FREEDOM SUMMER: THE SUCCESSES AND FAILURES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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Freedom Summer: The Successes and Failures of the Civil Rights Movement

The summer of 1964 was unlike any other time in American history. The whole country was reeling from the effects of the Civil Rights Movement that had begun a just a few short years before, but in Mississippi something truly radical was taking place. Freedom Summer, also known as the Mississippi Summer Project, was redefining what it meant for a movement to be organized from the ground up. Students from many well-respected and prestigious colleges, as well as young people who just felt the need to do something about the rampant racism that still existed in the South, ventured (or, in the vernacular of some, "invaded") "the heart of the Deep South" to try to resolve some of these deep-seated issues.[1] With the intention of educating and ultimately registering to vote the many African Americans who had been mistreated by a corrupt electoral system in Mississippi, the Freedom Summer volunteers sought to change the lives of many Southerners, and ended up with their lives changed as well.

Many different forces shaped the preparation for and outcome of the Summer. In the heart of the South, since reconstruction African Americans were purposefully and violently discriminated against and disenfranchised. While many African Americans in the South were going to great lengths to change their surroundings through their own means, the rest of the world was beginning to see how truly terrible their circumstances were. With the formation of organizations such as SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Commission) and COFO (Council of Federated Organizations), students as well as others across the country began to be involved in the Civil Rights Movement in the South. In 1964, the tyranny in the South reached a breaking point; people could no

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[1] James Atwater, "If We Can Crack Mississippi…" *Saturday Evening Post* 237, no. 27 (July 25, 1964), 15-19. http://0web.ebscohost.com.tiger.coloradocollege.edu/ ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&hid=21&sid=d6355a16-f3d0-4c28-a2d1-780ee69a8169%40sessionmgr4.

longer stand by and watch. Freedom Summer was the response to a comingling of events in Mississippi that the rest of the nation could no longer stomach.

Why Mississippi, Why Then? : The Events that Led to Freedom Summer

For African Americans living in the South, life had never been particularly "free." Although Reconstruction represented a brief period of hope for the self-determination and enfranchisement of African Americans, they had overwhelmingly been treated as second-class citizens in the South, most notably in Mississippi. In 1867 "46,436 whites and 60,167 blacks were registered" to vote in the same election. However, by 1875 white Democrats had regained control by intimidating Republicans and the blacks who supported them.[2] "In 1876," just one year after whites regained political control, "Senator Blanche Bruce, one of two Negro senators from Mississippi… condemned the practices of his state" by observing:

> The conduct of the late election in Mississippi… put in question and jeopardy the sacred rights of the citizens… the evidence on hand… will show beyond peradventure that in many parts of the State corrupt and violent influences were brought to bear upon the registrars of voters in such measures and strength as to produce grave apprehensions for personal safety and as to deter them from the exercise of their political franchises.[3]

Although this sentiment was recorded in 1876, it very well could have come out of the 1950s or 60s; little had changed in Mississippi nearly 100 years after Reconstruction. "In 1960, there were fewer black voters than in 1880 or even 1867," even after the Civil Rights Act of 1957 and the Civil Rights Act of 1960.[4] Violence and

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[2] David C. Colby, "The Voting Rights Act and Black Registration in Mississippi," *Publius* 16, no. 4 (Autumn 1986), 124. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3330163.
[3] William Maxwell McCord, *Mississippi: The Long, Hot Summer*, New York: WW Norton & Company, 1965, pg. 24.
[4] Colby, 128.

intimidation tactics were still being used to keep “the black man ‘in his place,’ ” as well as poll taxes and literacy tests.[5] Not until the Civil Rights Act of 1965 enacted July 2 were discriminatory applications of voting requirements outlawed; this included written literacy tests instead of oral ones and “a sixth grade education as proof of literacy.”[6]

African Americans were not only treated as second-class citizens in political terms, but also in the realm of education. “By the summer of 1964, Mississippi remained the only state in the Union which had not brought about even token integration in its primary and secondary school system.” One study done in 1962 showed the “expenditure of school districts for white versus Negro pupils. On the state level, the study showed that expenditures on white children averaged $81.86, whiles Negroes’ educational expenditures were $21.77.[7] In the face of this inequity, it is no wonder that African Americans ultimately had fewer educational opportunities.

Education and enfranchisement were two of the major factors in keeping African Americans in subservient roles, but they were not the only ones. As William McCord notes in a bulleted list in *The Long, Hot Summer*:

- Most Negroes lived in housing unfit for human habitation.
- Proportionately, about one-third more Negroes died each year than whites
- According to a report of the state school superintendent, one-half of Negro schools had no equipment whatsoever.
- More than 90 percent of public libraries in the state denied admittance to Negroes.
- More than 7 percent of Negroes could not find any employment in 1960, a rate of unemployment twice that of whites.
- In 1960, Negro families had an average annual income of $606, 71 percent less than that of whites.[8]

In the face of these statistics, it is undeniable that society was in dire need of change. Within Mississippi itself, organizations such as the Freedom Democratic Party, “a new

[5] McCord, 25.
[6] Colby, 129.
[7] McCord, 34-35.
[8] McCord, 41-42.

political organ designed to challenge the supremacy of Mississippi's regular Democratic machine," allowed African Americans the opportunity to run for political office for the first time since Reconstruction.[9] While it would have been a long shot for the Freedom Party candidates to triumph over the regular candidates, their campaign did serve to bring Mississippi's issues to the foreground of national politics.

As all of this took place in the South, people in the North began to take notice of these events in Mississippi. On June 14, 1964, when students from "Harvard, Yale, Oberlin, Berkeley…" met "on a leafy campus in Oxford, Ohio" with a "second group that had come less from a state than from a state of war" to undergo volunteer training, the Mississippi Summer Project truly began.[10] The volunteers had six days to prepare and train before heading into the belly of the beast. The SNCC volunteers who had arrived in Oxford, Ohio to train the Freedom Summer volunteers had "a simple plan—to tell the truth."[11] In order to make the volunteers understand what they were up against, SNCC workers "would do their best to scare some sense into the students:"

> Tuesday: I may be killed.
> Thursday: They—the white folk, the police, the county sheriff, the state police—they are all watching for you. They are looking for you. They are ready and they are armed.
> Friday: They take you to jail, strip you, lay you on the floor and beat you until you're almost dead.
> On Sunday evening, however, songs kept terror at bay.[12]

This was especially important when the socio-economic status of the volunteers was taken into account. Most came from families that had an average income of "50 percent above the national norm. Just two-fifths were female. As with the whole of America in 1964, 90 percent were white. All but a few were in college, almost half from Ivy League

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[9] McCord, 43.
[10] Bruce Watson, *Freedom Summer*, New York: Viking Penguin Group, 2010, pg. 17.
[11] Watson, 18.
[12] Watson, 18.

or other top schools."[13] There were very strict guidelines in the application process for Summer Project volunteers. "Professor John Maguire of Wesleyan succinctly stated the criteria for rejecting certain applicants:

> We are largely worried about two types: those who are looking for a new kind of "kick," sexual or otherwise; and those evangelical souls who will arrive in Mississippi with no more understanding of the situation than to turn their eyes skyward and say "Lord, here I am."[14]

Once an applicant was accepted into the Summer Project, he or she was "told to bring $150 in expenses, $500 for bail, and three publicity photos."[15] This amount was more money than most African Americans in the South could fathom holding at one time, let alone for something that was not an absolute necessity, as volunteering was sometimes viewed. On June 20, 1964, SNCC staff members and Freedom Summer volunteers ventured South in the hopes of making a difference in the lives of Mississippians.

The Invention of the Freedom School

Freedom Schools were not an invention of the Mississippi Summer Project. Since the early 1960s, COFO (Council of Federated Organizations), which was made up of the NAACP, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in order to create unity within the Civil Rights movement, had been organizing "voting drives, community centers, and freedom schools" with the "general aim of preparing Negroes 'to challenge the myth of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities and to find… new directions for action.' "[16] Though Freedom Schools were not the primary goal

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[13] Watson, 19.
[14] McCord, 53.
[15] Watson, 19.
[16] McCord, 46.

of the Summer, they were an integral part of the season. Instead of simply being organized from within the community, national attention was being brought to the disenfranchisement of black Mississippians. Whether or not this was a good thing is up for debate. As white volunteers from the North entered what could be argued was an entirely different nation, regimented and cohesive Freedom School curricula became extremely important.

At its outset, the curriculum taught in all forty-one Freedom Schools addressed the reader, soon to be teacher, in an informal way, much as it advised the young volunteers to do with their students.[17] In the section entitled "A Note to the Teacher," the curriculum gave guidelines and outlines of what was to be taught in the schools, but also reminded the teachers "students will be involved in voter registration activity after school" and "they may not come to school regularly."[18] The note went on to explain that many subjects would be taught, including everything from English and math to citizenship and "recreational and cultural activities."[19] After the introductory note, the curriculum was divided into two parts: the academic curriculum and the citizenship curriculum. The academic curriculum section encompassed two pages; the citizenship curriculum took up twenty-five pages.

In the academic portion of the curriculum, teachers were given activities to conduct in order to improve the verbal, writing, and reading skills of their students. All of the activities were related, in some way, to the Freedom Summer Cause. The text itself stated, "The curriculum should derive from the students' background and all aspects of

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[17] Daniel Perlstein, "Teaching Freedom: SNCC and the Creation of the Mississippi Freedom Schools," *History of Education Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (Autumn, 1990), 297. http://jstor.org/stable/368691.

[18] "The Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum," *The Radical Teacher*, no. 40 (Fall 1991), 6. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20709699.

[19] "The Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum," 6.

classroom activity should be an outgrowth of their experiences."[20] This could prove extremely difficult because of the vast discrepancies between the volunteer/teacher's life as a middle- to upper-class white person from the North as opposed to an impoverished Mississippian. Interestingly enough, the academic section of the curriculum was relatively small compared to the rest of the document. As Charlie Cobb, "an aspiring writer and son of a Springfield, Massachusetts, minister" and the architect of the Freedom Schools thought, "Students as well as professional educators from some of the best universities and colleges in the North will be coming to Mississippi to lend themselves to the movement. These are some of the best minds in the country, and their academic value ought to be recognized and used to advantage."[21] The shortness of the academic curriculum seemed to run counter to what Cobb believed could be a major part of the schools. Here the individual experience of each Freedom Summer volunteer began to vary.

After the short academic portion of the Freedom School curriculum, the text launched into the "citizenship" section comprised, among other things, of a set of questions to be repeated throughout the day: "1. Why are we (teachers and students) in Freedom Schools? 2. What is the Freedom Movement? 3. What alternative does the Freedom Movement offer us?"[22] While this mantra seems on the surface to reaffirm specifically the goals of the Summer Project, it also seems a bit like propaganda. True, students in the schools had been disenfranchised throughout the entirety of their lives, but it seems as though the volunteers pushed to an extreme the constant reminder of what

[20] "The Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum," 7.
[21] Perlstein, 297.
[22] "The Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum," 9.

they were lacking in their lives because of the actions of other (white) people. The curriculum itself offered unique and visionary ways of teaching young people, but the actual information taught seems to lead to a very specific end. Voter registration and the enfranchisement of black people in Mississippi was clearly the purpose of the Mississippi Summer Project, but the ways in which Freedom Schools were taught can be perceived as somewhat off-putting.

One of the main objectives of the Freedom School Curriculum was to get "high school youth in Mississippi to QUESTION."[23] However, it seems that very little of this questioning actually went on. While the Freedom Summer volunteers and teachers followed their curricula to the letter, very little information was left open for interpretation. In the second unit of the Citizenship curriculum, students were instructed to compare the lives of Southern blacks to those of Northern blacks. "If the curriculum was intended to encourage asking questions rather than learning answers, it nonetheless made clear that conditions were fundamentally the same North and South."[24] This might be one of the failures of the Freedom Schools and Freedom Summer as a whole. Although it is true that SNCC, COFO and the Summer volunteers did wonderful and uplifting things for the people of Mississippi, including registering them to vote, some of the information being taught was extremely politicized. In no way could the volunteers separate themselves from their feelings about the racist South, and that led them to color the things they taught in a specific way.

Another of the main purposes of the Freedom Schools was to teach honesty. Quoting a 1963 SNCC report, Daniel Perlstein captured SNCC's idea that "education—

[23] Perlstein, 309.
[24] Perlstein, 312.

facts to use and the freedom to use them—is the basis of democracy."[25] Most of the volunteers and SNCC members felt as though the Mississippi school system had been teaching untruths, or at the very least a small portion of the truth, to children. It became the goal of the Summer volunteers to "be honest with each other; and say what we believe."[26] It became increasingly important for the volunteers to teach in ways that would not only bring new academic, political, and social knowledge to their students, but also to change the way their students saw the world. SNCC's worldview of truth being lived as opposed to simply studied became a staple of the curriculum.

The curriculum itself had many architects, and was designed with various goals in mind. One of the first people involved with the curriculum was Charlie Cobb, a man imbued with faith in his fellow activists, the elite educational system in America and new and unique ways of teaching.[27] Cobb had faith in "educational innovation" because he had seen the ways in which SNCC staff had made its programs work; however, the Mississippi Summer Project was different.[28] Freedom Schools needed to operate more on a basis of "self discovery and empowerment" instead of programmed learning.[29] This is where the curriculum tried to lead.

In the introduction of "Unit 1: Comparison of Students' Reality with Others" of the Citizenship Curriculum, the text stated, "We are not here to teach you. We are here to help you learn and to learn together…. We are going to talk about a lot of things: about

[25] Perlstein, 302.
[26] "The Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum," 9.
[27] Perlstein, 304.
[28] Perlstein, 304.
[29] Perlstein, 304.

you and what you think and feel and want, and about me."[30] The open-ended style of these statements brings to mind the exact "new ways of teaching" that Charlie Cobb envisioned. In direct opposition to the rigid and concrete lessons learned in Mississippi's public schools, Freedom Schools offered a place for African Americans to learn not only about the subjects being taught, but also about new ways to learn and express oneself. While the structure of the school day was much more open in Freedom Schools than in a regular Mississippi public school, and while radically new ideas were being taught, much of the curriculum still gives off a feeling of propaganda.

The remaining six sections of the Citizenship Curriculum were broken into units such as "North to Freedom? (The Negro in the North)," "Examining the Apparent Reality (The 'Better Life' That Whites Have)," "Introducing the Power Structure," "The Poor Negro, The Poor White, and Their Fears," "Material Things and Soul Things," and finally "The Movement."[31] Each section is taught through distinct case studies and uses real life situations to engage the students. The final section, "The Movement," is where the majority of the curriculum appeared. While most of the other units took up only one to two pages, "The Movement" took up fifteen and was the only unit divided into subsections. "The Movement" began by focusing on Freedom Rides and Sit-Ins, then went on to talk about politics in Mississippi. It is here that the voter registration agenda is discussed. Although the entirety of the curriculum is thus politicized in nature, only in the seventh unit, and the last section of the seventh unit at that, were the goals of the rest of the Summer expressed explicitly.[32]

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[30] "The Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum," 9.
[31] "The Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum," 9.
[32] "The Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum," 26.

While discussing "The Movement," the curriculum noted many of the organizations and key people involved with Freedom Summer and the larger Civil Rights movement. Once again, the information was presented through question-and-answer format, with the ideal answers to be elicited from the students presented in the text. However, unlike the rest of the curriculum, in this particular unit there seemed to be a bit of a shift from the strictly question-and-answer style to more lecture.[33] The reader/ teacher/student may have questioned this format change: does the curriculum change to lecture style when there is more to be lost or gained in the information being presented, or is it simply the inevitable shift all teachers eventually face?

Noel Day, one of the main authors of the curriculum, points out that it "was designed to try to deal with [the Freedom School teachers' inexperience]," but that "volunteers seem not to have felt constrained by the curriculum."[34] Daniel Perlstein, however, makes an interesting observation in noticing that although most SNCC staff members and student volunteers believed fully in the discussion of students' experiences enriching the Freedom School curriculum, occasionally volunteers would slip into "hierarchical teaching styles" when teaching about the "universal truths."[35]As one report from a Freedom School explained, "it is better to discuss things… than to lecture [because it] makes the students more interested, lectures can give out more information… at a much faster rate."[36] This becomes apparent in the final section, "The Movement." Instead of the question-and-answer format used for the entirety of the document up until then, the curriculum takes the form of long paragraphs broken up only by a few questions

[33] "The Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum," 27.
[34] Noel Day in Perlstein, 313.
[35] Perlstein, 317.
[36] Perlstein, 317.

here and there.[37] In the eyes of Freedom Summer volunteers, this may be where the heart of the curriculum truly resided.

The final question of the entire curriculum is arguably the most important one: "What changes will occur in the state when the Negroes can vote?" The entire curriculum, and possibly the entire summer, led up to this question; all of the previous knowledge taught in the Freedom Schools is here combined to help students understand their place in the political sphere of Mississippi. Throughout the Citizenship Curriculum, students learned about their agency and, SNCC and the volunteers believed, this agency would be used to its full fruition through the vote. The end of the curriculum is not entirely optimistic. As it states "obtaining the vote alone is not going to create the 'good society' in Mississippi." The text recognizes that more work will need to be done. Just as the curriculum itself varies throughout the full text, people's experiences in the Summer, and the ways in which their lives were or were not changed were varied as well. Although the Freedom School curriculum was successful in many ways in bringing about social change in Mississippi, not all of the outcomes of Freedom Summer were necessarily positive. In the eyes of some of the volunteers, teaching in Freedom Schools was only the beginning of the experience.

Beyond Freedom Schools: How People Were Changed by A Changing Society

Although Freedom Summer sought to bring equality and enfranchisement to the African American community in Mississippi, within the Freedom Summer organizations themselves unequal treatment between people lingered. For example, in SNCC, most of the Summer volunteers assigned to voter registration were young men, with a "slight

[37] "The Mississippi Freedom School Curriculum," 27.

majority" of women being placed as teachers in Freedom Schools.[38] While it is true that, at the time, teaching was considered a woman's job, tthis gender disparity fit with the worldview at the time that women should be in subservient roles, much like the African Americans the young people were supposedly coming down to help. As one male volunteer was quoted, "running a freedom school is an absurd waste of time. I don't want to sit around in a classroom; I want to go and throw a few bombs." [39] Clearly, the role of women was just as limited within the sphere of the movement as it was in the rest of America. In spite of the apparent sexism within the organization, then, a new question arises: how were the people who came to Mississippi to change the society changed themselves?

While for the most part women were placed in the Freedom Schools despite some of their wishes, in general they had a newfound desire to do meaningful work that would outlast their generation. By helping their students to find their voices and equality, the women began to see that they could do the same for themselves.[40] With such prevalent female leaders as Ella Baker in SNCC and Fannie Lou Hamer in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, women inside the organization and out were starting to understand the ways in which they could impact their own lives as well as the lives of those around them. Most of the women who came to work in Mississippi did so with some "fear and trepidation" because of the previous knowledge of the dire brutality and extremely strict enforcement of segregation laws.[41] However, it was believed that if SNCC staff members

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[38] Perlstein, 320-321.
[39] Perlstein, 321.
[40] Perlstein, 321.
[41] *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC,* Faith S. Holsaert, Martha Prescod Norman Noonan, Judy Richardson, Betty Garman Robinson, Jean Smith Young, and Dorothy M. Zellner, eds. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010. Part 5.

and other volunteers could defeat the excessive racism in Mississippi, other states too would hearken to the change.

As Alvin F. Poussaint states, "white females were not allowed to participate freely [in the Movement] until the summer of 1964."[42] Poussaint highlights the fact that many project leaders were fearful of allowing white outsiders, particularly women, to participate in their programs because of the heightened prospect of violence, as well as the fear of the "disruptive influence in interpersonal staff relations" that their presence may have caused.[43] Besides simply having a more difficult time in the heart of Mississippi politics once they got there, it was much more difficult for women just to get to the South. In her seminal work *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*, Sara Evans states, "According to a study of summer volunteers… 'many more women than men spoke of the difficulties in getting parental approval and, unlike male volunteers, women were not allowed to work on any COFO (Council of Federated Organizations) or FDP (Freedom Democratic Party) project without parental approval if they were under 21 years old.'"[44] For young women, volunteering during Freedom Summer had the heightened aspect of requiring parental approval before being allowed to participate.

While Freedom Summer marked the beginning of constant national media attention focused solely on the South and the Civil Rights Movement, some have argued that this attention came only at the cost of introducing white women into the programs.

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[42] Alvin F. Poussaint, M.D., "The Stresses of the White Female Worker in the Civil Rights Movement in the South," *American Journal of Psychiartry* 123, no.4 (October 1966), 2. www.crmvet.org/docs/poussaint.pdf.

[43] Poussaint, 2.

[44] Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*, New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1980, pg 63.

"Nearly every major magazine carried a story portraying a young white coed at work uplifting the poor black folks in the South," states Poussaint.[45] In this claim, Poussaint is not entirely wrong. In one article, a Freedom School teacher, Carolyn Egan, is described as "a pretty, short-haired blonde from Portland," who "smiles with hope as she tells of one of her students."[46] In another article entitled, "Crusade in Mississippi," two young female volunteers are described as extremely nervous, but also filled with a deep desire to do the work. One of the volunteers stated, "I'm scared, but my fear is not as great as my duty. I've got to do it."[47] In these portrayals, the women volunteers of Freedom Summer are only shown as young, beautiful, and frightened of their situation. Their determination to "do good" is mentioned only after a note is made about their physical appearance and lack of real world experience in dealing with Mississippi. This gender bias may also be one of the failings of Freedom Summer.

With so much attention focused on the young white female volunteers, some of the esteem of the program itself got lost. Instead of focusing on the people in need of help in Mississippi or the actual work being done, the national media was focusing on the youthful beauty of the volunteers. Poussaint remarks, "the national attention given the white female serves to remind the Negro that he is only a 'second class person' within the American culture."[48] As the rest of America looked on with praise for the young women, African Americans in Mississippi felt as though they were being ignored within their own

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[45] Poussaint, 2.
[46] Jerry DeMuth, "Summer in Mississippi: Freedom Moves In to Stay," *Nation* 199, no. 6 (September 14, 1964), 109. http://0-web.ebscohost.com.tiger. coloradocollege.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdf viewer?vid=3&hid =21&sid=9f8f61cb-c578-4bf5-b464 762f8442a02b%40sessionmgr13.
[47] Alex Poinsett, "Crusade in Mississippi," *Ebony* 19, no. 11 (September 1964), 26, http://0web.ebscohost.com.tiger.coloradocollege.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&hid=11&sid=ba6dcbdf-e808-4c4f-9e88-f34da868c4aa%40sessionmgr14.
[48] Poussaint, 4.

movement. This motive added fuel to the fire of hostility felt by some African Americans toward the white volunteers during Freedom Summer. Unaccepted by the white community in the South, and sometimes the black community as well, white female workers felt a stress they previously had not known.

Despite all of the obstacles in their way, most female Summer volunteers would not have changed their situations. At the end of the day, the hope they felt from their students and peers was enough to keep them going. Fran O'Brien, a Freedom School teacher summed up the feelings of many young women just like herself:

> Sometimes I feel I'm not doing much, but… I still feel our real hope of success is in the children. They can't avoid fear, being intelligent, nor resentment, being human. But I hope for the stimulation of the Freedom School and the examples of determination set by Negro workers will save them from the apathetic "What's the use?" attitude which oppresses and binds people more than the law ever could.[49]

Though the odds were against them in many ways, the Freedom School volunteers, in particular the females, sought keep the movement moving forward even after they eventually had to leave Mississippi. Despite the fact that women were held in traditional roles in the majority of Freedom Summer jobs, "the visible role,… the desire… to do meaningful work, and the pedagogical project of stimulating students to find their own, authentic voices as a step towards gaining equality, encouraged women volunteers to actuate the Freedom Schools' curriculum."[50] Whether the young women's drive had a positive or negative effect is up for debate.

In *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*, women recount their days spent working in the movement. For the women who spent

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[49] Watson, 187.
[50] Perlstein, 321.

time in Mississippi during Freedom Summer, these memories are some of the most formative of their lives. Muriel Tillinghast, an African American woman from Washington D.C., relates the story of her time spent at the Greenwood office of the Mississippi Summer Project, and the ways that her life was forever changed. Just three days after she graduated from Howard University, Tillinghast decided to go to Mississippi and work with SNCC. She notes that although she had been involved with the movement in the North for quite sometime, when she finally decided to go to Mississippi, no one in her Northern family would speak to her.[51]

While Tillinghast recounts her days spent organizing, teaching and registering people to vote in Mississippi, she also notes the ways in which she noticed herself changing and gives some advice to young people working in similar types of movements today. She states, "You may not know *how serious* the step you're taking is, but when the opposition believes you are trying to shift the 'balance of power,' they will always attack, and their attack is *always* serious."[52] Tillinghast is still an activist today, involved in teaching equality in classrooms, prisons, jails, and other arenas. Because of her time spent in Mississipi, Tillinghast feels she can never be completely done with the Civil Rights struggle; it is something that she will forever carry with her. She acknowledges the fact that "as a result of movement activism, Mississippians died by the score," but still believes that the movement was successful as a whole.[53] Freedom Summer will

[51] Muriel Tillinghast, "Depending on Ourselves," in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC,* ed. Faith S. Holsaert, Martha Prescod Norman Noonan, Judy Richardson, Betty Garman Robinson, Jean Smith Young, and Dorothy M. Zellner, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 250.
[52] Muriel Tillinghast, in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC,* 256.
[53] Muriel Tillinghast, in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC,* 256.

remain a guiding influence for Tillinghast, as it does for many of the other women who spent their summers embedded in the struggle.

On the other side of the spectrum, Jeanette King, a "married southern white woman," also recalls her days spent in Mississippi.[54] King's experience differed greatly from most other women of her time because she was born and raised in Mississippi, but she and her husband had been ostracized as "a very small handful of native-born Mississippi white people who openly supported civil rights."[55] King and her husband worked openly with the movement throughout the early 1960s and Freedom Summer, but she was always keenly aware of her "otherness," stating, "I had always felt very sensitive about my 'whiteness' in a black community and participating in bringing about changes 'for black people.' This position always made me feel like an outsider taking on someone else's burden."[56] But King's "whiteness" was not the only factor in determining her feeling of being an outsider. King notes that her "female rage at any form of male dominance" helped her better understand SNCC's changing attitudes in the later years, and the eventual turn towards Black Power.[57]

Although King's experience seems vastly different from the younger volunteers during Freedom Summer, connections are still easily drawn. Freedom Summer volunteers were drawn to Mississippi because they believed that something truly wrong was occurring. Jeannette King, for instance, had seen the wrongs for the entirety of her life, and the Civil Rights Movement was the way she could actively take action against it. As she relates herself to other activists, King states, "Internally, I often labeled myself as a

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[54] Jeannette King, "Inside and Outside of Two Worlds," in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC,* 223.
[55] Jeannette King in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC,* 223.
[56] Jeannette King in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC,* 223.
[57] Jeannette King in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*, 228.

coward, because I could not be enthusiastic about demonstrations and being in the middle of sometimes dangerous situations. Whatever role I played, the Movement was life-changing and life-defining for me."[58] For Muriel Tillinghast, Jeanette King, and countless other SNCC staff members and Summer volunteers, Freedom Summer shaped their lives.

Not all of the effects of the Summer, however, were positive ones. While the Summer Project did accomplish many of its goals in educating African Americans in new ways and registering them to vote, violence was a plague the Summer could not avoid. Violence and fear was felt not only by the African Americans who had been living with it on a daily basis in Mississippi, but also by the workers who had come for the Summer. White male workers faced the most outright violence and threats, but female workers faced a different kind of stress. Alvin F. Poussaint, the Southern Field Director of the Medical Committee for Human Rights, wrote an article entitled, "The Stresses of the White Female Worker in the Civil Rights Movement in the South" in which he set out to identify the ways in which white women reacted to the unique circumstances of working in the South. As Poussaint points out, "It has been in her name and for her glory that the white South has oppressed, brutalized, lynched and mutilated the black man for centuries," but it is now up to her to try to solve the problems her gender has created.[59] Of the many problems Poussaint cites, most are problems thrust upon the female Civil Rights worker, not problems she created by or for herself. For example, the author talks about how the young women are "sometimes treated with scorn and derision" by the

[58] Jeannette King in *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*, 229.
[59] Poussaint, 2.

white community because of their ties to the black community, but are also disliked by members of the black community because they seem to be taking over the Movement.[60]

Poussaint's article gives new insight into the reminiscences of the women in *Hands on the Freedom Plow*. Although not all of the women felt so scorned by the movement, it is clear that many did. Viewing the stories of the SNCC staff members and volunteers through the lens of this article, particularly Jeannette King's views when she states quite clearly that she sometimes felt she was taking over a movement that did not belong to her, shows that the movement had many successes, but also failures.

As the stresses of workers, as well as the heat of the summer, began to get more intense, the Mississippi Summer Project began to wane. Although its goals were still in tact, it was becoming much more difficult for SNCC staff and student volunteers to accomplish their goals solely through grassroots work in Mississippi communities. As Bruce Watson points out, "Freedom Schools were overenrolled, bursting with enthusiasm. A dozen community centers were offering literacy workshops, health classes, day care… Yet SNCC's larger purpose—voter registration—was treading water."[61] Some of the Freedom Schools and voter registration projects would continue throughout the rest of 1964, but only at a fraction of what was previously being done. As was intended when the Summer Project began, most students returned to their Ivy League schools as summer faded to autumn.

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[60] Poussaint, 1 and 5.
[61] Watson, 173.

The End of Freedom Summer, the Downfall of SNCC, and Federal Intervention

On August 8, 1964, the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* headlined, "Miss. Summer Project to End Aug. 24, 700 Students to Abandon This State." By this time in the Summer, there were "forty-seven Freedom Schools, with 2,500 pupils, in more than two dozen counties" operating in Mississippi.[62] The Summer Project had accomplished much, including bringing "as many as 17,00 black applicants to courthouses across the state," even though "only about 1,600 were able to register, and most of these did so in the single county of Panola under a federal court order."[63] While all of these goals were accomplished, the true success of the Summer Project "may be measured in column inches of newsprint and running feet of video tape."[64] For the first time since Reconstruction, the population of the United States was forced to take a prolonged look at the deep-seated racism that had plagued the South since the country's creation.

While the majority of Freedom Summer volunteers left Mississippi after the Summer to return North to their families and schools, some decided to stay and continue working. As many as 200 volunteers elected to continue doing work in Mississippi for up to six months after the project officially ended, continuing to keep pupils engaged in "Freedom Schools, community centers and voter-registration activities."[65] However, most SNCC staff members and student volunteers "sought to encourage self-reliance among Freedom School students" so that once the Summer ended and volunteers were no longer in leadership positions, the more advanced students could take over and run

[62] DeMuth, 104.
[63] Neil R. McMillen, "Black Enfranchisement in Mississippi: Federal Enforcement and Black Protest in the 1960s," *The Journal of Southern History* 43, no. 3 (August 1977), 367. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2207646.
[64] McMillen, 367.
[65] DeMuth, 104.

permanent community centers. It had always been a main belief of SNCC's that "the goal of organizers should be to make themselves obsolete."[66] In this, SNCC was the prime example of building a Civil Rights project from the ground up, and creating leadership within communities that would grow even after the project was finished and volunteers had left.

It seemed as if Freedom Schools and the ideals set forth by SNCC staff and student volunteers would continue even after the Summer ended. Most people involved with the Summer Project projected great optimism about the work they had done and would continue to do, with many volunteers planning to return the following summer, or early in the next year. For some of these volunteers, Mississippi and the communities in which they worked had become their new homes and families, and they could not bear to leave. They also expected new groups of volunteers to come join them.[67] This, however, was rarely the case.

As Freedom Summer waned and white volunteers returned North, SNCC staff members became increasingly embittered by what they were seeing in the American mainstream. The collapse of the Freedom Schools and return to the atmosphere felt before Freedom Summer took place led many activists to believe that the volunteers had been doing the majority of the work and that the rest of the country was only interested in a movement when white people were involved. This was the initiation point for the turn of SNCC towards Black Power. SNCC did continue to establish Freedom Schools across the country, but never to the level of the Summer Project. Also, SNCC's new schools generally rejected the use of white volunteers and often relied on the SNCC staff itself.

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[66] Perlstein, 321.
[67] DeMuth, 109.

As an organization, SNCC began to implode and never again reached the heights of activism and agency as it did during the summer of 1964.

The nation did continue to move forward, however, albeit through entirely different means. On August 6, 1965, a full year after the conclusion of the Freedom Summer Project, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into effect the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This Act "provided for federal examiners to register voters and federal observers for elections; it suspended all literacy tests or similar devices; it required preclearance of any election or registration changes; it raised the criminal penalty for interfering with the vote; and it resolved that the poll tax was a denial of the vote."[68] In essence, this Act made voting rights as we know them today. No longer could an African American, or any disenfranchised person, be denied the vote simply through the illegal means of individual counties. In light of this federal intervention, results were dramatic. In Mississippi, African American registration rose from "28, 500 in 1965 to 240, 777 in 1968... The percentage of blacks registered jumped from 6.7 in 1965 to 59.4 in 1968." While these statistics may seem like incredible gains, the white voting populace was rising as well. "While 59.4 percent of blacks were registered in 1968, white rates had risen from 69.9 to 92.4 percent."[69] There was no doubt that the country was finally beginning to change; but the stronghold of whites in Mississippi seemed almost unbreakable.

The Lasting Effects of Freedom Summer

Although Civil Rights movements had taken place before the 1960s, this particular movement seemed to be different than any other in history. For the first time, organizations were being structured from the ground up; young people around the

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[68] Colby, 129.
[69] Colby, 130.

country were beginning to believe that if they worked hard enough at what they believed in, they could actively effect and change the world in which they lived. With the invention of organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee it was for the first time possible for a youth culture to become the dominant one in society and to challenge the values and laws set forth by previous generations. During Freedom Summer, students devoted themselves to the betterment of others, placing themselves in harm's way in order to enact the change they believed was necessary for the United States to achieve authentic democracy. Many of these changes flourished, but many of them were left by the wayside. Although the people of Mississippi as well as the students and SNCC staff members felt great change during the Summer, the outcomes were extremely convoluted.

Freedom Summer is one of the least known events in the entirety of the Civil Rights Movement. Although the Summer fostered and brought to light many of the issues plaguing the country, very few people know that the Mississippi Summer Project or Freedom Schools ever existed. Most people have heard of SNCC at least in passing, but few know the true depths of the organization and the ways in which students were the harbingers of change in the 1960s. Freedom Summer in and of itself is an extremely important event of which people should become aware, but its importance lies in more than just the events of one season. It is important for students to become aware of what they can accomplish when they band together and truly believe in something. It is important for the country to take a deep look into its history and realize that just fifty short years ago we were living in a system of apartheid, and to never let that happen again. Just as SNCC staff members and student volunteers taught in Freedom Schools, it

is important to believe in honesty, and to try above all to be honest in living and remembering our past, no matter how difficult that may be. Though Freedom Summer did not accomplish all of its goals and some collateral damage was left in its wake, the Project still stands as one of the largest and most youthful Civil Rights Programs to ever take hold on American soil. However, there is still work to be done even today. As Naomi Long Nadgett, a student in a Greenwood Mississippi Freedom School, eloquently put it:

> I've seen daylight breaking high above the bough,
>
> I've found my destination and I've made my vow:
>
> So whether you abhor me or deride me or ignore,
>
> Mighty mountains loom be-ore me,
>
> And I won't stop now.[70]

[70] Freedom School Student Attending at Moss Point, Unknown Student of Mississippi Freedom Schools, Edith Moore, and Naomi Long Nadget. "Freedom School Poetry," *The Radical Teacher*, no. 40 (Fall 1991), 41. http://www.jstor.org /stable/20709703.

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On my Honor, I have neither given, nor received, unauthorized aid on this assignment.
Honor Code Upheld.