_0teachernote2.pdf; “Notes on Teaching in Mississippi”; “Memorandum to Freedom School Teachers,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/fs64_memorandum.pdf; Hale, 93-97.

schools that summer. In a letter to the teachers before orientation, COFO staff workers and Mississippi College professors Staughton Lynd and Harold Bardenelli created a list of materials the volunteers needed to bring to Mississippi. Freedom school organizers like Lynd and Bardenelli predicted each school would have twenty-five to fifty students and would be staffed by at least five teachers. To accommodate the needs of the students, COFO instructed freedom school teachers to bring at least twenty-five pencils, pens, and pads of paper, markers, tape, staples and a stapler, paper clips, and a first aid kit. They were also instructed to lug their own typewriter to Mississippi for their own needs and for classroom needs. On top of these required materials, prospective teachers needed to bring any other resources, like books, maps, chalkboards, dictionaries, and cameras. If they had any educational specialties (skills, languages, art, or dance), they needed to bring their own supplementary materials. In many cases, the freedom schools may have fewer resources than the already abysmal resources at state schools; however, organizers challenged teachers to see their scant resources as an avenue for creativity instead of a limitation.¹⁶

After a week-long session inundated with curricular, pedagogical, and safety information, the prospective freedom school teachers stepped on buses to follow their peers down the long road to Mississippi. Carrying their own weight in school supplies and classroom materials, these students also brought newly developing conceptions of their own identities. These new identities stemmed from encounters with staff workers who peeled back their misconceptions and revealed

¹⁶ “Memorandum to Freedom School Teachers”; “Overview of Freedom Schools”; Mississippi Summer Project Staff, “Second Letter to Freedom School Teachers,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 25, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/fs64_teach2.pdf; “Books Needed in Mississippi Freedom Schools,” in Council of Federated Organizations Panola County Office Records, 1964, *Freedom Summer Digital Collection*, Wisconsin Historical Society, accessed April 4, 2019, <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15932coll2/id/8056/rec/16>; “Notes on Teaching in Mississippi”.

their motives and fears. COFO covered almost every aspect of teaching Mississippi African Americans, yet nothing could prepare these volunteers for what they would experience over the next few months. They would live in black communities, hear the stories, face racist and violent whites, and watch their students demonstrate incredible strength and resilience against a system designed to destroy them. Historian Jon Hale stated it well, “Once they crossed the state line into Mississippi... their true education began.”¹⁷

Volunteers’ nerves ran high as they neared the Mississippi border. After hearing about the Neshoba disappearances, many expected law enforcement or the Klan members to be waiting on the other side. Some volunteers met no resistance entering Mississippi and travelled, for the most part unnoticed, to their destinations. Others were not so fortunate. The chief deputy sheriff confronted a group of women volunteers waiting for a COFO car at a bus station in Moss Point. After a short conversation, he asked them, “You come straight down from Oxford?” The COFO car pulled up soon after, and the sheriff followed them to their destination and sent patrol cars to monitor the COFO office. One voter registration volunteer recorded events when 25 freedom school teachers arrived in Canton. The police took down any and all identifiable information, told them they would be raped or stabbed by the black community and that they were not invited to Mississippi. One brave volunteer responded they had been invited by “the Negro citizens of the county, if not by the whites.” The author continued, “This would seem to constitute a rather good invitation as the county is 72% Negro.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Hale, 101-107.

¹⁸ Letter from Ruleville, July 5, 1964 in Martinez, 46; Letter from Moss Point, June 30, 1964 in Martinez, 44-45; Letter from Canton, July 3, 1964 in Martinez, 45-46.

The freedom school volunteers did not know what to expect as they entered African American communities. While the COFO staff hoped African American communities would welcome the volunteers, they knew that some areas may be afraid or skeptical of the naïve college students and told the volunteers they might not receive the warmest welcome. While individual community members may have been skeptical, the majority of volunteers were pleasantly surprised when they came to the community they would live in for the next few months. Volunteer Geoff wrote, “We had been warned to expect fear and hostility, but we were immediately invited to live and eat in negro homes....” Volunteers across the state reported similar welcomes. One Meridian local told a volunteer, “I’ve waited 80 years for you to come.” A Hattiesburg volunteer summed up their experience and wrote home, “I think that all the decency the Mississippi human contains is encased in black walls.”¹⁹

Many volunteers quickly bonded with the families and individuals who graciously welcomed them into their homes. Nancy, a summer volunteer in Holmes County wrote to her family, “I have become so close to the family I am staying with.” The woman she stayed with, Mrs. H., introduced Nancy to a friend as “Nancy, my adopted daughter!” As they walked around black Canton, two widows who housed freedom summer teachers would “invariably [greet] each passerby with, ‘have you seen my girls, yet?’” These volunteers were surprised to see the depth of love given by Mississippi African Americans. They could not understand how a group, so maligned and abused, could love complete strangers who seemed, in many respects, just like the

¹⁹ Geoff to Dear people, Batesville in Martinez, 50; Letter from Gulfport in Martinez, 50; Letter from Greenville in Martinez, 51; Letter from Canton, July 10, 1964 in Martinez, 51; Letter from Meridian in Martinez, 51; Letter from Gulfport in Martinez, 51-52; Letter from Hattiesburg in Martinez, 52; McAdam, 88-89.

abusers. Yet there they were, amid bustling black families or wise and witty elders, sharing meals, laughing, singing, and living together.²⁰

Freedom summer volunteers were housed with anyone who offered, and usually housed in groups or pairs. For some, that meant living in pairs with a widow or elderly couple in a small home, for others, it meant living with five other volunteers in a family's home with eight children. In a COFO report with data from 1960, only one-third of Mississippi black housing was classified as "being in sound condition," only 25 percent of rural homes had piped water, and over 90 percent of rural homes lacked flush toilets, bath tubs, and showers. Additionally, Mississippi blacks' annual income was less than \$2,000. This meant living conditions within the black community varied incredibly, thus volunteers' living conditions varied as much as the community they lived in. Some volunteers wrote about the home they stayed in was "kept immaculately by the three girls [daughters]. Many Northern women could take lessons from them," while others found ants' nests in their beds and wasps and bees' nests around the home.²¹

The black families that invited freedom summer volunteers into their homes faced much greater dangers than ants, bees, and wasps. In a letter home, one volunteer wrote, "The Negroes here have been pretty courageous, taking us in...." These families' homes "were shot up when the people went down to register during the past two years." It was common for people who housed volunteers to lose their jobs. Families who rented their homes could be evicted for

²⁰ Nancy to Mom, Holmes County, July 8, 1964 in Martinez, 56-57; Letter from Canton, July 10, 1964 in Martinez, 51; McAdam, 88-89.

²¹ Roy to Anne, Itta Bena, June 28, 1964 in Martinez, 46-48; Letter from Shaw about housing with family of 10, animals, and bugs in Martinez, 49; "Statistics on Education, Housing, Income and Employment, and Health," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 25, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_fs_research_data.pdf; Mike to Ed, Tchula, July 6, 1964 in Martinez, 48-49; Letter from Ruleville, July 5, 1964 in Martinez, 46; Susan, Hattiesburg, July 4, 1964 in Martinez, 49; Letter from Mileston, June 30, 1964 in Martinez, 50.

welcoming northerners. One family sent their volunteers to another home after a car parked outside their home all night.²²

Volunteers were also shocked to see the abject poverty in many black Mississippi communities. The volunteers may have known the statistics and facts from their orientation sessions, but instead of numbers, now they had names and they witnessed the conditions firsthand. They saw families with no food to eat, a job that paid pennies, and no hope for change. One volunteer wrote that the money many earned from working in the cotton fields was “gone before they earn it.” Another volunteer recorded the story of an old woman in Tchula. She worked fifteen hours each day for \$2.50. The COFO report on education, economics, and health in Mississippi identified the rise of technology coupled with inadequate education as a major contributing cause for the economic troubles Mississippi blacks faced. Those who lost their job as an agricultural worker had no hope of obtaining a job anywhere else because most lacked the skillset and education to be effective workers elsewhere. One volunteer in Hattiesburg wrote, “it takes coming down here to grasp all this, no matter how many books we’ve read.” Another wrote home criticizing the call to “Send me your tired, your poor, your helpless masses to breathe free” after seeing how America ignored the tired, poor, and helpless black communities in Mississippi. They concluded their letter, “There is no Golden Door in Shaw.”²³

Freedom school teachers arrived in Mississippi about a week before classes would “officially” start. In this short time, teachers were supposed to work together to lesson plan,

²² Unidentifiable/Letter about Negro Courage in Martinez, 53; Roy to Anne, Itta Bena, June 28, 1964 in Martinez, 46-48; McAdam, 89-90.

²³ Letter from Ruleville in Martinez, 61-62; Letter from Tchula, July 16, 1964 in Martinez, 62; “Statistics on Education, Housing, Income and Employment, and Health”; Letter from Hattiesburg, July 4, 1964 in Martinez, 63-64; Letter to Mom and Dad, Shaw, July 4, 1964 in Martinez, 63; McAdam, 86-88.

organize their classroom spaces in the basements of churches, recruit students to attend, and to connect with students and the community. Many teachers travelled with the voter registration volunteers around the community, sharing information about the schools as other volunteers tried to encourage them to register to vote. Classes started on July 7th. Most schools expected 20 to 50 students, and almost all freedom schools had at least five teachers. COFO planned to run 21 schools across the state and expected 700 to 1000 total students. As mentioned earlier, African American communities eagerly welcomed the summer volunteers and freedoms school teachers, making it easier for teachers to develop interest and excitement for the freedom schools. Additionally, COFO staff across the state had been promoting freedom schools. Many students were excited and eager to come.²⁴

Hattiesburg was an exceptional example of community support and student interest in freedom schools. COFO expected a larger program of 75 students, but as the teachers were preparing and trying to recruit students, they realized they would have a much larger number of students than expected, now predicting around 150 students. The nervous freedom school teachers called the Jackson COFO office who promised another eight teachers, raising the total number of teachers to twenty-three. One teacher wrote, “On registration day, however, we had a totally unexpected deluge: 600 students!” They continued, “After a while, as they were coming in, it changed from a celebration to a crisis.... Somehow we must set up a complete school system: 6 churches and schools spread around the city; next to nothing in materials; and age

²⁴ Hale, 111-113; “Map of Mississippi Freedom Summer Projects, 1964,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 25, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_map_ms_fs.pdf; Letter from (Hattiesburg), Saturday, July 4, 1964 in Martinez, 107; McAdam, 83-84; “Memorandum to Freedom School Teachers”; “Freedom School Data, July 1964”.

range from 8 to 82.” She concluded saying, “We have been here only a week... the thought that we might not make it hasn’t even occurred to us.”²⁵

Across the state, black students broke all of COFO’s expectations. The staff expected 700, but eagerly hoped for 1000 students. A report written on July 26, after about two weeks of freedom schools running, listed an enrollment of 2,135 students, “twice the figure projected in planning for the summer.” COFO needed to open another twenty schools to meet the demand, raising the total number of freedom schools to forty-one. COFO immediately started plans to recruit 50 to 100 more teachers to meet the schools’ needs. While the huge number of enrolled students may have caused planning problems and created challenges for teachers expecting a 5:1 student-to-teacher ratio who now had upwards of 20:1 student-teacher ratios, it also was an incredible encouragement to the volunteers, staff, and movement veterans. These students and schools embodied much-needed hope for change in Mississippi. On registration day in Hattiesburg, a freedom school teacher declared to a curious and cautious white minister, “[they] *do* want to study and learn.”²⁶

The freedom schools opened their doors on July 7th. Freedom school volunteers welcomed students into makeshift classrooms in the basements of churches or living rooms in private homes very early in the morning. Most freedom schools opened around 7 A.M. Teachers refrained from arranging seats in traditional rows and instead invited students to sit anywhere they wanted. Instead of demanding silence and order like a typical Mississippi school, freedom school teachers began each day singing freedom songs, allowing students to express themselves

²⁵ Letter from (Hattiesburg), Saturday, July 4, 1964 in Martinez, 107; Hale, 112-113.

²⁶ “Freedom School Data, July 1964”; McAdam, 83-84; Letter from (Hattiesburg), Saturday, July 4, 1964 in Martinez, 107.

and foster a sense of unity and excitement. As the day wore on, students quickly learned that this was no normal school.²⁷

Freedom school teachers frequently structured classes according to the curriculum COFO and the National Council of Churches drafted in March. In a memorandum to freedom school teachers, COFO outlined a typical day. From 7-9 A.M., teachers would have a time for individual study and research according to the students' needs and interests. If a student felt they needed remedial help in a particular subject, they could work on their own and get one-on-one time with the teacher. Then, teachers could move on to the suggested civics curriculum until lunch time. Because of the sweltering Mississippi heat in July and August, COFO recommended that teachers use the hot afternoons as time for recreation or other forms of non-academic activities. Teachers were also encouraged to participate in and bring students to Freedom Summer events, like voter registration drives, MFDP conventions, or other community activities. Some teachers also taught night classes for local adults to attend after work. These typically focused on literacy skills and civics to help equip these adults to participate politically.²⁸

The early mornings focused heavily on English, math, and the "freedom" curriculum: civics, African American history, and African American literature. One freedom school teacher called these the "core curriculum." It was designed to help students remediate skills and knowledge in basic English and math classes as well as create a foundational education of the civil rights movement, its philosophy, and political participation. Many teachers worked together to create freedom school "libraries" with texts like *Freedom Road* by Howard Fast and *Strange Fruit* by Lillian Smith as well as copies of works by Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and

²⁷ Hale, 112-114.

²⁸ Hale, 112-117; "Memorandum to Freedom School Teachers".

Frederick Douglass. These libraries exposed students to rich examples of African American literary and cultural achievement. These students learned, many for the first time, that African Americans could and had been making incredible contributions to America's history and culture.²⁹

COFO challenged teachers to base their schools and curriculum on student interests. In addition to the "core curriculum," many teachers added everything from biology to drama, based on student requests. Teachers taught drama classes where students wrote out plays covering significant moments in US or Mississippi history. Students did not back down from harsh events, going on to perform plays that enabled them to share their voices and stories, even about events like deaths of civil rights activists in Mississippi. Teachers also encouraged students to share their voices through freedom school newspapers. Students wrote articles, advertised for events in their communities, edited, and published their papers for their communities. These became powerful avenues for teachers to encourage their students to use their own voices and share their own experiences.³⁰

Freedom school teachers faced many of the challenges that regular teachers faced, as well as challenges unique to their own situations in the schools. Most teachers know the frustration of teaching students who have not been adequately prepared for a certain level of academic rigor. Freedom school students essentially had no preparation. COFO released documents that analyzed statistics from the US Census Bureau records in 1960. These reported that 22 percent of people in Mississippi were "functionally illiterate." The median grade completed by African Americans

²⁹ Hale, 112-115.

³⁰ Hale, 129-131; William Sturkey, "'I Want to Become a Part of History': Freedom Summer, Freedom Schools, and the *Freedom News*," *The Journal of African American History* 95, no. 3-4 (Summer-Fall 2010): 358-363, accessed March 25, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5323/jafriamerhist.95.3-4.0348>.

was only 6th grade while the median grade completed by whites in Mississippi was 11th grade. On average, the state spent four times more on white students than black students. As a result, most students were sorely behind grade level in every subject.³¹

Another common complaint teachers have regards attendance. They become frustrated when 3 students are absent in a week. In the freedom schools, attendance rates could be abysmal. Instead of being on a traditional school schedule with a summer break, Mississippi black public schools were closed during the cotton planting and harvesting seasons and open during the winter and summer. Because of this, many students had to choose between attending their regular classes or the freedom school. Many poorer students attended when they could get off work, making freedom schools less accessible to impoverished students. In any given week, the Clarksdale freedom school could have as few as 8 students or as many as 35. These wild fluctuations could make it incredibly difficult for teachers to plan lessons.³²

Additionally, one of the greatest hurdles freedom school teachers needed to overcome was student self-doubt and wariness due to students' previous encounters with whites. One teacher recalled students, "learn from childhood not to be openly emotional," and commented that getting them to express their ideas and feelings was a challenge in and of itself. Another teacher from Jackson said his greatest challenge was overcoming students' fear, silence, and submissiveness. Many students were afraid to speak up and express themselves. Their fears resulted from living in a place where they were constantly put down and silenced, where survival meant keeping your head low and blending in. Mark Levy, a teacher in Meridian, was stunned

³¹ "Statistics on Education, Housing, Income and Employment, and Health"; "Freedom School Data, July 1964"; Hale, 124-127.

³² Hale, 124-126.

when he asked his students why they asked him to teach them French. They responded, “We don’t have typing; we don’t have French in Negro schools. Why? What’s the problem? Is there something wrong with us?” Freedom school teachers worked tirelessly to be trustworthy, to be honest, and to help students change their thinking. They wanted students to understand the problems came from the system, not themselves.³³

Despite these frustrations, the teachers became components of change as they worked with the students. One teacher recorded student responses after they taught the students about the Haitian Revolution. The teacher recorded their despondent faces when it appeared the French would crush the rebellion; however, the teacher also recorded the joy and inspiration in their students’ faces when they told the end of the story – that the slaves succeeded, and Haiti was recognized as a republic. Claude Allen, a teacher in Holly Springs, recalled, “The atmosphere in the class is unbelievable. It is what every teacher dreams about – real, honest enthusiasm and desire to learn.” The dynamic pedagogy and inspiring curriculum became easier to teach as they built relationships and saw hope in students’ eyes. The freedom schools truly became transformative places for both teachers and students, where true learning inspired hope, courage, and determination to walk in the light of freedom.³⁴

³³ Hale, 124-126, 117; “Notes on Teaching in Mississippi”.

³⁴ “Example of a Freedom School Class: Talk on Haitian Slave Revolt,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 25, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_fskool_example.pdf; Hale, 127-128.

Chapter Four

“Help Us Become Freedom Fighters”: Freedom School Students Learning and Walking in the Light of Freedom

Attending a freedom school was a life-changing experience for Mississippi African American students. Beyond learning remedial reading, writing, and math skills, these students developed leadership skills and confidence. They also learned about civic involvement and organizational leadership through participation in direct action protests and working alongside civil rights veterans, activists, and volunteers in other freedom summer programs. Despite intense intimidation and white violence, these students attended freedom schools at any and all costs. Lastly, the skills and hope they developed in their short time in the freedom schools inspired lifelong change and freedom school alums became the young leaders of the civil rights movement, well after the end of the Mississippi Freedom Summer.¹

As freedom school teachers opened their “classrooms” and hearts to these students, they responded with insatiable appetites for learning. The teachers provided as many resources as possible, creating libraries and teaching African American history as well as introducing students to the history and goals of the civil rights movement. As the teachers developed trust and relationships with their students, the children began to powerfully interact with the curriculum. After interacting with supportive teachers and being inspired by African American literature, discussions changed from focusing on student deficiencies to highlighting student potential and achievement. Students began analyzing themselves and their environments, and swiftly identified

¹ Jon N. Hale, *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in Mississippi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 129-139; James P. Marshall, *Student Activism and Civil Rights in Mississippi: Protest Politics and the Struggle for Racial Justice, 1960-1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 117-118.

the root of the problem. Instead of blaming themselves, they placed blame where it was due – on the shoulders of Jim Crow, racism, and segregation. Once they correctly identified the problem, students set out to solve the problem of racism and segregation in their communities.²

While freedom school students understood the value of a traditional education, they would not settle for remedial classes. Ruleville students told their freedom school teacher, “What we want you to do is to help us become [sic] Freedom Fighters.” These young Americans wanted the tools and skills to rise up and become strong, courageous, and determined men and women like the martyred Medgar Evers or the inspirational Fannie Lou Hamer. They knew this opportunity would be wasted if they only learned how to add fractions and identify subjects and verbs. The true value of this education rested not in intellectual achievement, but in a core understanding of how to change their communities and country. They found the freedom schools to be exactly what they were looking for – with an inherently political curriculum and teachers instructed to base their classes on student interests, the schools fostered the kind of environment where political activism could thrive.³

Their first steps towards change came in the form of school newspapers. Twelve freedom schools across the state published their own school newspapers. Students typed up articles on their teachers’ typewriters and copied newspapers using mimeograph machines. Mississippi whites had tried to prevent the media from covering the civil rights movement for years in the same way they tried to keep African Americans as second-class citizens – through violence, intimidation, and economic repercussions. Because of this, very few media outlets in Mississippi

² Hale, 113-115, 117-120.

³ Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 129; Jon N. Hale, “‘The Student as a Force for Social Change’: The Mississippi Freedom Schools and Student Engagement,” *Journal of African American History* 96, no. 3 (Summer 2011), 331-333, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5323/jafriamerhist.96.3.0325>.

accurately reported on the civil rights movement. These students filled a hole in their communities through their publications and disseminated civil rights news around the state. Writing freedom newspapers also helped the students develop more than just reading and writing skills. Running their own newspapers allowed these determined youths to learn valuable leadership and organizational skills.⁴

These freedom newspapers became avenues for leadership development, critical thinking, and literacy skills. Freedom school teachers gave guidance, but largely left students with the authority to make most decisions. Students took the guidance and independence they were given and created their own newsrooms in their freedom schools. One teacher helping students publish the *Clarksdale Freedom Press* remarked, “The place looked just like a newspaper office with people running in and out, with typewriters going, and newsprint everywhere.” Newspapers included articles covering COFO events and encouraging the community to participate, critiques of the white power structure and specific white leaders in their communities. They also frequently featured poems, stories from black history, drawings, and more. For the first time, they could express themselves in powerful and public ways. While the newspapers provided a unique avenue for self-expression, many students found another outlet through poetry.⁵

Freedom school poets give a clear picture of life in Mississippi and how the freedom schools changed students’ lives. Their experiences in freedom schools gave them literacy tools

⁴ Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 129-130; William Sturkey, “‘I Want to Become a Part of History’: Freedom Summer, Freedom Schools, and Freedom News,” *Journal of African American History* 95, no. 3-4 (Summer-Fall 2010): 358-359, accessed April 3, 2019, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5323/jafriamerhist.95.3-4.0348?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents; “Examples of Student Work,” *Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum, Education and Democracy*, accessed April 3, 2019; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 159-260.

⁵ Sturkey, 358-361; Dittmer, 159-161.

needed for powerful self-expression. Student poetry ranges from twelve-year-old Ida Ruth Griffin's poem "I am Mississippi Fed," which expresses the tragic reality of life for many Mississippi African Americans to fifteen-year-old Edith Moore's poem, "Fight on Little Children," where she challenged her peers to fight on, despite endless trials. She ends her poem stating,

In the end you and I know
That one day the facts they'll face.
And realize we're human too
That freedom's taken slavery's place.⁶

The freedom school poetry is an incredible legacy of students' self-expression. Many freedom school teachers noted students faced difficulties expressing their experiences and emotions during the first few weeks. Writing poetry enabled students to communicate and validate each other's experiences and to look forward with hope based in their own capabilities to bring change. Sandra Jo-ann O. from Hattiesburg demonstrated how attending a freedom school shaped her self-perception. She wrote, "Who am I... I'm not the girl I used to be... I am a Negro who fought her best/ To earn her freedom...."⁷

These young poets exercised a wide variety of poetic styles, crafting unique and powerful verses. Many explicitly discuss politics, civil rights, and race relations, while others lack a distinctly political or social focus. Nevertheless, each unique poem provides insight into the lives

⁶ Edith Moore, "Fight on Little Children," in SNCC, *Freedom School Poetry*, (Atlanta, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1965), 16, accessed April 3, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/poetry/64_fskool_poems-r.pdf.

⁷ Sandra Jo-Ann O. "Who Am I?" in SNCC, *Freedom School Poetry*, 18; Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 119-120.

and experiences of each student. These poems gave students an achievement to be proud of. They did not just fill out a grammar worksheet, they did not analyze someone else's poem. They created their own piece of art that contributed to an incredible pool of African American literature and poetry. In these verses, students became part of something larger, empowering them and giving them inspiration and courage. As Langston Hughes eloquently wrote, "Poems, like prayers, possess power." The true power in poetry comes from the author. These poems embodied the power to make change not because of their medium, but because of the power the young authors already possessed.⁸

Additionally, freedom school students took to helping with voter registration drives and led direct action protests as a way to take part in the movement gaining speed all around them. Stories from African American literature and historical events like the Haitian revolution inspired students who had previously never seen their own potential to bring change. While these students were too young to register to vote and take part in COFO voting activities, they could certainly assist COFO workers and volunteers canvass local communities. Younger students drew flyers and posted them around their communities to raise support for COFO's projects while older students in middle and high school canvassed local neighborhoods to get their community members to register to vote either in the actual Mississippi Democratic Party or with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Many local African Americans were hesitant to participate, but the students never gave up. One student from the Greenwood freedom school recalled after a conversation with a hesitant woman while she was canvassing, "I wanted her eyes opened wide so that she could see the things she could do." The education the students

⁸ Wallace Roberts, "'Teaching' Freedom," in Elizabeth Martinez, ed. *Letters from Mississippi: Reports from Civil Rights Volunteers & Poetry of the 1964 Freedom Summer* (Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2007), 275-278.

received in freedom schools gave them a sense of agency in their communities, state, and country.⁹

The energy and drive for change was tangible in these black Mississippi communities, and it was extremely contagious. As students learned more about the Mississippi civil rights movement, its goals, and means for attaining those goals, students wanted to apply their learning. Teachers explained the importance of non-violence in the movement, of sustained resistance, and how to protect themselves as they participated in the movement. In a moment of victory, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law on July 2, 1964. This act provided for the protection of voting rights and desegregation throughout the country. Freedom school students were eager to test this law in Mississippi. They attended rallies, participated in boycotts, distributed leaflets and information, and some even started planning and staging sit-ins. In Hattiesburg, one freedom school teacher supervised as six students requested library cards from the white public library. When they were denied library cards, they crossed the street and began a sit-in at a segregated lunch counter. Their teacher was arrested, which stopped the sit-in that day. However, students would not be deterred and continued to participate in civil rights activities in their communities.¹⁰

While the movement in Mississippi was exhilarating, it could also be terrifying and extremely dangerous. As freedom schools opened their doors, no one could forget three freedom

⁹ Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 120-122, 132-133, “Freedom School Flyer (From Shaw, MS),” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed April 3, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/6406_msfs_flyer.pdf; “Freedom School Flyer (From Lauren, MS),” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed April 3, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/640600_cofa_freedom-school-flyer.pdf.

¹⁰ Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 120-122; 131-133; Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Public Law 382, 88th Cong. July 2, 1964, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/statutes/titlevii.cfm>; Hale, “The Student as a Force,” 333-338.

summer volunteers, Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman were still missing. Additionally, the lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in 1955 was still a potent reminder that even children were not safe from white violence. Many freedom school newspapers did not publish student contributors' last names for fear of identification and retaliation by the white community. Citizens councils kept tabs on which students attended freedom schools and frequently fired freedom school students' parents. Students who participated in rallies and voter registration drives were at as much risk of receiving beatings as their parents. An Indianola police officer arrested two freedom school students, only eight and nine years old, for passing out COFO pamphlets. He took the two terrified children to the police station and their families had to retrieve them. Like in Hattiesburg, police were often called when students attempted to desegregate public spaces; however, in many cases, the police arrested the students as well as their teachers. Age did not matter to Mississippi police, they would attempt to silence any voice that spoke out, no matter how young.¹¹

While threats of police involvement were intimidating enough, KKK violence also escalated during the summer. Homes and churches that hosted freedom schools were primary targets. SNCC kept a running list of "incidents" of violence or injustice from June through August. In addition to the three missing volunteers, whites shot at African Americans or into their homes over thirty-five times, burned thirty-five churches, and bombed over thirty-one homes. The KKK bombing of Mt. Zion Methodist Church in Philadelphia (the church where the

¹¹ Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 129-134; Dittmer, 253-258.

KKK captured the three missing volunteers) in early June was a perfect example. The KKK purposefully targeted that church because they had agreed to host a freedom school in July.¹²

As soon as classes started, whites targeted freedom school students. On July 7, white students in Vicksburg threw bottles at a car waiting to pick up freedom school students after their first day of class. Two days later, the report states, “Freedom school students stoned en route to class.” Thirteen Greenwood students were arrested with ninety-eight adults participating in a “Freedom Day” on July 16. As a result of increased violence against these courageous young people, freedom school teachers felt compelled to teach students how to defend themselves during beatings. Hymenthia Thompson recalled, “The boys were taught how to protect the girls from being kicked in the abdomen because that would keep us from producing children.” Freedom school teachers knew when their students took part in protests, they would likely receive the brunt of racist violence. Moreover, as evidenced in SNCC’s incident report, Mississippi whites threatened African Americans whether or not they participated in the civil rights movement. Lessons in personal protection were a necessary fact of life for all Mississippi African Americans.¹³

These heightened levels of violence and intimidation took their toll on many within the African American community. Many refused to open their homes to freedom school teachers, canvassers, or freedom schools. Some parents tried to keep their children from attending freedom schools. As students canvassed, many members of their communities tried to push them away –

¹² “Mississippi Summer Project: Running Summary of Incidents (June 16- August 26),” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed April 4, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_fs_incidents.pdf; Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 134-137.

¹³ “Mississippi Summer Project: Running Summary of Incidents (June 16- August 26)”; Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 120-122.

these older folks had endured so much trouble, they did not want to invite any more by participating in the movement. Many churches prohibited COFO workers from attending or using their premises for civil rights work. The message the KKK sent through the June bombing of Mt. Zion Methodist Church in Philadelphia was clear and fear ran rampant through many African American communities, especially in the Mississippi Delta.¹⁴

The COFO project in McComb faced intense violence throughout the summer. McComb was situated in the heart of the southern Delta and deep in Klan country. Two bombings took place in the all-black community in the first few weeks of July. Over the next month, another three churches were burned down, even though they were not affiliated in any way with the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. The day after the Freedom House, which hosted the freedom school, was bombed by the KKK, all seventy-five students showed up and began class outside, sitting around rubble and remains of their classroom. While the students courageously continued to meet outside, their teacher and the COFO staff tried to find a new building for the freedom school; however, most members in the community were too frightened to offer their homes or churches. While the older folks feared losing their jobs, homes, and lives, most of the students in Mississippi believed they had nothing left to lose. White Mississippi had already stripped them of any freedoms or opportunities. Many of the freedom school students were frustrated with the lack of support in the community. Sixteen-year-old Joyce Brown captured their frustration in her poem, "The House of Liberty." She wrote to the older generations and read it for her class the morning after their freedom school was bombed,

¹⁴ Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 132-136; "Mississippi Summer Project: Running Summary of Incidents (June 16-August 26)".

I asked for your churches, and you turned me down,
But I'll do my work if I have to do it on the ground,
You will not speak for fear of being heard,
So you crawl in your shell and say, "Do not disturb,"
You think because you've turned me away,
You've protected yourself for another day...
Because of your fear of a bomb,
And because you've let your fear conquer your soul,
In this bombed house these minds I must try to mold;
I must try to teach them to stand tall and be a man
When you, their parents, have cowered down and refused to take a stand.¹⁵

Joyce Brown's poem struck the consciences of many local community members. Not long after, a church offered to host the students. Students worked with a few key community members to create a planning committee to house and feed the freedom summer volunteers and teachers. By the end of July, over 100 students were attending the McComb freedom school and more and more community members were participating in the movement, despite continued threats and violence. The COFO staff took notice and reported that the older generations were

¹⁵ Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 134-136; Dittmer, 259-260; Joyce Brown, "The House of Liberty," in SNCC, *Freedom School Poetry*.

looking to their kids and teens for courage and leadership. Staff members credit the success of the Freedom Summer project in McComb to the students' courage and dedication to the cause.¹⁶

Violence directed towards freedom school students continued throughout the summer, yet students demonstrated incredible courage and resilience. In early August, whites bombed one of the schools in Madison County. The freedom school teachers asked students to write down their thoughts when they realized their school had been burned to the ground. Teachers took care to make sure students' names were separated from their comments to try to protect them from more violence. One fourteen year old wrote, "Burning our churches and society hall down are not going to stop us from having freedom school. Because we are going to get our Freedom someday." A seventeen year old student also wrote, "The purpose of our burned school was to stop us from coming but nothing is going to keep us away from freedom school, but a complete Freedom education." One of the older students wrote, "he did succeed in burning our society hall to the ground, but our hearts and minds are on the Prize and we are going to hold on." These comments clearly demonstrate the students' courage and determination to learn.¹⁷

Freedom schools inspired incredible short-term change in the lives of students and the communities that supported them. The inspiring curriculum and creative pedagogy also propelled students into long-term activism. Many students recalled their experiences at freedom schools as critical moments that truly changed their lives. To be clear, the change did not come from the teachers' skill or skin color, but the heart behind the curriculum, pedagogy, and summer project in general. Egalitarian pedagogy and practices, expanding access to African American cultural

¹⁶ Dittmer, 268-269; Hale, 134-136; Joyce Brown, "The House of Liberty".

¹⁷ "Responses by Freedom School Students to the Burning of their School, August 10, 1964," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed April 4, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/640810_fs_bomb-responses.pdf.

and social resources, and the development of deep teacher-student relationships all influenced the success of the long-term freedom school outcomes.¹⁸

As freedom school classes continued, students and teachers developed meaningful relationships built on trust and openness. For many students, this was the first time they encountered friendly and kind white people, and it often took them some time to build trust. However, freedom school teachers worked hard to live up to the expectations set for them during the Oxford orientation sessions. Their efforts to be worthy of students' trust, humble, honest, and to create open classrooms where students could speak and be heard helped bridge the gap between students and teachers. Once these relationships formed, they created a long-lasting mark on the freedom school students. Freedom school student, Homer Hill recalled the freedom schools were "the first time in my life that I was exposed to people who were white but who were not in any manner similar to the people who we were accustomed to who happened to be white." He continued, "For me that experience was something that I continue to carry with me to this day." The open atmosphere of the freedom schools and the close cooperation between mostly white teachers and black students opened doors for many deep conversations about race and challenged students' conceptions and norms from their intensely segregated upbringing.¹⁹

Student activism rose to a new level as the freedom schools ended. COFO only intended freedoms schools to run for about six weeks, but by the end of those six weeks, freedom school students were just getting warmed up. They had developed leadership and organizational skills through freedom school newspapers, self-confidence through poetry and academic success, and

¹⁸ Daniel Perlstein, "Teaching Freedom: SNCC and the Creation of the Mississippi Freedom Schools," *History of Education Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (Autumn 1990), 316-318, accessed April 4, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/368691>; Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 135-137.

¹⁹ Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 127-130, 136-137; Perlstein, 316-317.

participation in other parts of the movement were exhilarating and liberating. The students stood firm in the face of violence and intimidation and refused to let Jim Crow and the KKK keep them down. Freedom schools were just the beginning of student activism and participation in the movement.²⁰

Freedom school teachers and COFO workers wanted to challenge students to become self-reliant and begin to take positions of authority as freedom schools ended. In many communities, older students stepped up to keep the freedom school running, even after the freedom school teachers took buses back north to go home. Some older students had already started helping their freedom school teachers with younger classes, weeks before classes would end. Other students stepped up and committed to keep the freedom school open as a community center to keep the movement alive and maintain a safe place where the community could gather. These students were equipped and determined to keep the movement going.²¹

Other students worked together with the Mississippi Student Union to create a culminating conference for the freedom schools, where students would develop a youth platform for the MFDP and create state-wide plans for students to continue to participate in the movement in the following year. Joyce Brown, the author of the compelling poem after the KKK bombed her McComb freedom school, and Roscoe Jones, a student from Meridian, organized a planning committee for the conference. Each aspect of the conference was planned and organized by these two students and the five-student planning committee. The students used the skills and passion they developed in the freedom schools to organize and execute a state-wide conference to

²⁰ Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 136-137; Mary Aickin Rothschild, "The Volunteers and the Freedom Schools: Education for Social Change in Mississippi," *History of Education Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (Winter 1982), 410-412, accessed April 4, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/368066>.

²¹ Perlstein, 320-321; Rothschild, 410-412.

determine what role young students would have in the Mississippi civil rights movement in the future. In a later interview, Jones stated with pride, “This was our convention and we wanted to run it, and we did... We ran that convention.” Never before had students in Mississippi organized a program on this scale. These empowered students moved forward with passion and drive to make change.²²

The coordinating committee requested each of the forty-plus freedom schools to send a delegation of three representatives to the conference.²³ Over ninety students from across the state travelled to Meridian to participate in the convention. In accordance with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party standard protocol, the coordinating committee appointed chairs and assigned specific convention responsibilities to the delegates and delegations. These delegates worked together to review their experiences in freedom schools and to craft a plan of action for students over the following year. They spent two days discussing their experiences and planning for the future as they deliberated how to solve employment, education, and social problems within the state. At the end of their two-day conference, the students submitted their platform in a formal declaration with thirteen demands to the MFDP. They included requests for better facilities for all schools; a broad, freedom-summer-like curriculum for schools; low-cost vocational classes for adults; a consistent, nine-month class schedule; special education schools; integration; and academic freedom for teachers and students.²⁴

²² Perlstein, 321; Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 144-146.

²³ There is some variation in the numbers of reported freedom schools. Some primary sources claim 41 freedom schools in mid-July, while other undated sources report 47 freedom schools.

²⁴ Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 144-146, 154-155; Marshall, 119-120; “1964 Platform of the Mississippi Freedom School Convention,” *Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum*, Education and Democracy, accessed April 4, 2019, http://educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/B_20_PlatformOfStudentConv.htm; “Freedom School Data, July 1964,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_fskool_data.pdf.

These student delegates demonstrated a deep level of problem-solving and critical thinking skills. They carefully analyzed problems, identified sources of issues, and created a plan of action to remedy these dilemmas. The freedom schools acted as a catalyst to propel students into walking in self-sufficiency and courage. Students, who less than a month before would have shied away from these discussions because they believed Jim Crow's lies, were now having heated discussions about intense social, political, and economic problems. They were creating their own solutions. Hymethia Thompson summed up this experience: "The freedom schools allowed us to believe that we could come above whatever situation, and we were inspired that we had to work harder and go extra time to catch up... but that we could make it." She continued, "We had to believe that God had given us what we needed, regardless of the color of our skin." freedom school students learned they could make change and unlocked their own potential to bring needed change.²⁵

The freedom school conference jumpstarted the Mississippi Student Union (MSU). COFO officially established the MSU earlier that year, but, like other planned student movements, it struggled to take-off. The freedom school conference was officially organized through the MSU, and many of the student-leaders became leaders of the MSU that year. Delegates who attended the conference took information about the conference and MSU back to their communities. By the end of the summer, there were over 1,500 students involved. COFO worker and freedom school coordinator Liz Fusco wrote about the MSU and the August Convention: "COFO was the father of the MSU but now they're entirely weaned and they run their own meetings and come to their own decisions. All I ask them is to put my name on their

²⁵ Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 146-147; "1964 Platform of the Mississippi Freedom School Convention".

mailing list.” Once again, older generations could look to a large network of empowered teens for inspiration, hope, and courage.²⁶

One of the most profound decisions students made in the August conference was the choice to discontinue freedom schools across the state. Instead, these students believed they needed to pursue integration of the public schools as well as integration of all public facilities in their communities. Roscoe Jones declared, “We young people had a plan. We were going to integrate everything that was open to the public that we had to go through the back door.... And it was not adults telling us this. It was student led.” This decision surprised COFO, who in July, published a document claiming they would continue the freedom schools throughout the next school year; however, COFO supported the students’ decision. While some students did choose independently to continue small-scale freedom schools in their communities and COFO maintained a few freedom schools, most students turned their attention to desegregation in their communities. This decision would place students directly confronting whites on a regular basis and required immense courage, yet these bold students were determined they would, in the words of young Bossie Mae Haring, “walk in the light of freedom until we achieve victory.”²⁷

In late August, black Mississippi youth recharged the Mississippi civil rights movement. They organized through the MSU pushing for desegregation of public schools and of all public spaces. The MSU quickly developed a strong program to organize students and use pressure to

²⁶ “Mississippi Student Union – Memoranda and Reports,” *Freedom Summer Digital Collection*, Wisconsin Historical Society, accessed April 4, 2019, <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15932coll2/id/43564/rec/12>; Marshall, 117-118; COFO, “Mississippi Student Union (MSU) Brochure,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed April 4, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_msu.pdf; “Mississippi Student Union Convention – December 1964,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed April 4, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/6412_cof_msu.pdf.

²⁷ “1964 Platform of the Mississippi Freedom School Convention”; Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 146-149, 108.

fix major grievances. As the MSU grew, it gained a more defined structure. Students elected Roscoe James, one of the chief coordinators of the August convention, to be the MSU's first president. Through the organized efforts of the independent Mississippi Student Union, students began to push against the closed society and encouraged leaders in their communities to fight alongside them. Instead of students working alongside adults and civil rights workers, the local adults were now coming alongside their children.²⁸

The MSU sponsored boycotts and helped students organize challenges to segregated public schools. They used the skills they learned in their freedom school classrooms to continually put pressure on the school systems until the Fifth Federal Circuit Court stepped in. The court ordered "stairstep" integration in Biloxi, Clarksdale, Jackson, and Leake County, enabling black elementary students to enroll in all-white schools. While this provided for extremely slow desegregation, it was a first step for these student activists. They challenged the existing system and created tangible change. Soon, the MSU developed plans for student activists to challenge segregated high schools and for older students to tutor and mentor the elementary school students who paved the way for integration in white schools. Soon, civil rights organizations across the state were joining in, assisting students where needed and encouraging African American families to register their students in white schools. By December, the MSU held a state-wide meeting to decide whether to attempt a state-wide boycott of public schools to speed up integration.²⁹

²⁸ Liz Fusco, "Freedom Schools in Mississippi, 1964," *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed April 4, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/fs64_fusco.pdf; Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 154-145.

²⁹ Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 154-156.

Freedom school students continued to push for desegregation throughout the following year. A group of twenty-two students attempted to desegregate a high school in Meridian. Another nineteen students attempted to desegregate a Canton high school, while about twenty students attempted to desegregate a high school in Jackson. While white segregationists successfully prevented these students enrolling, they could not hold them off forever. In 1965, a year after attending a freedom school, Hymethia Thompson and twelve other students became the first black students to attend Murrah High School. White communities were still extremely hostile to desegregation, and Thompson, her family, and the other students and families faced severe repercussions from the Jackson white community. In spite of the dangers, the students persisted.³⁰

Students also attempted to desegregate other public spaces. The Civil Rights Act, passed in July 1964, outlawed segregation and declared the federal government would enforce the desegregation of all public spaces. Students were eager to test this. Fourteen-year-old Eddie James Carthan participated in Tchula's first voter registration drive as well as a school boycott to protest unequal treatment of black students and a "sit-in" in an all-white barber shop until the barber finally cut his hair. A group of freedom school alumni in Ripley spent their free time desegregating public spaces from the local pool, restaurants, ice cream parlors, and the aptly named Dixie Theater. They were the first Ripley residents to take part in a direct action protest. As a result, they were repeatedly arrested, and spent many nights in jail. After a failed attempt to

³⁰ Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 156-158; Dittmer, 332-333.

desegregate a theater in Holly Springs, high school student Roy DeBerry organized a campaign to desegregate a local market.³¹

These are just a few examples of the student participation across the state. From school desegregation challenges and integration attempts to school boycotts, freedom school students were active across the state. As the older students graduated and moved on to colleges, younger students took their places. The MSU continued to organize, slowly moving from state-wide programs to encouraging more local organization and protest. White Mississippi never grew comfortable with these young activists, but their attacks and threats lost potency throughout the following years. These students were critical thinkers, constantly coming up with new ways to respond and push back against white fear and hatred.³²

Liz Fusco, the freedom school coordinator, summed up freedom schools' influence on students' lives. In a report on the freedom schools, she stated the one thing most young black Mississippians hoped for was a train or bus ticket north – to get away from Mississippi and the pain and problems there. Many believed that somewhere, somehow, in the North, they would find freedom. However, after freedom summer, “almost all of these kids were planning to stay in Mississippi.” She saw “kids in Mississippi expressing emotion on paper . . . organizing and running all by themselves a Mississippi student union whose program is direct action to alleviate serious grievances . . . a total transformation of these young people” taking place. Freedom schools enabled all these things and more, because they were specifically designed to meet the needs of students. The vast majority of freedom school teachers and COFO workers knew

³¹ Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 158-161; “Case Study on the Civil Rights Bill,” *Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum*, Education and Democracy, accessed April 4, 2019, http://educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/C_CC7d_CivilRightsBill.htm; Dittmer, 268-269, 332-333.

³² Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 154-171.

Mississippi students had potential and designed these schools to give students the eyes to see their own worth and value. Edification enabled students to rise up and be brave enough “to go up against armed guards and people with sticks and bricks just singing.”³³

³³ Liz Fusco, “Freedom Schools in Mississippi, 1964”; “CORE Freedom School Brochure,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed April 4, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_core_freedomschools.pdf; Hale, *The Freedom Schools*, 149.

Chapter Five

The Legacy of the Freedom Schools and the Continuing Potential for Change

Mississippi freedom schools dramatically changed life for the students who attended in the summer of 1964. Despite being the “secondary focus” of the Mississippi Freedom Summer Program, the freedom schools created some of the longest lasting legacies of the entire summer program. This change resulted from a number of factors that all combined to create a transformational educational experience for these young Mississippi African Americans. The creative and personalized curriculum gave needed structure and balance, while the teachers’ freedom to follow students’ interests and passions enabled students to connect their learning to their lives. Pressure on teachers to build relationships enabled students to develop meaningful connections and take part in in-depth conversations about their experiences. Most of all, students were ready to engage, learn, and join the movement. Student drive and determination, along with a powerful and flexible curriculum created the environment that sparked such incredible change in such a short period of time.¹

Students were ready to engage in the Mississippi civil rights movement due to the intense inequality and violence they faced daily. White legislators and policy makers had carefully crafted hundreds of laws intended to keep Mississippi African Americans stuck as a lower class. These laws ranged from curfews at night to laws that restricted access to the polls. Whites maintained segregated schools, prevented any form of academic freedom in black schools, and

¹ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 259-261.

limited access to educational materials. These conditions essentially prevented Mississippi blacks from receiving an education that went beyond basic literacy and math skills; however, even those skills may or may not have been effectively taught. In 1960, 20 percent of Mississippi African Americans were labeled “functionally illiterate.”²

COFO designed the freedom schools for two purposes. First, COFO wanted to offer students an opportunity to remediate basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. They created a curriculum designed to make up for the poor education black students received through the state. The first part of the curriculum emphasized developing lacking mathematics and literacy skills to create a foundation to base later learning on. COFO encouraged teachers to administer assessments to determine what students already knew and what they had to learn. They also created an in-depth curriculum focused on African American culture, civil rights history, and civic education. Teachers were challenged to emphasize history and civics to prepare students for participation in the civil rights movement.³

Second, and more importantly, COFO designed the schools to be open spaces where students could experience academic freedom, build self-confidence and self-sufficiency, and gain applicable and transferable skills to equip them to become the next generation of freedom fighters. The curriculum indirectly emphasized student potential, equality, and worth through

² Charlie Cobb, “Prospectus for a Freedom Summer School Program in Mississippi,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2018, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/fs64_prospectus.pdf; “Statistics on Education, Housing, Income and Employment, and Health,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 25, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_fs_research_data.pdf.

³ Charlie Cobb, “Prospectus for a Freedom Summer School Program in Mississippi”; “Part 1: Academic Curriculum: Reading and Writing,” *Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum*, Education and Democracy, accessed April 4, 2019, http://educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/C_AC0_AcadCurric.htm; “Part II: Citizenship Curriculum,” *Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum*, Education and Democracy, accessed April 4, 2019, http://educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/C_CC1_Units1to6.htm.

exposure to examples of African American achievement. It focused on a skills-based education instead of content-based education, sending students out of the classroom with creativity and analytical tools they could use in any situation. The freedom school curriculum, designed specifically for Mississippi students by staff workers who knew them well, provided the structure needed to create such a unique and powerful experience.⁴

The freedom with which the teachers could implement and follow the curriculum added to the potency and effectiveness of the instruction. Because it was designed to teach skills, Freedom school teachers could follow the curriculum when it was useful and practical but could also diverge from the program when it was appropriate. This flexibility was what defined the “freedom” in freedom schools. This flexibility also enabled teachers and students to develop meaningful relationships that fleshed out the concept of equality. Teachers valued student voices because they were instructed to let students and their experiences guide learning within the classroom. As teachers listened and responded to students’ voices and opinions, the students lived and experienced equality. This lofty concept became tangible and enabled students to develop a sense of self-worth and understand their capacity for change. For the first time, their thoughts, feelings, and dreams were considered as important as any white person’s. Once students had a small taste of equality within the classroom, they knew they needed to join the fight to ensure equality everywhere else.⁵

⁴ Charlie Cobb, “Prospectus for a Freedom Summer School Program in Mississippi”; “Part I: Academic Curriculum: Reading and Writing”; “Part II: Citizenship Curriculum”; Bob Moses, “Prospectus for the Mississippi Freedom Summer,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 7, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/fs64_proposal.pdf.

⁵ “Notes on Teaching in Mississippi,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed March 22, 2018, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_fs_notes.pdf; Jon N. Hale, *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 116-122.

Finally, these freedom schools changed students because they were eager for change and brought their own passions to their classrooms. The fact that many students skipped regular school or work to attend freedom schools shows a powerful level of commitment. Then, when students continued to press on and attend schools -- often dodging rocks thrown by white teens, in spite of threats of violence, and even after their school was bombed – they demonstrated a whole new level of dedication and passion. These students did not let anything deter them from taking hold of this opportunity. In many cases, they stood up to their parents and their communities. These students had been waiting for an opportunity, and when they saw it, they seized it with all the strength they had. Freedom schools brought change because students were ready and willing to be the change.⁶

The legacy of freedom schools lives on through each student who attended. In six weeks, students experienced a dramatic transformation that influenced their actions, lives, and communities for decades. That is the power of student-focused education. These students, like many students today, spent years in schools, yet had little to show for it. Yet, in less than two months in an edifying and open learning environment, students became innovators solving social problems at a conference they planned and ran on their own. Freedom schools can be a powerful lens to look back at the civil rights movement, they can be a tool used to understand the past, but they can also be used to inspire the future of American education.

⁶ Hale, 129-134; “Mississippi Summer Project: Running Summary of Incidents (June 16- August 26),” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed April 4, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/64_fs_incidents.pdf.

While the freedom schools were a relatively small alternative education program,⁷ the curriculum and pedagogy of the freedom schools can be usefully applied to classrooms across America today. The freedom school curriculum was designed to develop skills students could use outside of the classroom. Skills-based education, like the freedom school curriculum, provides needed classroom structure and direction while giving the teacher the flexibility to customize the classroom experience for their students. What mattered for students was the development of critical and analytic thinking, creativity, and self-confidence to believe they could accomplish what they set out to do. While students in freedom schools received some remedial education, it was not their math content knowledge that enabled them to plan and host a state-wide conference. It was not their ability to dissect a poem that enabled them to create solutions for problems in their communities and state. Teachers used the curriculum to set goals while analyzing available activities and experiences that would help students reach those goals.⁸

Additionally, teachers incorporated student interest into the classroom. One freedom school teacher created a “pop-up” French classroom based on student interest. In Shaw, the freedom school looked drastically different from schools elsewhere in the state because students who needed to attend their public-school requested evening instruction in political protest. Incorporating student interest was crucial for developing trust between students and teachers, and that trust was ultimately what enabled students to experience what equality felt like. Trust enabled students to feel safe, to open their hearts and minds, and to ask hard questions. As

⁷ While the freedom schools educated almost 2000 students, there were over 295,000 African American students enrolled in public schools that fall. The number of students who attended freedom schools was below 0.7% of the total black student population in Mississippi. “Southern School Desegregation Statistics,” *Southern Freedom Movement Documents, 1951-1968*, Civil Rights Movement Veterans, accessed April 4, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/66_school-stats-r.pdf.

⁸ “Southern School Desegregation Statistics”; Hale, 146-147.

evidenced in the freedom schools, strong relationships between students and teachers not only unlock student potential, they help calm issues of classroom management, creating more useful time for instruction. Including student interests and emphasizing relationship building in classroom pedagogy can help our regular classrooms become more like the effective freedom school classrooms.⁹

The legacy of freedom schools can still be felt today. Freedom school students became catalysts for change in their communities and continued to push for the advancement of civil rights, long after the summer ended. They walked out of their freedom schools with courage, passion, and the skills needed to make the changes they wanted to see in the world. What these students accomplished and the men and women they became is simply awe-inspiring. Educators today can create environments where students learn skills, their own value, and the value of others so that each school sends out young men and women who are equipped to tackle the challenges to freedom we still face today.

The freedom schools are considered a success despite circumstances that seemed insurmountable. The teachers were ill-equipped and inexperienced with only one week of training, they had very few materials and resources and were, in many cases, extremely outnumbered. These schools met in unorthodox locations with an extremely politicized curriculum that some of the teachers had trouble working with in their classes. Freedom schools competed with Mississippi public schools and students' work schedules. Students had to stand up to racist whites every day, families had to choose educational liberation over safety, churches

⁹ Wallace Roberts, "'Teaching' Freedom," in Elizabeth Martinez, ed. *Letters from Mississippi: Reports from Civil Rights Volunteers & Poetry of the 1964 Freedom Summer* (Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2007), 274-276; Hale, 116-118.

and communities made hard decisions about what was worth fighting for. Yet these unorthodox, flexible, odd schools produced students who walked out, proudly declaring, “I am the voice of freedom. I will be – America!”¹⁰

¹⁰ Robert Lee, “The Voice of Freedom,” in SNCC, *Freedom School Poetry* (Atlanta: Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1965), 46, accessed April 3, 2019, https://www.crmvet.org/poetry/64_fskool_poems-r.pdf.

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