

The 54-mile march from Selma, Alabama, to the state capitol in Montgomery in 1965 culminated a journey of a hundred years by African Americans to gain one of the most fundamental of American freedoms:

the right to vote.

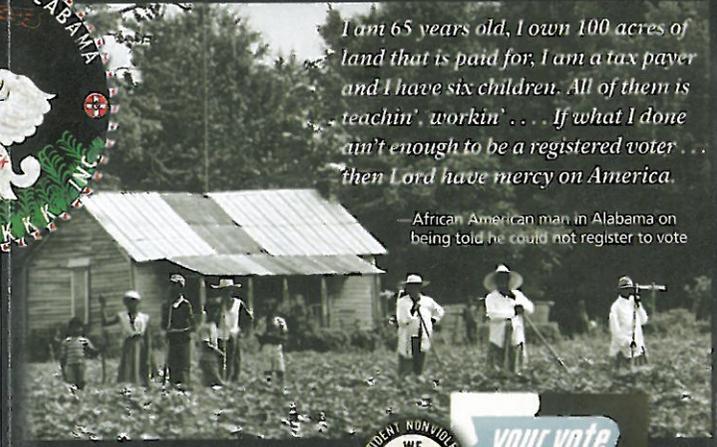
The peaceful march was possible because in the preceding days courageous citizens, local leaders, and civil rights groups had, at the cost of harassment, bloodshed, and innocent lives, come together to demand that right. The final march was a celebration of their achievement, a procession for fallen comrades, and the climactic event of the modern civil rights movement.

On the first attempt to march, John Lewis (right) and Hosea Williams lead the marchers as they approach waiting state troopers.

COURTESY PHOTO BY RIDER MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. CENTER FOR NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS MUSEUM AND INSTITUTE



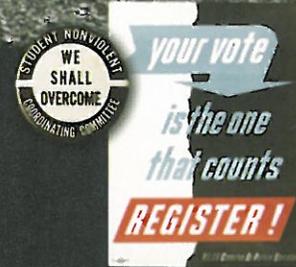
1900-1964



I am 65 years old, I own 100 acres of land that is paid for, I am a tax payer and I have six children. All of them is teachin', workin' . . . If what I done ain't enough to be a registered voter . . . then Lord have mercy on America.

—African American man in Alabama on being told he could not register to vote

African American farmers who worked the fields of Alabama's "black belt," named for its dark, productive soil, were denied the vote—thwarted by unfair laws and harassed by the Ku Klux Klan.



WHY SELMA?

How did the old cotton port city of Selma, Ala., the seat of Dallas County, become the national focus of the voting rights movement? At mid-20th century African Americans made up roughly half of the county's voting age population, but since 1901 the county and state had systematically denied them the vote through literacy tests, poll taxes, and intimidation. In 1961 only 156 of the county's 15,000 voting age African Americans were registered to vote.

The county's dismal record led the Justice Department to request records from county registrars, but it was thwarted by an unsympathetic judge. The Dallas County Voters League (DCVL)

added a few voters to the rolls in the early 1960s through voter registration classes. In 1963 the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), an advocate of grassroots efforts like those of DCVL, sent representatives to Selma to help with the voting clinics. When African Americans assembled at the county courthouse to register, county sheriff Jim Clark and his deputies harassed people waiting in line and attacked SNCC workers. In December 1964 DCVL asked the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), headed by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., to help. SCLC knew that Clark's violent ways would help draw national attention to the voting rights drive.

We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action.

—Statement by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

Demonstrators in Selma hold hands and sing. (Right) Flyer announces SNCC speaker. Churches were the safest places for such activities.

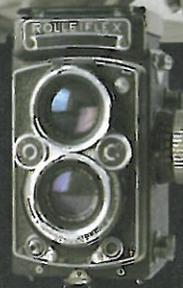
... but we'll never turn back
SUPPORT:
Rev. L. L. Anderson
 COME TO A
Mass Meeting!
 AT
TABERNACLE BAPTIST CHURCH
 808 1/2 N. 11TH ST.
TUES. NIGHT, May 14, 1963
 AT 7:00 P. M.
 GUEST SPEAKER:
MR. JAMES FORMAN,
 Executive Secretary of Student Nonviolent
 Coordinating Committee of Atlanta, Ga.
 Sponsored by Selma Co. Voters League.
"GOD IS ON OUR SIDE"

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED UNLESS OTHERWISE INDICATED

JANUARY 1965



Sheriff Clark jabs teachers attempting to register—all caught on camera, a valuable ally to the movement. (Right) The "Never" button worn by Clark and Governor Wallace made their sentiments clear.



A GATHERING OF FORCES

The push for voter registration in Selma picked up momentum as SCLC joined forces with SNCC and DCVL. On January 2, in defiance of an injunction against large gatherings, King addressed a mass rally at Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church. On the 18th some 400 people joined the first voter registration march from Brown Chapel to the county courthouse. Sheriff Clark directed the marchers to an alley, then allowed no one to register. The next day, when the marchers refused to stand in the alley and DCVL's Amelia Boynton responded too slowly to Clark's order to move, he grabbed her by the collar and shoved her roughly towards a patrol car, then arrested 67 other

marchers. With the appearance in major newspapers of the photo of Boynton's treatment, the media turned its eye on Selma.

When 105 teachers led by DCVL president Rev. Frederick D. Reese marched to the courthouse, Clark and his deputies twice pushed them from the steps, jabbing with nightsticks. This courageous act by people vulnerable to reprisal inspired their students and others who had been fearful of getting involved. As more marches and more arrests ensued, Sheriff Clark's intemperate responses upset Selma's mayor and public safety director, who were concerned about the city's image as it attempted to attract industries to the area.

FEBRUARY 1965



We was infuriated to the point that we wanted to carry Jimmie's body... and dump it on the steps of the Capitol.

—March participant Albert Turner

500 people wait to sign the "appearance book" to determine the order of registration. In Marion, Jimmie Lee Jackson (left) was shot down by a state trooper during a night march. He died a few days later.

THE CONFLICT TURNS DEADLY

In a tactical move by SCLC and SNCC to force the arrest of Dr. King and dramatize the campaign, King and 250 marchers violated a parade ordinance as they marched to the courthouse on February 1. When 500 students marched later that day, Clark and his men arrested them with liberal use of nightsticks and at times cattle prods. By the 5th more than 3,000 marchers had been arrested, many held in prison camps outside town.

The mass arrests and harsh conditions under which the marchers were held caused growing concern in Washington. On the day of Dr. King's release on the 5th, his "Letter from a Selma Jail" depicting the obstacles to voting

appeared in the *New York Times*. King, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Congress pressed President Lyndon Johnson and the Justice Department to finish drafting promised voting rights legislation. Then on the 18th participants in a dangerous nighttime march in Marion, Ala., seat of Perry County, were attacked by state troopers. A young demonstrator, Jimmie Lee Jackson, was fatally shot while trying to defend his grandfather. A call to carry Jackson's body to Montgomery evolved into a memorial march from Selma to Montgomery—a march Gov. George Wallace vowed to stop.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The voting rights movement drew on the wellsprings of religion, nonviolence, and music for guidance and for the moral and physical courage the struggle demanded. Many southern communities, fearing organization by African Americans, forbade them to gather in large groups—except in their churches. African American leaders were vulnerable to economic reprisal—except preachers, who were beholden only to their congregations. Because clergymen enjoyed moral authority in their communities and could speak persuasively before large groups, they emerged as the movement's natural leaders. The most famous of these preachers, Dr. King, believed deeply in the principle of "non-

violent direct action" as the most effective and morally justified strategy for social change.

Inspired by earlier nonviolent reform movements, especially the one for Indian independence led by Mohandas Gandhi, SCLC and SNCC helped organize sit-ins, rallies, and marches to protest racial discrimination. Since jail and often physical harm were the result, nonviolent protest required profound bravery by participants. They took to song for solidarity, to endure long vigils, and to build courage for impending confrontation. Sam Cooke's soaring, gospel-tinged *A Change is Gonna Come*, a hit in early 1965, was background music to the struggle in Selma.

MARCH 7, 1965



State troopers beat the leaders of the march with nightsticks, then donned gas masks and released tear gas to further terrorize the marchers. It was all recorded by major news media.

BLOODY SUNDAY

On a bright Sunday afternoon 600 marchers, in ranks of two, moved slowly up the Edmund Pettus Bridge rising over the Alabama River. Leading were John Lewis and SCLC's Hosea Williams. The marchers had left Brown Chapel singing *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round*; now they walked quietly. They could see only the calm river and the bare trees on the far bank.

Reaching the apex of the bridge, they saw below what Lewis described as a "sea of blue"—a phalanx of Alabama state troopers blocking U.S. 80. Behind the troopers Sheriff Clark's posse waited on horses. They stopped a few yards short of the troopers,

asking to speak to their leader. In response they were given two minutes to return to their "homes or church." When the marchers did not move, the troopers advanced, hitting marchers with their nightsticks, kicking those that went down. The posse rode directly into the panicking marchers. Donning gas masks, the troopers released clouds of suffocating tear gas; newsfilm captured the troopers flailing at the blinded and gagging marchers. They began running back towards the bridge, stumbling over each other and trying to ward off the blows. The troopers and posse continued to use nightsticks, whips, and rubber tubes as they drove the marchers through the streets of Selma.

MARCH 9, 1965



Marchers pray at Edmund Pettus Bridge before returning to Selma. Unitarian minister James Reeb (left), in Selma for the march, was attacked that night and died two days later. His assailants were acquitted.

TURNAROUND TUESDAY

As state troopers continued to beat marchers after they reached the Brown Chapel area, enraged onlookers called for retaliation. It was a pivotal moment in the voting rights campaign: the principle of nonviolence was being tested in the heat of attack. The leaders were able to convince those ready to fight that this could only undermine the movement. They had to keep the sympathy they had earned, and with the image of troopers beating unresisting marchers televised nationally, the spotlight was on Selma. Dr. King called on the nation's clergy to come to Selma for another attempt to march. But Federal District Court judge Frank Johnson issued an injunction against another march until

a hearing could take place. King, reluctant to defy the court, agreed to march no further than the other side of the bridge.

On Tuesday March 9, as the first of some 2,000 marchers approached the state troopers at the site of Sunday's violence, the leaders knelt to pray, then turned around. It was an unpopular decision with the marchers, but one noted that otherwise they would have been "beaten up with the court's approval." That night a clergyman who had marched, Rev. James Reeb, was attacked on a Selma street and later died. In his eulogy Dr. King said, "Again we must ask the question: Why must good men die for doing good?"

MARCH 21-25, 1965

Allow men and women to register and vote whatever the color of their skin. Their cause must be our cause . . .

—President Johnson, March 15



4,000 people left Selma to begin the march, this time with no state troopers to block the way. A marcher carried an American flag (right) to Montgomery, where the Confederate flag flew over the capitol.

WITNESSES FOR FREEDOM

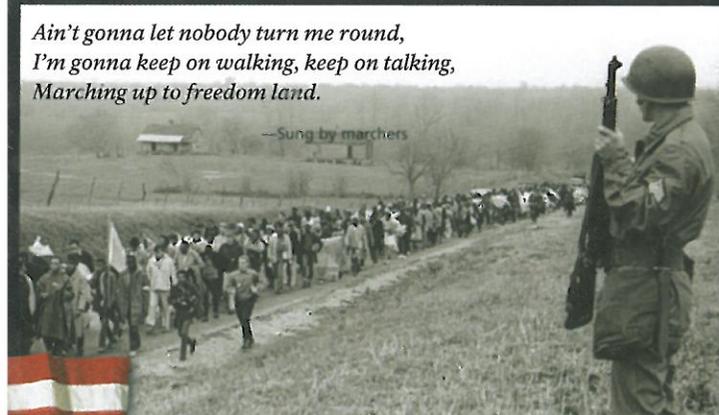
A week later the long-sought goal finally appeared on the horizon. On the 15th President Johnson called on Congress to pass a voting rights bill; on the next day Judge Johnson lifted the injunction against the march. Jubilation replaced fear, but local resistance remained fierce. That same day marchers in Montgomery were brutally beaten, causing Dr. King to respond angrily, "the cup of endurance has run over."

Governor Wallace refused President Johnson's request for state protection of the marchers, so Johnson nationalized 1,900 Alabama national guardsmen and dispatched 2,000 soldiers and dozens of FBI agents and federal marshals. On March 21 some

4,000 marchers set out from Selma; where U.S. 80 (ironically also called Jefferson Davis Highway) became two lanes the number was restricted to 300. Most of this core group marched all 54 miles, stopping at four overnight campsites. In Montgomery their numbers swelled again to an exultant throng of 25,000 as they approached the Alabama State Capitol. The hard-won fight and the march honoring it had given meaning to the promise made a century earlier in the 15th Amendment: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

*Ain't gonna let nobody turn me round,
I'm gonna keep on walking, keep on talking,
Marching up to freedom land.*

—Sung by marchers



1965-1966



Many newly registered voters voted for candidates of the Lowndes County Freedom Party (button at right). They wasted no time in voting Sheriff Clark out of office in 1966. (Left) Residents of "tent city."



*Let us march
on ballot boxes until brotherhood becomes more than a
meaningless word in an opening prayer, but the order of the
day on every legislative agenda. Let us march on ballot boxes
until all over Alabama God's children will be able to walk the
earth in decency and honor.*

—From the speech by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., on March 25 at the Alabama State Capitol

Marchers endured racial slurs and threats from on-lookers, and some of the federalized Alabama national guardsmen barely concealed their hostility. But nothing could hide the joy on the faces of those who watched from fields and front porches as the marchers passed—25,000 strong when they reached the Alabama State Capitol.

IN THE WAKE OF THE MARCH

The triumphal march provoked another death that night. Viola Liuzzo had come from Detroit to help. After she had carried marchers back to Selma, Klansmen sped alongside her car and shot her. (See map on other side.) Resistance to change would die hard.

SNCC continued to work with African Americans in Lowndes County, organizing the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. This evolved into a political party, the first to adopt the black panther symbol. On August 6th President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, which suspended literacy tests, called for the appointment of federal election monitors, and directed the U.S. Attorney General to chal-

lenge the use of poll taxes by states.

But laws cannot end bigotry. That month Jonathan Daniels, an Episcopal seminarian helping desegregation efforts in Hayneville, Ala., was shot and killed. Lowndes County landowners evicted tenants who registered. In December SNCC and Lowndes County leaders helped several dispossessed families set up a "tent city" off U.S. 80, then helped them find jobs, permanent housing, and new lives. In the end the hard work bore fruit: By 1966 the number of registered African Americans in Alabama was four times greater than in 1960.