

Lesson Two: Mississippi Civil Rights Timeline

Objective:

Research skills are developed by students as they use the Internet and Sovereignty Commission files to research Mississippi's major civil rights activists.

Materials: *Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission*; Internet access; *Major Mississippi Civil Rights Activists in the 1960s*; *Mississippi Civil Rights Map and Timeline*; *Journal Two: Ask Yourself*.

Procedures:

Activity One: All the Yolks are the Same

1. Ask students to identify the obvious difference between a brown and a white egg.
2. After responses are given, crack each into a bowl and ask students to identify which is which.
3. The fact that the interior yolks of each egg are the same should provide a visual example to students that regardless of color, everyone is the same on the inside.

Activity Two: The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission

1. Have students research events since 9/11 that have been incidents of government spying on private citizens in America. Many feel this is an invasion of privacy. Discuss as a class how students feel about the government's legal ability to listen in on any conversation (vocal or written). Have students support their arguments.
2. Distribute the *Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission* reading to students.
3. Visit the school computer lab. Have students access the Sovereignty Commission files online (now housed at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History) at http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/
4. Divide the class into ten groups and assign each group one of the individuals listed on the *Major Mississippi Civil Rights Activists in the 1960s* worksheet.
5. Have students search for their figure's name in the Sovereignty Commission files as well as a basic Internet search engine. In the Sovereignty Commission files, there will be multiple files per person. Students should look through a several of their choice. As for Internet sites, encourage sources ending in ".org," ".gov," or ".edu" and explain why they are more reliable.
6. When all groups have located their facts, have each share their findings. Have students fill-in the facts about each figure on their own worksheet.
7. Distribute the *Mississippi Civil Rights Map and Timeline* and have students label it with locations and events covered during the class activities and discussions.
8. Students will answer the questions in *Journal Two: Ask Yourself* individually before discussing them aloud.

Extension Activity: The Sovereignty Commission and You

Using the online archive of Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission records, have students research their own family members. Were their relatives being observed? Why? Discuss with students their feelings about having their ancestors spied on.

Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission

In 1954, thirteen Topeka parents, on behalf of their twenty children, took the issue of school segregation to the U.S. Supreme Court. In the case known as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, the court ruled in a 9-0 decision that separate public school systems for African American and white children were unconstitutional. *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) instantly became void insofar as it applied to public education.

Many Mississippians, resenting the federal government's attempt to dictate a way of life that was decades old, sought to preserve the racial segregation of the state. At the voting polls, Mississippians approved a law that vowed to close all public schools in the state if the federal government enforced *Brown v. Board*. Private citizens in Indianola established the White Citizens Council with the purpose of making life more difficult for African Americans through denial of jobs, locking of bank funds, and physical harassment. Additional chapters sprang up across the South, growing its membership to 60,000.

On March 29, 1956, the state legislature created the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission with the purpose to "do and perform any and all acts deemed necessary and proper to protect the sovereignty of the state of Mississippi and her sister states" from "encroachment thereon by the Federal Government or any branch, department or agency thereof." The Commission compared itself to the FBI and intelligence agencies in that they sought information about the enemy, in this case not foreign spies but individual American citizens and organizations who challenged racial segregation and participated in civil rights activities. The records include reports, photographs, and audio recordings of tens of thousands of Mississippians connected to the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s.

The Sovereignty Commission closed on June 30, 1973, and was officially dissolved in January, 1977. At that point, the records were transferred to the Mississippi Department of Archives and History but debate raged on whether the files should be opened to the public without restriction. In 1998, by order of the United States District Court, files not involved in litigation were opened and made available in an electronic format to the public. Since then additional files have been added to the online collection that is available on the MDAH website at http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/

Elbert Hillard, director of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, seals Sovereignty Commission files in alignment with court orders in March of 1977. MDAH, Archives and Records Services.



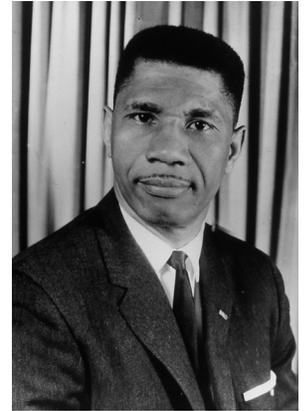
NAME: _____ DATE: _____

Major Mississippi Civil Rights Activists in the 1960s

Working in small groups, find three to five facts related to your civil rights activist life or activist work on Internet sites (remember that sites ending with “.org,” “.gov,” and “.edu” are more reliable) and in the Sovereignty Commission found online at http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/.

Medgar Evers

- Born July 2, 1925, Decatur; Died June 12, 1963, Jackson.



MDAH, Archives and Records Services.



James Meredith

- Born June 25, 1933, Kosciusko.

MDAH, Archives and Records Services.

Vernon Dahmer

- Born March 10, 1908, Forrest County; Died January 11, 1966, Hattiesburg.

NAME: _____ DATE: _____



Fannie Lou Hamer

- Born October 6, 1917, Montgomery County; Died March 14, 1977, Mound Bayou.

MDAH, Archives and Records Services.

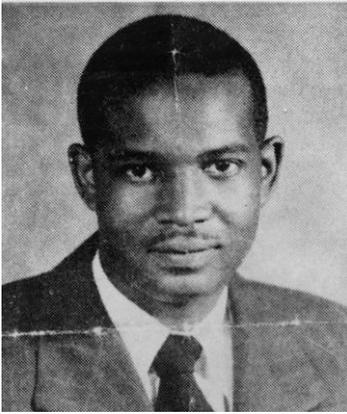
Jack and Aurelia Young

- Born March 9, 1908, Jackson; Died September 25, 1976, Jackson, and Born 1915; Knottsville, Kentucky; Died October 17, 2010, Los Angeles, California.



MDAH, Archives and Records Services.

NAME: _____ DATE: _____



Aaron Henry

- Born July 2, 1922, Dublin; Died: May 19, 1997, Clarksdale.

MDAH, Archives and Records Services.

Dr. T.R.M. Howard

- Born March 4, 1908, Murray, KY; Died May 1, 1976, Chicago, Illinois.



MDAH, Archives and Records Services.



Reverend Edwin King

- Born 1936, Vicksburg.

Image courtesy of Ed King and MDAH, Museum Division.

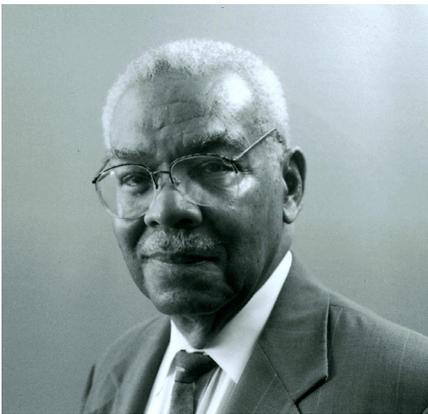
NAME: _____ DATE: _____

Hazel Brannon Smith

- Born February 4, 1914, Alabama City, AL; Died May 15, 1994, Cleveland, TN.



MDAH, Archives and Records Services.



Dr. Gilbert Mason

- Born October 7, 1928, Jackson; Died July 8, 2006, Biloxi.

MDAH, Public Information.

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

Journal Two: Ask Yourself

1. Ross Barnett suggested that Mississippi's high percentage of African American citizens showed they "loved our way of life." Is this true? Why do you think African Americans stayed in Mississippi if they faced discrimination?
2. Medgar Evers risked his life in Europe while fighting for his country during World War II, but he could not vote when he returned. Based on your understanding of irony, how does irony apply to Evers' situation and that of other African Americans who fought in World War II?
3. Some have pointed out that eighteen-year-old American citizens can fight for their country in war, but when they return home, they are not legally old enough to buy an alcoholic drink until age 21. What other examples of irony do you see in Mississippi or federal law today?