

We Shall Lead: Freedom Schools and the Creation of Black Youth-based Leadership

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In 1964, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) conducted one of the most ambitious civil rights campaigns in the history of the United States. During the spring of that year, SNCC recruited over one thousand volunteers to enter the nation's most segregated state to join the fight for African American civil rights. Historian Neil McMillen has appropriately called this demonstration, known as Freedom Summer, "easily the most spectacular and sustained single event in recent civil rights history."¹ This protest was designed to achieve three major objectives. The first was to expose the political discrimination experienced by Mississippi blacks to the rest of America. The second goal was to register large numbers of black voters. Finally, SNCC also sought to create a leadership class among black Mississippi youths.² By the end of the campaign, SNCC achieved limited success in pursuing their first two goals. The attempt to generate media coverage largely failed because reporter interest was focused almost exclusively on the affluent, white volunteers. The voter registration project yielded limited results as SNCC was only able to register enough voters to raise the percentage of registered age-eligible blacks in the state by one tenth of a percent.³ However, despite the relative failures of Freedom Summer's first two goals, the campaign was extremely successful in creating a strong leadership class among black Mississippi youths. The ability of SNCC to empower an incredibly motivated and effective group of young African American leaders remains one of the strongest lessons

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to be learned from the Civil Rights Movement. The structure employed by SNCC to achieve this goal remains one of the movement's defining successes.

Welcome to 1964 Mississippi

Black children in 1950s and 1960s Mississippi did not grow up in the same fashion as most American children. The burgeoning civil rights movement that had captured America's attention during the previous decade had been hidden from them. Unlike most of the country, Mississippi blacks did not see the news coverage of the 1963 Birmingham protests, or the March on Washington later that year. Most of them did not own television sets because they were too poor. Of the nearly one million African Americans living in Mississippi in 1964, eighty-six percent lived below the poverty line.⁴ In fact, the median income for black families in Mississippi was less than half the amount prescribed by the federal government to consider a family impoverished.⁵ Even if they did own a television, one of the recurring technical difficulties that swept Mississippi networks during the early 1960s censored movement coverage.⁶ Rather than growing up in a nation that was beginning to reject the plight of its black citizens, African American youths in Mississippi grew up in a place where segregation and racial inequality were as deeply rooted in the state's culture as cotton and magnolias. Their knowledge of American race relations was the product of whispers from the shadows of their existence about a fourteen year-old boy who had been killed for whistling at a white woman. The ghost of Emmett Till, not the success of Martin Luther King Jr., defined the parameters of black life in Mississippi during the 1950s and 1960s.⁷

Prior to the 1964 Freedom Summer, black Mississippians were the victims of one of the most severe states of educational poverty in modern American history. An

extremely racist state school expenditure policy saw that \$81.86 was spent on each white pupil, while only \$21.77 was spent on African American students.⁸ In the poverty-stricken Mississippi Delta, the discrepancy was even worse. Holly Bluff County saw an average expenditure of \$191.70 and \$1.26 for white and black students, respectively.⁹ African Americans in Yazoo County experienced perhaps the greatest expenditure discrimination as only \$3 per year was spent on black children in a district spent \$245 annually on its white students.¹⁰

Even the academic calendar for all-black schools was discriminatory. The importance of educating black Mississippians took a backseat to the state's King Cotton culture. Mississippi legislators, many of whom owned cotton farms in the majority-black Delta region, catered the black school calendar to their labor needs during the harvest season. The all-black Mississippi schools would begin their academic year in early November and run until late May. Schools would then close so that black youths could pick cotton. When the cotton picking season ended in mid-June, black schools reopened. In September, when the white students went back to school, the black schools would close again to allow their students to pick cotton until November.¹¹

When black children did actually attend school they learned very little about African American history, or about the rights supposedly guaranteed to them by the Constitution. Much of the curriculum taught in Mississippi's black schools was specifically designed to maintain white supremacy. In his analysis of the education available to Mississippi blacks, SNCC volunteer Charles Cobb wrote that Mississippi public schools were "geared to squash intellectual curiosity," and that there was a "complete absence of academic freedom." He concluded that "Mississippi destroys [those

considered to be] ‘smart niggers’ and its classrooms remain intellectual wastelands.’¹²

Another volunteer wrote that:

The students are taught nothing of their heritage. The only outstanding Negroes they are told about are Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver. They learn nothing of the contributions Negroes have made to our culture or anything else which could give them any reason to disbelieve the lies they are told about Negroes being able to do anything worthwhile.¹³

Shocked at the lack of knowledge black youths possessed, one volunteer noted that a group of sixth and seventh grade black students did not know how many states comprised the United States of America, or what the nation’s capital was.¹⁴ Another volunteer was astonished to learn that black youths, between thirteen and seventeen years of age, had never heard of the 1954 Brown v. Board Supreme Court decision that called for school desegregation.¹⁵ This lack of knowledge about African American history, Constitutional rights, and the black freedom struggle was not a coincidence. The white Mississippians who controlled the school board specifically outlawed any discussion of the civil rights movement. In her stunning memoir, native Mississippian Anne Moody recalls a case where one of her teachers was fired for telling a student what the NAACP stood for.¹⁶ This lack of education about African American history, combined with the intellectual vacuum described by Cobb, created an environment in which going to school was detrimental to the psyche and self-esteem of young African Americans. It is no wonder that by 1960 only seven percent of Mississippi blacks had completed twelve years of school, and fewer than 5 percent of eligible black citizens had registered to vote.¹⁷

During the Freedom Summer of 1964, SNCC decided to directly confront the Mississippi system of educational poverty. Their goal, as stated by former volunteer Len Holt, was to “develop...a homegrown freedom movement that will survive after the

1,000 visitors leave.”¹⁸ In order to accomplish this goal, SNCC erected Freedom Schools across the state. These schools became the antithesis of the regular black Mississippi schools. The curriculum taught in these institutions was designed to motivate activism by enhancing student knowledge of the strong tradition of African American protest, and by teaching them how to conduct their own civil rights activities. As former volunteer Mary Rothschild wrote, Freedom Schools were to “be a training ground for the next generation of local civil rights workers.”¹⁹ The curriculum taught in the Mississippi Freedom Schools not only filled a void for its African American students, it also motivated, inspired, and enabled them to become active in the movement.

Pure Grassroots: Freedom Schools in Action

As previously mentioned, Mississippi blacks had virtually no access to information about the history of African American resistance. In order to combat this educational void, Freedom School director Stoughton Lynd created a curriculum package titled, “Guide to Negro History.” This section of the curriculum proved to be incredibly effective because it introduced students to the rich traditions of resistance that constituted the entirety of the black experience in America, and offered logical explanations as to how and why African Americans had been relegated to such an inferior status in Mississippi. The “Guide” began by discussing the Amistad case in which captured Africans rebelled on a slave ship to violently reclaim their freedom. The story of the Amistad revolt was used to “set the tone” for the rest of the Freedom Summer curriculum.²⁰ SNCC believed that by teaching such stories it could “elicit immediate

interest on the part of Negro youth to a summer study,” help build racial pride among students, and provide a thematic basis for the rest of the history lessons.²¹

The rest of the “Guide to Negro History” was organized chronologically. Freedom School teachers discussed the origins of American slavery and how it contradicted the Declaration of Independence. They encouraged the black students to challenge the hypocrisy of the American Revolution, and to discuss how the Constitution had been written to protect the institution of slavery.²² The next part of the curriculum told the story of various slave insurrections. Similar to the Amistad discussion, this section was designed to instill pride in the black students, but also to demonstrate various forms of black resistance. Included among the revolts discussed was the Haitian Revolution, the revolt of Gabriel, Nat Turner’s rebellion, and the Charleston, SC insurrection planned by Denmark Vesey in 1822.²³

The final part of this portion of the curriculum explained the failures of Reconstruction and the beginning of segregation. It started by arguing that “Reconstruction is the most distorted period in the writing of American history.”²⁴ This section illuminated the successes of African Americans during the first stages of Reconstruction. Lynd wrote that “Because of their strength, Southern Negroes during Reconstruction elected many Negroes to office and obtained many public appointments. This was especially the case in South Carolina, Louisiana, and Mississippi.”²⁵ The Freedom School curriculum then explained how the Supreme Court decisions of Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), and Williams v. Mississippi (1898), reinforced the state’s ability to create inferior and segregated institutions for African Americans, as well as deny them the right to vote.²⁶ The strength of this final section was that it logically showed the

students why African Americans had been relegated to second class citizenship in the state. As opposed to the regular Mississippi schools, that constantly implicated African American inferiority, Freedom Schools taught their students that their oppression was unnatural.

The curriculum had a strong impact on the more than two thousand students who attended Freedom Schools.²⁷ Liz Fusco, who took over the Freedom School coordinator position towards the end of the summer, claimed that the students were especially inspired by the African American history lessons. She recalled the way that black students were able to connect with historical figures:

Through the study of Negro History [the students] began to have a real sense of themselves as a people who could produce heroes. They saw in the history of Cinque of the Amistad a parallel to kinds of revolts in the Movement, as they began to learn about it, represented. They saw Joseph Cinque, in leading a mutiny on that slave ship instead of asserting his will to freedom by jumping off the ship into the shark-waiting waters, was saying that freedom is something that belongs to life, not to death, and that a man has a responsibility for bringing all his people to freedom, not just for his own escaping.²⁸

Pamela Allen described the dramatic response to her lesson on the Haitian Revolution.

She observed her students' reactions while telling the story of the Haitian Revolution:

I watched faces fall around me. They knew that a small island, run by former slaves, could not defeat England. And then I told that the people of Haiti succeeded in keeping the English out. I watched a smile spread slowly over a girl's face. And I felt girls sit up and look at me intently. Then I told them that Napoleon came to power, reinstated slavery, and sent an expedition to reconquer Haiti. Their faces began to fall again...And when I told them that Haiti did succeed in keeping out the European powers and was recognized finally as an independent republic, they just looked at me and smiled. The room stirred with gladness and a pride that this could have happened. And I felt so happy and so humble that I could have told them this little story and it could have meant so much.²⁹

According to the volunteers, the African American history that the students learned provoked a lot of emotion, and more importantly instilled in them a sense of pride and of

possibilities for their own lives. The state of Mississippi had withheld any information concerning African American heroes of the past, and this initial exposure helped instill confidence among Freedom School attendees.

The schools had an immediate impact on the students. As previously shown, the student's enthusiastic response can be seen by the large Freedom School attendance figures which greatly exceeded SNCC expectations.³⁰ However, while large numbers of students were encouraging, this was not the main goal of the Freedom School project. The project's primary objective was to create a strong group of activists among the students. To achieve this, the Freedom School teachers also taught basic organizing skills such as letter writing, public speaking, and newspaper publishing. As the Freedom Summer wore on, it became clear that the Freedom Schools were achieving their primary goal. The students that participated in Freedom Schools displayed remarkable talents for organizing, protest, and leadership. These abilities were displayed in several ways.

One of the first ways can be seen in the school newspapers published by several of the Freedom Schools. In school papers such as the *Holly Springs Freedom News*, the *Gulfport Press of Freedom*, and the *Hattiesburg Student Voice of True Light*, students voiced their concerns about the political struggle of African Americans in Mississippi. One of the most common issues discussed in these publications were the problems encountered by African American youth while canvassing. Just days into the Summer Project, Freedom School students joined the army of SNCC canvassers who had been attempting to convince local blacks to register. Moss Point Freedom School director Tony O'Brien wrote that many of "the best students were eager to be out canvassing for voter registration."³¹ The students chronicled their canvassing experiences in the school

papers. In these articles we can see how the students began to take leadership roles in their communities. Student Dorothy Louise Lucas detailed her canvassing experience:

At first I started talking to his wife, but I wasn't getting anywhere with her...Then her husband walked into the room and I started talking to him but he said right away he didn't have time to think about what I was saying...I said, "That's why Negroes aren't getting anywhere in the world today, because they don't have time for what Mr. Joe or Mrs. Sue say. What can't we seem to find time for something that will help our race?"³²

Bonnie Tidwell wrote about a similar experience asking a woman to fill out a voter registration form:

She said, "Why should I? My vote wouldn't make any difference what-so-ever. Just my one vote! How could it help?" I said, "Why of course it would help. It can make a lot of difference. Your one vote could make the person you vote for win by one vote, maybe even break a tie. If you did vote you could even say you have some voice in the government."³³

Another student, Mavis Farrow, conveyed her attitude toward inactive citizens in the

Holly Springs Freedom News:

This is to you p[e]ople that are talking about being afraid to attend the Freedom School and afraid to register and vote: you are missing one of the most important parts of your life. This is to you parents; especially you that are talking about the fact that you have children: you should talk this over and come to a decision and stand up and be counted as citizens of today's world.³⁴

According to SNCC records, the people writing these articles were children, usually between thirteen and fifteen years old.³⁵ Their works convey impressive leadership capabilities. One of the most outstanding aspects of this leadership was the aggressive manner in which they demanded the political participation of older generations. It is remarkable that a young teenager would have the audacity to approach an adult and demand that they register to vote. Even more impressive is that, because of the education they received in Freedom School, young students took it upon themselves to educate others about the need to vote. The students were not only soliciting votes from the older

generation, they were training them. As the summer progressed, junior high school students from the McComb Freedom School volunteered to teach local adults. The children came to the Freedom School, which also served as a community center, and would “sit with the adults who were learning their alphabets, one kid to one adult,” Liz Fusco recalled.³⁶ Other summer activities included sit-in protests, a state-wide Freedom School conference, and letter writing campaigns.³⁷

Freedom Schools transformed a large number of African American youth in Mississippi into incredibly conscious and effective civil agitators. Before the Summer Project, Black Mississippians were certainly aware of the inequality that pervaded the state. However, the experience of Freedom Schools exposed the participants to an analysis of Mississippi white supremacy, and how it had been developed and maintained. Thirty-two years after the project, SNCC volunteer Lawrence Guyot claimed that the campaign “had brought America to Mississippi.”³⁸ The reverse is true as well. Freedom Schools brought Mississippians to America. They learned how the American legal and political systems functioned, and how to challenge those systems. This exposure had an incredible impact on Mississippi youth. Almost instantly, they became not just a part of the movement, but leaders in their communities. During the Freedom Summer they began canvassing potential voters, organizing student groups, voicing their demands, and aggressively pursuing their rights as American citizens. Out of the Freedom Schools emerged a group of individuals who were well quipped to fight against Mississippi’s closed society.

Notes

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- ¹ Neil McMillen, "Black Enfranchisement in Mississippi: Federal Enforcement and Black Protest in the 1960s," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 43, No. 3, (August, 1977), 367.
- ² For more on goals see John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 243-268, and Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 96-108.
- ³ See Carson, 117, 123, and Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 81.
- ⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census 1964.
- ⁵ The 1964 median income for black families in Mississippi was \$1,444. The 1964 Report of the Council of Economic Advisers set the national poverty line at \$3,000. See Gordon Fisher, "Poverty Guidelines for 1992," in *Social Security Bulletin*, Vol. 55, No. 1, Spring, 1992.
- ⁶ Local networks in Mississippi would routinely black out portions of the national news that covered civil rights protests. See Steven D. Classen, *Watching Jim Crow: The Struggle over Mississippi TV, 1955-1969* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
- ⁷ Emmett Till was a fourteen year-old boy who was killed in Mississippi in 1955 for an interaction with a white woman. Mississippi native Anne Moody discussed the ways that the rumors of Till's death were dealt with among black youths in the late 1950s. For more, see Christopher Metress, ed., *The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2002), and Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi: The Classic Autobiography of Growing Up Poor and Black in the Rural South* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1968).
- ⁸ William McCord, *Mississippi: The Long, Hot Summer* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1965), 35.
- ⁹ Len Holt, *The Summer That Didn't End* (New York: William Morrow, 1965), 102.
- ¹⁰ McCord, 152.
- ¹¹ See Elizabeth Sutherland, ed., *Letters From Mississippi* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 100-105, and Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 16-17, and Kenneth Andrews, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement and Its Legacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 101-102.
- ¹² Memo, Charles Cobb to COFO Summer Program Committee, Jan. 14, 1964, SNCC, The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972 (Sanford, NC: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1982), reel 68, frame 424. Hereafter cited as MCA.
- ¹³ Sutherland, 92-93.
- ¹⁴ See Ibid.
- ¹⁵ See Ibid.
- ¹⁶ See Moody, 132-137.
- ¹⁷ McCord, 35, and Carson 97.
- ¹⁸ Len Holt, 197-198.
- ¹⁹ Mary Rothschild, "The Volunteers and the Freedom Schools: Education for Social Change in Mississippi," *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 4, (Winter, 1982), 402-403.
- ²⁰ "The Amistad Case," SNCC, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Collections), Reel 20, Frame 146. Hereafter cited as (Michigan) SNCC.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² "Origins of Prejudice," (Michigan) SNCC: Reel 20, Frame 146.
- ²³ See "Negro Resistance to Oppression," (Michigan) SNCC: Reel 20, Frames 147-148.
- ²⁴ "Reconstruction," (Michigan) SNCC: Reel 20, 149-153.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ SNCC had only anticipated that approximately 1,000 students would participate in the Freedom School project. However, by the middle of the project the schools had an enrollment of 2,135. See "Freedom

School Data,” Date Unknown, COFO, Jackson, MS, Pamela Allen Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW).

²⁸ Liz Fusco in, “Freedom Schools in Mississippi,” (MCA) SNCC Reel 68, File 346, Page 0224.

²⁹ Letter from Pamela Allen to “Mom and Dad.” Holly Springs, MS. Date unknown, Pamela Allen Papers, SHSW.

³⁰ When planning the project, SNCC workers estimated that approximately 1,000 students would participate in the Freedom Schools. However, by the fourth week of the project, the schools had an enrollment of 2,135. See “Freedom School Data,” Date Unknown, COFO, Jackson, MS, Pamela Allen Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW).

³¹ Tony O’Brien, undated Freedom School report, (Michigan) SNCC: Reel 68, Frame 529.

³² Dorothy Louise Lucas, “No Time to Study,” *The Holly Springs Freedom News*, July 17, 1964, Vol. 1, No. 4. Marvin Gatch Papers, SHSW.

³³ Bonnie Tidwell, “Don’t Care,” *The Holly Springs Freedom News*, July 17, 1964, Vol. 1, No. 4. Marvin Gatch Papers, SHSW.

³⁴ Mavis Farrow, “The Local News,” *The Holly Springs Freedom News*, July 17, 1964, Vol. 1, No. 4. Marvin Gatch Papers, SHSW.

³⁵ See “Freedom School Data,” Date Unknown, COFO, Jackson, MS, Pamela Allen Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW), also available on SNCC Papers microfilm.

³⁶ Liz Fusco, “Freedom Schools in Mississippi, 1964,” (MCA) SNCC, Reel 68, File 346, Page 0224.

³⁷ See Sandra Adickes, *Legacy of a Freedom School* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 93-95.

³⁸ Lawrence Guyot, interview with John Rachal, 09/07/1996, University of Southern Mississippi. Oral History Program. F341.4.M 57, vol. 673. <http://www.lib.usm.edu/%7Eespol/crda/oh/guyot.htm>

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