

# 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

**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/fannioulouhamercredentialscommittee.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?

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

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?

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?

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.

**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 the 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”?

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?

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?

4. King addresses how civil rights injustices 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”?

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?