Selma to Montgomery

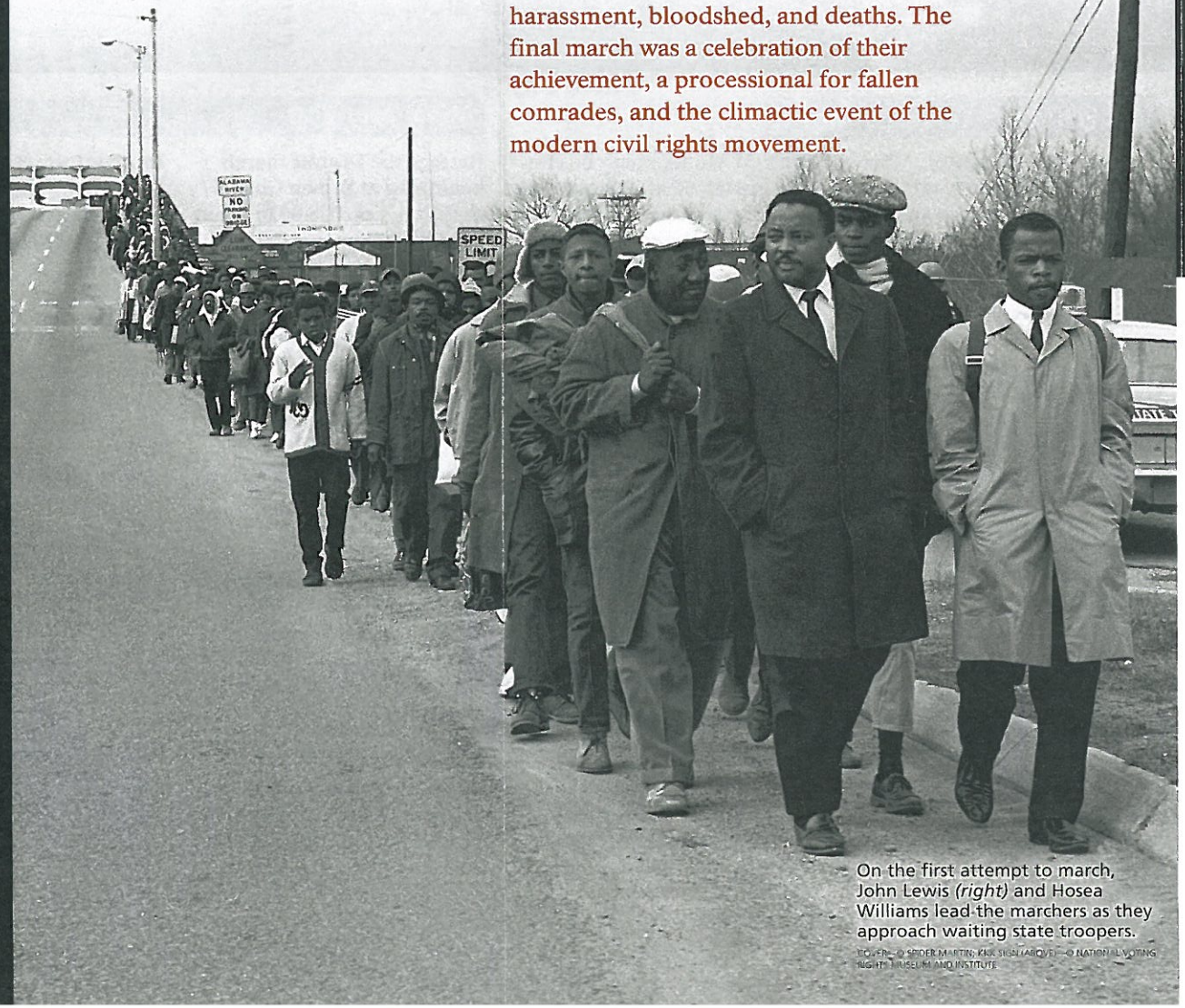
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Historic Trail
Alabama

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 courageous citizens, local leaders, and civil rights groups had been demanding that right for months. They had endured harassment, bloodshed, and deaths. The final march was a celebration of their achievement, a processional 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.

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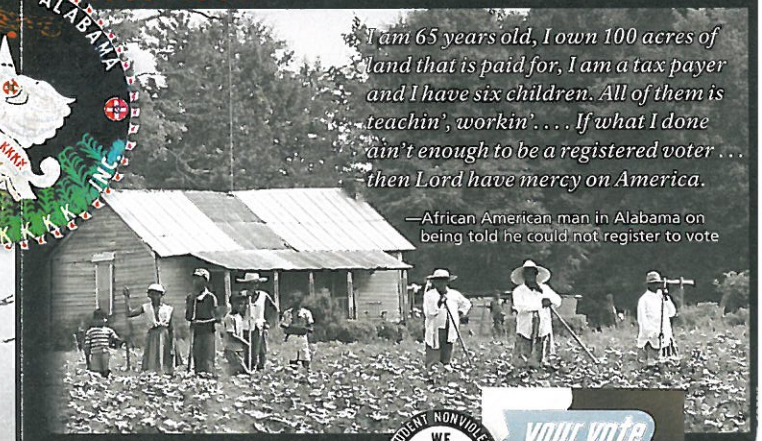
1900–1964



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

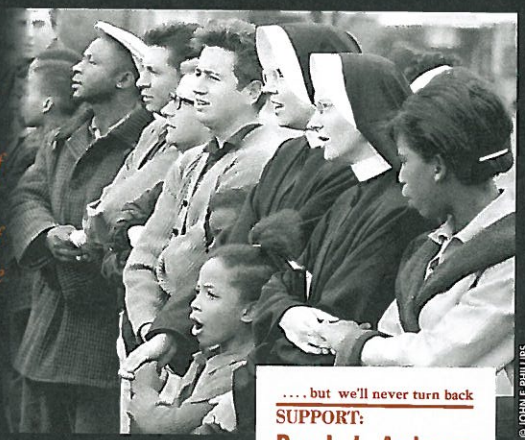
WHY SELMA?

How did the old cotton port of Selma, Alabama, the seat of Dallas County, become the national focus of the voting rights movement? In 1950 African Americans made up about half of Dallas County's voting-age population. But the county and state had been denying them the right to vote since 1901 through literacy tests, poll taxes, and intimidation. Only 156 of the county's 15,000 voting-age African Americans were registered to vote in 1961.

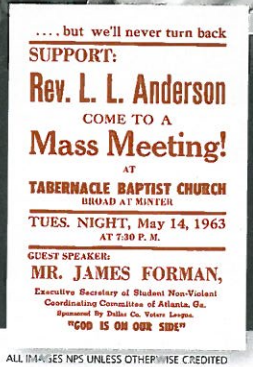
The county's dismal record led the US Justice Department to request records from county registrars, but it was denied by an unsympathetic judge. The Dallas County Voters League (DCVL) added a few voters to the rolls in the early 1960s through voter registration classes. In 1963 the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), an advocate of grassroots efforts like those of DCVL, sent representatives to help with the voting clinics. When African Americans came to the county courthouse to register, county sheriff Jim Clark and his deputies harassed them 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. Flyer *(right)* announces SNCC speaker. Churches were the safest places for such activities.



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GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The voting rights movement drew on the roots of religion, nonviolence, and music for guidance and for moral and physical courage. Many southern communities prohibited African Americans from gathering in large groups except in their churches, so that is where they met. African American leaders risked economic reprisal in these communities unless they were preachers, who were beholden only to their congregations. Clergy enjoyed moral authority in their communities and could speak persuasively before large groups, so they emerged as the movement's natural leaders. Dr. King, the most famous of these leaders, believed deeply in the principle of "nonviolent direct action" as the most effective and morally justified strategy for social change.

Earlier nonviolent reform movements, especially the one for India's independence led by Mohandas Gandhi, inspired SNCC and SCLC. The two groups organized sit-ins, rallies, and marches to protest racial discrimination. Such nonviolent protest required profound bravery by participants, who faced jail and injury. They used music for solidarity, to endure long vigils, and to build courage for impending confrontation. Sam Cooke's soaring, gospel-tinged "A Change Is Gonna Come" was a hit in early 1965 and became background music to the struggle in Selma.

JANUARY 1965

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

A GATHERING OF FORCES

The push for voter registration in Selma picked up momentum when SCLC joined forces with SNCC and DCVL. On January 2, 1965, Dr. King defied an injunction against large gatherings to address a mass rally at Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church. On the 18th some 400 people joined the first voter registration march from the chapel to the county courthouse. Sheriff Clark directed the marchers to an alley, then allowed no one to register. The next day, marchers refused to stand in the alley. Clark ordered them to move. When DCVL's Amelia Boynton responded too slowly, Clark grabbed her collar and shoved her towards a patrol car. Then he arrested 67 other marchers.

When a photo of Boynton's mistreatment appeared in major newspapers, national media turned its eye on Selma and the voting rights movement.

DCVL's president, Rev. Frederick D. Reese, led 105 teachers to the courthouse on January 22. Clark and his deputies pushed them from the steps twice, jabbing them with nightsticks. These courageous teachers inspired their students and others who had been afraid of becoming involved. As more marches and more arrests ensued, Sheriff Clark's excessive responses upset Selma's mayor and public safety director, who were concerned about the city's image and ability to attract industries.

FEBRUARY 1965

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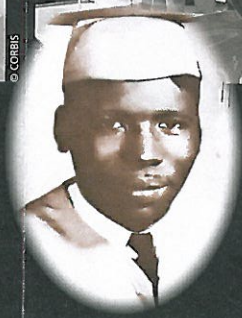

We was infuriated to the point that we wanted to carry Jimmie's body . . . and dump it on the steps of the Capitol.

—March participant Albert Turner

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

THE CONFLICT TURNS DEADLY

In February, SCLC and SNCC made a tactical move to force the arrest of Dr. King and dramatize the campaign. King and 250 marchers violated a parade ordinance by marching to the courthouse. They were joined by 500 students and hundreds of other supporters. Clark and his men arrested more than 3,000 people, using nightsticks and cattle prods. Many of the marchers were held in prison camps outside town.

During his incarceration, Dr. King wrote his "Letter from a Selma Jail" detailing obstacles facing African Americans who wanted to vote. It was published in the *New York Times* the day he was released. He then joined Congress and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to press President Lyndon Johnson and the US Department of Justice to finish drafting promised voting rights legislation.

On February 18th, people were marching at night in Marion, Alabama, northwest of Selma. They were attacked by state troopers. A young demonstrator, Jimmie Lee Jackson, was fatally shot while defending his grandfather. A call to carry Jackson's body to Montgomery evolved into a memorial march from Selma to Montgomery—a march that Governor George Wallace vowed to stop.

MARCH 7, 1965

BOSTON GLOBE

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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.

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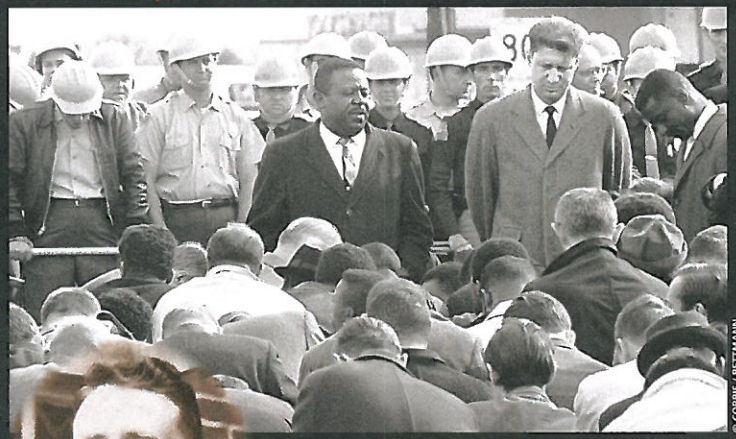
MARCH 9, 1965



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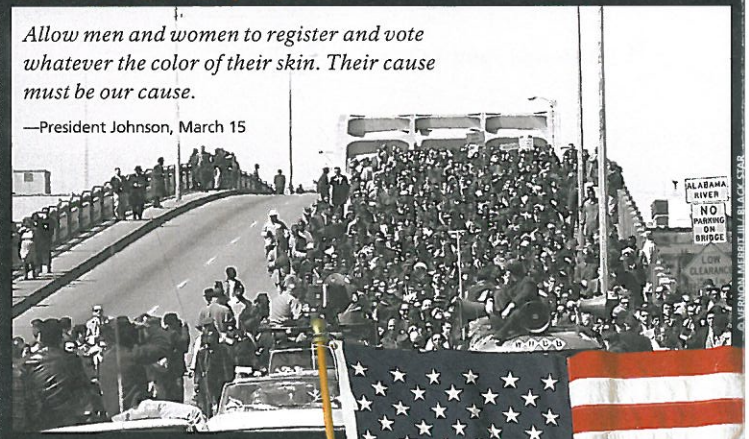
Marchers pray at the Edmund Pettus Bridge before returning to Selma. Unitarian minister James Reeb *(left)*, in Selma for the march, was attacked that night and died two days later. His assailants were acquitted.

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



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4,000 people began the march on March 21. This time no state troopers blocked the way. A marcher carried an American flag *(right)* to Montgomery, where the Confederate flag flew over the capitol.

BLOODY SUNDAY

On a bright Sunday afternoon in early March, 600 marchers moved slowly up the Edmund Pettus Bridge rising over the Alabama River. SNCC's John Lewis and SCLC's Hosea Williams led them. They 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"—Alabama state troopers blocking US 80. Sheriff Clark's posse waited on horses. The marchers stopped a few yards short of the troopers, asking to speak to their leader. 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 any who went down. The posse rode into the panicking marchers. Donning gas masks, troopers released clouds of suffocating tear gas. News cameras captured the troopers attacking the blinded and gagging marchers. The demonstrators began running back to the bridge, stumbling over each other and trying to ward off blows. The troopers and posse continued to use nightsticks, whips, and rubber tubes to drive the marchers through the streets of Selma.

TURNAROUND TUESDAY

As state troopers continued to beat marchers past 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 retaliation could only hurt the movement. They had to keep the sympathy they had earned. News stations brought their efforts into the national spotlight by televising images of troopers beating unresisting marchers. 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 only to the other side of the bridge.

On March 9, approximately 2,000 marchers approached the state troopers at the site of Sunday's violence. The leaders kneeled to pray, then turned around. It was an unpopular decision, but a marcher 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?"

WITNESSES FOR FREEDOM

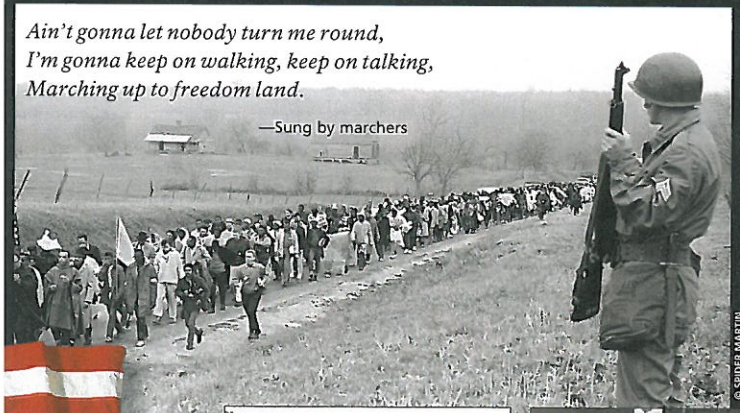
A week later the long-sought goal finally appeared close. President Johnson called on Congress to pass a voting rights bill; on the next day Judge Johnson lifted the injunction against the march in Selma. Jubilation replaced fear, but local resistance remained fierce. That same day marchers in Montgomery 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. The president federalized 1,900 Alabama national guard troops and sent 2,000 soldiers and dozens of FBI agents and federal marshals.

On March 21 some 4,000 marchers set out from Selma. They marched until US 80 (Jefferson Davis Highway) narrowed to two lanes; then the march was restricted to 300 people. Most of this core group marched all 54 miles, stopping at four campsites. As they approached the Alabama State Capitol in Montgomery, their numbers swelled again to a jubilant 25,000. 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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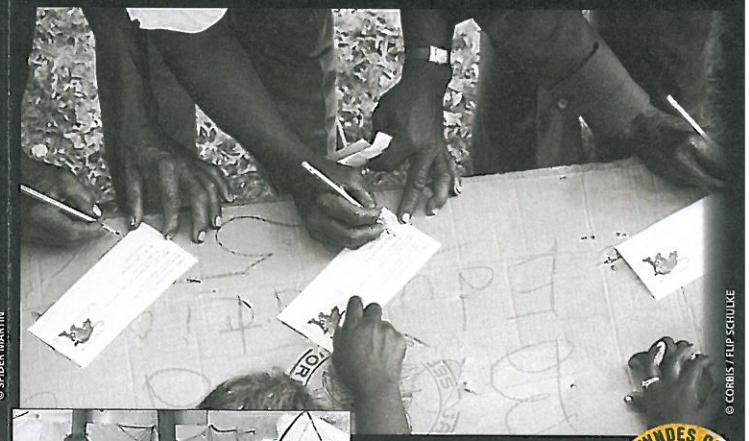
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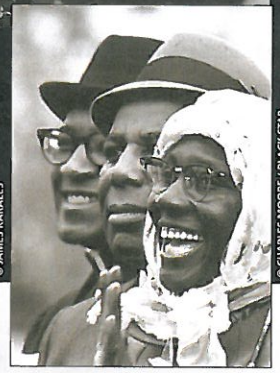
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Many newly registered voters *(above)* voted for candidates of the Lowndes County Freedom Party. Voters in Dallas County voted Sheriff Clark out of office in 1966. "Tent city" residents *(left)*.

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 onlookers, 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

After the triumphal march, the movement met tragedy again that night. Viola Liuzzo had come from Detroit to help. After she had carried marchers back to Selma, members of the Ku Klux Klan 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 Alabama, organizing the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. This evolved into a political party, the first to adopt a 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 US Attorney General to challenge the use of poll taxes by states.

But laws cannot end bigotry. That month Jonathan Daniels, an Episcopal seminarian helping desegregation efforts in Hayneville, Alabama, was shot and killed. Lowndes County landowners evicted tenants who registered. In December SNCC and Lowndes County leaders helped several evicted families set up a "tent city" off US 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 the number of 1960.

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