

BROWN CHAPEL AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: X Statewide: ___ Locally: ___

Applicable National Register Criteria:

A X B X C ___ D ___

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions):

A X B ___ C ___ D ___ E ___ F ___ G X

NHL Criteria:

1,2,3

Criterion Exceptions:

1,8

NHL Theme(s):

- II. Creating Social Institutions and Movements
 - 2. reform movements
- IV. Shaping the Political Landscape
 - 1. parties, protests, and movements
 - 4. political ideas, cultures, theories

Areas of Significance:

Politics/Government, Social History, Ethnic Heritage-Black

Period(s) of Significance:

Jan 1, 1965-March 25, 1965

Significant Dates:

March 7, 1965-Bloody Sunday; March 9, 1965-Ministers' March turned back by police; March 25, 1965 Marchers permitted to go to Montgomery

Significant Person(s):

Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X

Cultural Affiliation:

Architect/Builder:

A. J. Farley

NHL Comparative Categories:

- XXXI. Social and Humanitarian Movements
- M. Civil Rights Movements

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church is of extraordinary national significance under Criteria 1, 2, and 3. Criterion 1 is met because of the role it played in the events that led to the adoption of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Criterion 2 is met because of its direct and important association with persons of national significance such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. Criterion 3 is met because of the symbolic role it played in the acquisition of voting rights for Black Americans in the United States.

Criterion Exception 1 is met because it derives its primary national significance from historical importance. Criterion Exception 8 is met because of its extraordinary national significance in relation to the Voting Rights Movement which removed widespread institutional barriers long used to deny Black Americans the right to vote. Equal access to the ballot not only represents a great American ideal, but it influenced the local, state and national political landscape for decades. As headquarters of the Selma Voting Rights Movement, it was the starting point for the three Selma to Montgomery marches, the meeting place of such Civil Rights leaders as Martin Luther King, Jr. of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and Malcolm X of the Nation of Islam.

Brown Chapel

Brown Chapel is one of the resources most closely associated with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's 1965 Selma campaign to win equal access to the ballot for Blacks.² During the first three months of 1965, the church served as the headquarters for the SCLC, as the site for rallies conducted by Martin Luther King, Jr. and other leaders of the SCLC. Brown Chapel was the place where the "Voting Rights March", the "Bloody Sunday March", and the "Selma to Montgomery March" began. After the State and Federal courts issued injunctions to prohibit mass meetings in Black churches, other churches voted to abide by the injustice imposed upon them. However, Brown Chapel's doors were ordered to stay open by the Alabama Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, thus providing shelter to the movement during the storms of resistance to social and political change.

Initially, the freed slaves of Selma worshiped with whites at the First Methodist Episcopal Church, South. To become more independent in religious matters, upon the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation, the free blacks moved to meeting in the basement of the local Albert Hotel in 1866. The Colored A.M.E. Church of the South began as a Sunday school and a mission. The members applied for admission to the African Methodist Episcopal Church and were admitted to the Convention in 1867. Under the leadership of Bishop John Mifflin Brown the church was named the Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church. The first Alabama Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church was organized at Brown Chapel in 1868 by Bishop

²The Edmund Pettus Bridge is the other resource closely associated with the Selma Voting Rights Campaign. Civil rights protesters who attempted to march from Brown Chapel in Selma to the capital in Montgomery were twice prevented by state troopers from crossing the bridge. Their third attempt, On March 21, 1965, was successful.

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Brown. The first frame structure was erected on the current site in 1869. The present building was erected in 1908.

Background--Civil Rights Movement

The decade following the Supreme Court decision of 1954 witnessed the rise of a movement for civil rights unprecedented in scope and intensity. Through television, radio and the newspapers, the entire world became familiar with such new leaders as Martin Luther King, Jr., Bayard Rustin, and James Forman and an array of old and new organizational titles: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), SCLC, SNCC and many others. Racial violence in Little Rock, Arkansas, Birmingham, Alabama and scores of other cities helped galvanize public sentiment in the United States in favor of desegregation, and provided a considerable source of international embarrassment for the nation. For the first time in American History, the nation appeared to be gaining an awareness of the full dimensions of the "American Dilemma."

The Black leader who best articulated the aspirations of the Civil Rights Movement was Martin Luther King, Jr. King did not originate the doctrine of nonviolent resistance. The doctrine had a long history in this country and overseas and, in the realm of Civil Rights, had already been adopted by the Congress of Racial Equality, founded in 1942. Under King's guidance, noncooperation with unjust laws and nonviolent responses to physical assaults became the dominant principles of this mass movement.

King had risen to national prominence during the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955. A Black woman, Mrs. Rosa Parks, had been arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger and in response the Black community refused to patronize the city bus system until it was desegregated. But it was not until the 1960s that King's methods became the tool of a nationwide movement. A turning point in the Civil Rights Movement was the 1961 decision of four Black students in Greensboro, North Carolina to refuse to leave a lunch counter at which they had been denied service. Sit-ins, as such demonstrations came to be called, spread across the country and succeeded in integrating hundreds of shops, restaurants, parks and other facilities. The demonstrators purposely violated the law by either trespassing or entering segregated facilities. In 1961, the sit-in technique was extended to interstate transportation when Black and White Freedom Riders journeyed into the South to test compliance with a ruling of the Interstate Commerce Commission that required desegregation of buses, railways and terminal facilities.

The pace of the Civil Rights Movement quickened and reached a climax of sorts during 1963. In the spring of that year, King led a series of massive demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama protesting the segregation and discrimination which pervaded every aspect of life in that city. The violence with which the police broke up the demonstrations led to a wave of sympathy among northern whites for the civil rights cause. In a nationwide speech in June of 1963, President John F. Kennedy stated his conviction that the nation faced a severe moral crisis and proposed a sweeping civil rights bill to outlaw segregation in all public accommodations, end discrimination in Federally-assisted programs of all kinds, and empower the U.S. Department of Justice to initiate suits for school desegregation. Then in August, the

March on Washington took place. Approximately 250,000 Americans, mostly Black, peacefully assembled to demand "jobs and freedom", the passage of the Civil Rights Act and an end to racial discrimination in all phases of American life. Peaceful demonstrations would continue for some time. The Federal government enacted Kennedy's bill soon after his death and in 1965, a strong Voting Rights Act.

Voting Rights³

Despite the new Civil Rights legislation, hundreds of thousands of Blacks in the South continued to have difficulty in voting or were barred altogether. During the summer and fall of 1964, the Council of Federated Organizations, composed of the major civil rights groups, the National Council of Churches and others experienced great difficulty in their drive to increase voter registration among Blacks. Southern whites, especially in areas where the Black population was large, seemed more opposed to the voter registration drives than to demonstrations to desegregate public accommodations. In Selma, Alabama the opposition was particularly fierce. Acts of violence which included the use of tear gas, whips and clubs against the demonstrators attracted worldwide attention.

In the fall of 1964, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference selected Selma as the site of a voting rights campaign as a result of an invitation from the Dallas County Voters League. This invitation brought about a collaboration between SCLC and SNCC and reignited the conflict between the two, primarily over leadership styles. On January 2, 1965, Martin Luther King addressed a crowd of 700 at Brown Chapel where the movement headquarters had been established. In his speech, King promised demonstrations and even another march on Washington if voting rights were not guaranteed for Blacks in the South. Although King left Selma later that evening, SCLC staff members remained in the city and began organizing a series of ward meetings. It was at these ward meetings that Blacks were inspired to seek their voting rights.

Activities in Selma continued to escalate through January of 1965. Blacks began to test the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by integrating local restaurants and the King Albert Hotel in Selma. At the same time, approximately 400 marchers lead by Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Lewis of SNCC made a march to the Dallas County Courthouse. The marchers were met by police officers and they peaceably retreated. On January 19, a second march began for the courthouse. The marchers were reluctant to follow the directions of Sheriff Jim Clark, who then assaulted Amelia Boyton and threw her into a police car. Mrs. Boyton was a veteran local civil rights activist, and a registered voter and she was on hand to serve as one of the two enrolled voters required by law to vouch for the truthfulness of each of the numerous declarations all applicants were required to make. The marchers continued and more arrests resulted. On January 22, 1965, 105 Black teachers marched to the courthouse where they were threatened by Sheriff Jim Clark and his posse. They eventually returned to Brown

³This section is based on: National Park Service, Southeast Region, *Selma to Montgomery Historic Trail Study, Report to the National Park System Advisory Board on the Proposed Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail* (Atlanta: National Park Service, 1991), pp. 37-43.

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Chapel. The teachers' march set off a chain reaction in Selma resulting in more middle class Black Americans getting involved in the movement.

On February 1, 1965, King lead a march of about 200 with the intent of him getting arrested to bring national publicity to the struggle. King, along with Ralph David Abernathy also of SCLC, was arrested and both refused to post bond. On February 4, 1965, SNCC invited Malcolm X to visit Selma after his speech at Tuskegee Institute. Speaking at Brown Chapel, Malcolm's speech was conciliatory to SCLC's and SNCC's efforts. On that same day, U.S. District Judge Daniel Thomas enjoined Dallas County from using the Alabama literacy test and he required the Dallas County Board of Registrars to allow at least 100 people per registration day to fill out registration forms until June 1, 1965. This ruling prompted King and Abernathy to post bond on February 5.

As protest activities in Selma escalated, voting rights activities in nearby Marion began to receive media coverage. On the evening of February 18, at the conclusion of a rally at Zion Chapel Methodist Church, the participants were attacked by State troopers. One family in attendance, the Jacksons, fled from the troopers and sought refuge in Mack's Cafe, but a group of troopers found them. When one officer attempted to strike Viola Jackson, her son, Jimmie Lee, sought to protect her. When he moved toward her, two troopers grabbed Mr. Jackson, assaulted him and then shot him at point blank range. Jackson was taken to Good Samaritan Hospital in Selma where he died on February 25. Jackson's funeral was held at Brown Chapel. The eulogy was delivered by Martin Luther King, Jr. Jackson's death produced a strong response in Selma and in Marion.

One of the first statements regarding a possible trek to Montgomery came from Lucy Foster. She proposed that Black Americans dump Jackson's body at the Capitol in Montgomery to gain the attention of Governor George Wallace. After considerable discussions as to the proper course of action, March 2 was the confirmed date that Martin Luther King would lead a march from Selma to Montgomery beginning on Sunday, March 7, 1965.

Preparations were initiated immediately for the march, as well as plans to prevent it. On March 6, Governor Wallace prohibited the march. On the morning of March 7 more than 500 people arrived at Brown Chapel, with 300 or more of them from Marion. The marchers were given a brief training in the principle and techniques of nonviolence. Early that afternoon, the marchers left Brown Chapel, led by Hosea Williams of SCLC and John Lewis of SNCC. As the marchers approached the Edmund Pettus Bridge, they found that the road had been blocked by State troopers. The marchers were informed that this assembly was unlawful and they were ordered to disperse. When they refused to disperse, the marchers were shoved and then attacked by the troopers and the Sheriff's posse. Tear gas was fired and some of the marchers were attacked by troopers on horseback. The law enforcement officers pursued the marchers all the way back to Brown Chapel, First Baptist Church and the George Washington Carver Homes. Troopers on horseback surrounded the entire area, including Brown Chapel.

This day has since been known as "Bloody Sunday." Reaction to the violent attack was swift and harsh. Congressional leaders across party lines denounced the actions of the law enforcement officials and demanded that President Johnson ensure the protesters' safety and

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deliver the long promised voting rights legislation. In addition, the televised horrors of "Bloody Sunday" lead many sympathizers to join forces with the demonstrators in Selma. Ministers from all denominations responded in large numbers by coming to Selma.

On Monday, March 8, SCLC attorneys petitioned the U.S. District Judge in Montgomery to restrain the State and county, and to permit the Ministers March that was planned for Tuesday. The Judge enjoined the SCLC from marching until after a full hearing on Wednesday, March 10. This ruling placed the SCLC in an awkward position. They had never before broken a Federal court order, but ministers of all faiths had poured into Selma in response to King's call. Officials of the Justice Department and SCLC agreed that a march would take place but would not go all the way, only to the point of attack on Bloody Sunday. King stopped the march yards from the troopers. At that point, several ministers offered prayers and then the ministers turned around and returned to Brown Chapel. King's explanation was that this was only a symbolic march and the march to Montgomery would take place after the Federal hearing. He also asked as many ministers as could to remain in Selma to assist in march preparations. One minister who stayed was the Reverend James Reeb, a Unitarian minister from Boston. Reeb and two other ministers went to dinner Tuesday night, March 9, at Walker's Cafe, but they made a wrong turn when leaving and passed the Silver Moon Cafe. Four white men yelled at the ministers and then ran toward them with either a club or pipe. Reeb was hit in the head, but the others escaped serious injury. After the seriousness of Reeb's wound was determined, he was sent to the University of Alabama Hospital in Birmingham. Reeb's transfer to Birmingham was hampered by mechanical difficulties with an ambulance, and failure to secure a police escort. Several hours later, Reeb reached the hospital where it was determined that he had a skull fracture and a serious blood clot. On March 11, James Reeb died. On March 15, President Lyndon Johnson introduced his Voting Rights Bill before a joint session of Congress. Johnson called his speech "The American Promise". He stated, "There is no cause for pride in what has happened in Selma. There is no cause for self-satisfaction in the long denial of equal rights of millions of Americans. But there is cause for hope and for faith in our democracy in what is happening here tonight."

The next day, the Federal District Court in Montgomery issued a decision that supported SCLC and restrained Sheriff Clark and the State of Alabama from interfering with the planned march to Montgomery. March 21 was set for the date to leave Selma. When Alabama Governor George Wallace announced that the State of Alabama could not afford to protect the marchers, President Johnson federalized the "Dixie Division" of the Alabama National Guard.

By 1:15 p.m. on Sunday, March 21, after a rally at Brown Chapel, marchers began to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge toward Montgomery. On March 24, the marchers entered Montgomery County. On March 25, the marchers reached the capitol. On the platform at the capitol were John Lewis of SNCC, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Whitney Young of the National Urban League, A. Phillip Randolph, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. Each spoke exuberantly to the large crowd. An attempt was then made to present a petition to Governor Wallace. The petition asked for full voting rights for Blacks in Alabama, but troopers prevented its delivery.

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That night, tragedy struck again. Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, a housewife from Detroit, was killed by four Ku Klux Klan members from Birmingham. She was returning to Montgomery to bring marchers back to Selma. The perpetrators were from Birmingham. By Friday, March 26, the FBI had all four perpetrators in custody.

On August 6, 1965, less than five months after the Selma to Montgomery march, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act at a ceremony in the Capitol rotunda. With the help of this law and Federal voting registrars, thousands of Black Americans were added to the voting rolls in the South. The Voting Rights Act also provided the impetus for increases in the number of Black political candidates which has resulted in the present Black Congressional Caucus. Later amendments and reinterpretations of the Act have provided for districts with concentrations of minority voters.

Brown Chapel Church served as the headquarters for the Selma voting rights movement and as the starting point for all three marches. It played a pivotal role in the Civil Rights Movement.