

The Cupola

Scholarship at Gettysburg College



Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil
War to the American Public

Civil War Era Studies

3-21-2015

Walking through 1965 on an Alabama Highway: Day 1

John M. Rudy
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw>

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Rudy, John M., "Walking through 1965 on an Alabama Highway: Day 1" (2015). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 42.

<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw/42>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Walking through 1965 on an Alabama Highway: Day 1

Abstract

"Outside in the backyards I had just passed other youngsters engaged in their game 'State Trooper' in which half the number lined up locked arms, and proceeded to march singing 'We Shall Overcome,' then were set upon and beat down by the others wielding sticks and branches. In situations like these, one must observe the tragedy: that the misdeeds of our immature society are imprinted in the minds of innocent children."

Carl Benkert, *Freedom Songs: Selma, Alabama, 1965*

We were marching down the road. Seriously. We were marching down a rural Alabama highway. Hundreds of us. Marching. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Selma, justice, Civil Rights Movement

Disciplines

African American Studies | Cultural History | History | Public History | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

Creative Commons License

Creative

Commons

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

License



Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com



Walking through 1965 on an Alabama Highway: Day 1

SATURDAY, MARCH 21, 2015

"Outside in the backyards I had just passed other youngsters engaged in their game 'State Trooper' in which half the number lined up locked arms, and proceeded to march singing 'We Shall Overcome,' then were set upon and beat down by the others wielding sticks and branches. In situations like these, one must observe the tragedy: that the misdeeds of our immature society are imprinted in the minds of innocent children."

Carl Benkert, *Freedom Songs: Selma, Alabama, 1965*

We were marching down the road. Seriously. We were marching down a rural Alabama highway. Hundreds of us. Marching.

Selma is a convoluted sight. At once, it engenders hope and sorrow. And today as we began the 50th anniversary commemoration of the third march from Selma to Montgomery, a march instigated by a simple instance of police violence against a young man in Marion, Alabama, it was a particularly striking town.

Brown Chapel is in the heart of the projects, a national jewel nestled among families just trying to eek by. As we began to trudge down the street, a drum line and Boy Scout Troop from the Atlanta-area leading the way, some of the young residents of the Carver Projects scribbled on a woman's yellow t-shirt. Back at home, her classroom of young scholars had used Sharpies to write messages of encouragement on their teacher's shirt. And now, in the heart of a community ravaged by decades of systematized racism, Selma's own children were excitedly doing the same, filling the empty space.

Near the road, the hulks of proud middle-class homes sat burned, their walls scorched and charred above boarded-over windows. Selma is a still stark scar of a long-ago wound, the remnant of a promise of freedom in 1863 not quite fulfilled.

We turned the corner, a stop light that looked like it dated from the 1960s still dangling over our head. And believe me, I know stop lights. Crouse-Hinds back home in Syracuse makes them. It's not



"...privileged to see life in a vital totality never otherwise experienced."

ambiance, though. This is no living history village. It hangs like that because it's likely never been replaced, another sign of the scars and heartbreak, privation and damage done by a war left unfinished for 15 decades.

Up and over The Bridge. If there is only one bridge worth mentioning in America, and perhaps *there is only one bridge worth mentioning in America*, it is that bridge. There young men and women, peaceful fathers and grandmothers alike bled for freedom, walked for freedom, chanted for freedom, prayed for freedom. And the irony of it all was that the bleeding and walking and chanting and praying should have been unnecessary.

"The right of citizens of the United States to vote," the echo of a war to destroy slavery still resounds, "shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

A ways up the road, as feet tramped along U.S. Route 80, I pressed play on my iPhone. The interpretive staff wanted to inspire the marchers, put spring in their step. And being the technophile, it was left to me to ultimately engineer the task. Out from a speaker on my hip piped the voices of Common and John Legend. Had we cleared it with Columbia Records? No. Does it matter? No. Any company named after the very embodiment of freedom herself has no right to complain when the song *Glory* floats above a reenactment of the march from Selma to Montgomery.

The pace livened. The interpreters smiled. Behind me, I heard a middle-aged white school teacher singing along with the refrain, half under her breath as if embarrassed that she cared enough to know every last word.

The song trailed off. I flipped off the speaker.

A few dozen feet ahead of me, I heard the silence almost immediately broken by a voice, a young black woman on the verge of striking out on a life of her own.

"No Justice?" she called.

From around her came the obvious reply, reflexively: "No Peace!"

Again and again she repeated it. And the reply got stronger. When she lengthened her words, they lengthened hers. Staccato yielded staccato. Legato yielded legato.

Marching somewhere just a few feet ahead of me were a handful of seniors from the Ferguson-Florissant School District. They're the same age Michael Brown was on August 9th of last year. They have every right to chant. They have every right to be angry. They have every right to be afraid. The world, this American landscape pockmarked by 400 years of systematized racial violence and the half-effective backsliding outcomes of a war fought to destroy that system in the 1860s, seems dead set against them.

"No Justice?"

The cries continued.

"No Peace!"

Echoing through the air.

"No Justice?"

They were a warped refrain of sorrow.

"No Peace!"

A sad reflection on where our nation sits. We might have marched so far since 1863, but we have so much farther left to march.