

# 1964

## Freedom Summer

The path to voting rights for African Americans has been a long and difficult one. After the Civil War, the Fifteenth Amendment granting voting rights to Black men was ratified in 1870. The Freedmen certainly exercised their new right to vote. In fact, they helped Ulysses S. Grant win the state of Mississippi in his presidential reelection bid in 1872.

However, as federal troops pulled out of the South and Reconstruction ended, protection of Black voters ended as well. Mississippi then experienced increased acts of racially driven violence, even murder, to discourage voting by the Freedmen.

In 1890, Mississippi enacted a new constitution to disenfranchise African Americans and keep the racial divide; Jim Crow laws were a by-product. Jim Crow laws created legal hurdles for Black citizens by making it more difficult, if not impossible, for them to exercise their rights as citizens. Those who attempted to defy Jim Crow laws were often faced with consequences as brutal as arrest, violence, or even death.

Jim Crow laws, literacy tests, and poll taxes were forced upon Black citizens. Poll taxes were expensive and could be anywhere from two weeks to a month's salary. Literacy tests were designed to suppress Black voters who had been denied educational opportunities.

A century after the Civil War, in November of 1963, civil rights activists held the "Freedom Vote," a mock election experiment meant to show that Black people would register and participate on Election Day if voting and voter registration was a fair and open process. It dismantled the myth that Black citizens did not want to vote. White students from the North came down to participate in the mock election, and with the presence of White students, violence against Black voters decreased. This sparked an idea. Civil rights activists would bring Northern White students down to Mississippi for a summer-long voter registration drive. In 1964, the Freedom Summer Project was created to draw the nation's attention to the oppression of Black Americans trying to exercise their constitutional right to vote.

Two key figures in Mississippi Freedom Summer were Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and the Reverend Ed King. Notably, both were founding members of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The MFDP was founded in 1964 to challenge the established power of the state's existing Democratic Party. The MFDP traveled to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, where they highlighted the violence and injustices they faced for simply attempting to vote.

In the speeches associated with this assignment, you can read Fannie Lou Hamer's riveting testimony at the convention about the coercion she faced while attempting to register to vote and Ed King's reflection on his experience during Freedom Summer.

### **Subjects that can be addressed within this Digital Archive:**

- Civil Rights

- Freedom Summer
- Freedom Democratic Party
- Ed King
- Fannie Lou Hamer

**Curricular Connections:** Below are key standards featured in this Learning Lagniappe.

Mississippi Studies

**MS.8.1:** Analyze the significant figures, groups, events, and strategies of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi. **MS.8.3:** Evaluate the lasting impact of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi.

U.S. History: 1877 to Present

**US.3.2:** Trace the development of political, social, and cultural movements and subsequent reforms, including: Jim Crow laws, Plessy vs. Ferguson, women’s suffrage, temperance movement, Niagara movement, public education, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Marcus Garvey. **US.11.3:** Explain contributions of individuals and groups to the modern Civil Rights Movement, including: Martin Luther King, Jr., James Meredith, Medgar Evers, Thurgood Marshall, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the civil rights foot soldiers.

**Pre-Reading:**

<https://mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/The-1964-Mississippi-Freedom-Schools>

<https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/ed-king/>

<https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/freedom-summer-project/>

<https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/fannie-lou-hamer/>

**Directions Speech One:**

1. Access the transcription of a speech given by Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer relating to her attempt to register to vote in Mississippi. <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/fannielouhamercredentialscommittee.htm> 2. Students can listen as well as read here. 3. Direct students to read the speech then come back to work through the following questions.

**Questions:**

1. In her introduction, Mrs. Hamer gives her full physical address. Why do you think this is important to the rest of her speech?

**Possible Student Answer:** Telling the committee where she lives shows she has an inside knowledge of the real everyday struggle for civil rights in Mississippi.

2. Mrs. Hamer says she was trying to register to become a “first-class citizen.” What did she mean by this term?

**Possible Student Answer:** She and others were attempting to register to vote so they would have the same citizenship rights as White people.

3. Fannie Lou Hamer worked as a timekeeper on a local plantation, working and living on the property. When she registered to vote, the plantation owner kicked her and her family out, telling her, “We’re not ready for that in Mississippi.” What did he mean by that statement?

**Possible Student Answers:** The plantation owner was referring to the opinion that White Mississippi was not ready for African Americans to have equal voting rights in the United States.

4. Try to put yourself in Mrs. Hamer’s place. If you were forced to leave your home, or what had been your home, simply for doing something you had every right to do, how would you feel? Can you tell her feelings from her speech?

**Possible Student Answers:** Responses will differ but should convey an understanding of the question.

5. At the end of her speech, Fannie Lou Hamer makes a statement that has been used repeatedly throughout the Civil Rights Movement. She says, “I question America.” After reading these two speeches what do you think Mrs. Hamer was questioning? Are there things in America you question? Explain and discuss.

**Possible Student Answers:** Responses will differ but should convey an understanding of the question.

### Directions Speech Two:

1. Have students read the introduction provided in this lagniappe. 2. Access the transcription of a speech given by Reverend Ed King relating to events of Freedom Summer [https://da.mdah.ms.gov/vault/projects/OHtranscripts/AU104\\_096187.pdf](https://da.mdah.ms.gov/vault/projects/OHtranscripts/AU104_096187.pdf) 3. Direct students to read the speech then come back to work through the following questions.

### Questions:

1. Based on the introduction and the end of King’s speech, what was Freedom Summer or the “Movement”?

**Possible Student Answer:** Freedom Summer “was defending the Black community from massive White opposition and replacing and rebuilding the institutions or building new institutions” (King, pg. 14). The institution that Freedom Summer worked to fix was voter oppression. Freedom Summer included a voter drive meant to register as many Black voters in Mississippi as possible to prove to the federal government and others the desire to vote within Black communities.

2. In his speech, Ed King says:

“In an interview in 1963, I had once said that a goal of the struggle in Mississippi was to make the state more like the rest of America. For Mississippi, that would have been a kind of progress. The victories of the 1964 Freedom Summer gained at least this much. The story of Mississippi and the rest of the ‘60s, and, now, I would say the ‘70s, is the working out of this, the Americanization of Mississippi.” (pg. 4)

What do you think Ed King means by “the Americanization of Mississippi”? What other parts of King’s speech lead you to this understanding?

**Possible Student Answer:** The federal government was not holding Mississippi to the legal standards that were instituted after the Civil War. Mississippi had regressed back into an oppressive state. King is emphasizing the need that Mississippi had for America to notice the state and intervene. King says that Mississippians have “seen America at its worst,” and he is highlighting the importance of others to view the oppressed Mississippians as Americans, also, deserving of their civil rights.

3. King says, “How [Black Americans] would vote was a concern then, and how they would vote is a concern today” (pg.9). Based on this assignment introduction and your reading, what systems were in place before 1964 that showed that there were concerns about Black Americans having the right to vote?

**Possible Student Answer:** Jim Crow Laws—Black voters were required, at the discretion of the poll workers, to pay poll taxes and pass literacy tests. Sometimes, poll taxes could be anywhere from two weeks’ pay to over a month’s pay. Literacy tests were designed to be almost impossible to pass especially considering the educational inequality between Black and White students. Aside from the Jim Crow Laws, Black Americans were also threatened to prevent their voting, which dramatically affected their turnout as well.

4. King addresses how civil rights injustices that he saw before the 1964 Freedom Summer were not eradicated and persist into “today.” Though King delivered this speech in 1979, what civil/human rights issues do you see persist in your “today”?

**Possible Student Answers:** Answers are not necessarily found in the reading materials but some examples are as follows: food insecurity, disability discrimination, denied access to healthcare, unbalanced criminal legal system, etc.

5. Why do you think the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was offered only two seats in the Democratic National Party? What are some reasons you can think of that they would have turned this offer down?

**Possible Student Answers:** The MFDP was likely offered two seats to pacify the party into submitting to the norms of the larger Democratic National Party. Students’ answers will vary here but should show an understanding of the question and serious thought of the subject.