

The African American Civil Rights Movement



After Reconstruction, African Americans faced discrimination, especially in the southern states. Jim Crow laws limited their freedoms while white southerners continued to maintain political, economic, and social control in the South. Even until the middle of the 20th century, the South was segregated by race. It was less apparent in the North but African Americans were still restricted to poorer neighborhoods and lower-paying jobs.

Civil Rights Milestones, 1947 to 1957

1947	Jackie Robinson became the first African American to play in major league baseball
1948	President Harry S. Truman ordered an end to segregation in the armed forces using Executive Order 9981
1954	The Supreme Court case <i>Brown v. Board of Education</i> ruling stated that segregated schools were unconstitutional.
1955-1956	The Montgomery Bus Boycott protested segregation on city buses. The Supreme Court ruled bus segregation was unconstitutional
1957	President Dwight D. Eisenhower used the National Guard to enforce desegregation of schools in Little Rock, Arkansas

Civil Rights and the Courts

In the 1950's, the Supreme Court made several important decisions regarding the civil rights of African Americans.

President Eisenhower had appointed the former governor of California **Earl Warren** to become the new chief justice. Between 1953 and 1969, when he presided over the **Warren Court**, many decisions were made that affected many areas of American life, including civil rights for African Americans.

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas

The Supreme Court combined several cases relating to overturning state laws that allowed for school segregation in Kansas, Delaware, South Carolina, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. There were nearly 200 plaintiffs, including Oliver Brown whose daughter, **Linda Brown** wanted to attend an all-white school in her neighborhood in Topeka, Kansas rather than attend an all-black school that was farther away from her home.

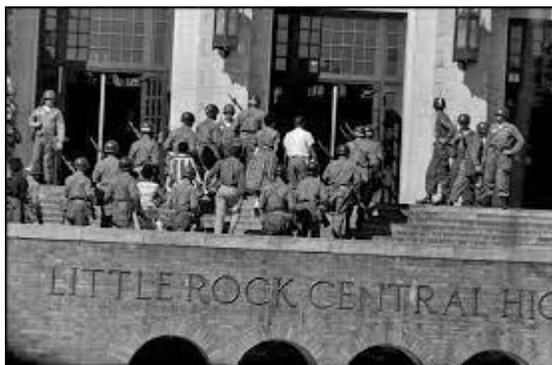
The 1896 ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson* upheld that **separate but equal** facilities were legal so **Linda Brown** was refused admission to the all-white school. The NAACP joined the case and in a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court ruled that the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling had **no place** in the education system.



Many Americans were shocked at this decision. In the South, many white school districts began campaigns of resistance to public school desegregation. In 1957, the **Governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus**, ordered the state National Guard to prevent nine African American students from entering the Central High School in Little Rock. These students became known as the **Little Rock Nine**.



This action challenged the Constitution so President Eisenhower placed the Arkansas National Guard under federal control and sent in his own federal troops to ensure that the students were allowed into the school. Governor Faubus continued to disobey the ruling, he even closed down the schools at the end of the year. His tactic failed and in 1959, the first integrated class graduated from Central High School.



In the 1950's in the South, movie theaters, lunch counters, drinking fountains, restrooms, buses, and trains were still segregated. Instead of waiting for federal court rulings, African Americans began to organize into the Civil Rights Movement, mostly using **civil disobedience (non-violent protest)** as a means to achieve their goal.

Major Civil Rights Protests 1955 to 1965

1955 to 1956	Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. After 381 days, the bus company was forced to desegregate and Martin Luther King Jr. , became an important civil rights leader
1961	The Freedom Rides after violent outbreaks led to the Interstate Commerce Commission banning segregation on interstate transportation.
1963	James Meredith sued the University of Mississippi who denied him admission. The Supreme Court upheld his right to enter an all-white institution.
1963	Protest marches in Birmingham, Alabama saw the local authorities use violence against the peaceful demonstrators. These acts shocked the nation as they were seen on television. Under immense pressure, Birmingham desegregated public facilities
1963	The March on Washington saw over 200,000 peaceful demonstrators rally to support civil rights
1965	The March on Selma in Alabama again saw State troopers attack marchers. President Lyndon B. Johnson used federal troops to protect the route from Selma to Montgomery. [In 2015, the 50 th anniversary of the original march, President and Mrs. Obama led lawmakers and civil rights activists in a similar march and in a speech stated, " our march is not yet finished" and cited the need for full restoration of the Voting Rights Act which had been weakened in some states].

Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott that lasted 381 Days



The March on Selma and subsequent reaction by local authorities



Civil Rights Organizations and Legislation

In the early 1960's many groups followed the civil disobedience ideas of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)**, and the **Student-Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)** who became known as the **Freedom Riders**.

Practicing civil disobedience was difficult and often turned violent. In **Greensboro, North Carolina**, a group of African-American students began a **"sit-in"** at a lunch counter in a local store. They sat in the "whites only" section and refused to leave until served. They were often met with violence but such protests soon became popular and sometimes sympathetic whites joined them.



The Greensboro Four at the "sit-in" in the Woolworth store

Birmingham, Alabama was considered to be the most segregated city in the South. In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC led a protest march where the police used dogs and fire hoses to break up. Over 2,000 were arrested and it was while King Jr. was in jail, he wrote his famous **"Letter from a Birmingham Jail"** in which he defended his use of non-violent protest and restated the need to end segregation.

Medgar Evers was a field secretary for the NAACP who had been working to desegregate Jackson, Mississippi. In June 1963, Evers was killed by a sniper outside his home.

In the same year, **Governor George Wallace of Alabama** tried to stop two African American students from registering at the University of Alabama. Pressure from President Kennedy and the arrival of the National Guard forced Wallace to back down and the students enrolled peacefully.

The **March on Washington** in August 1963 was attended by over 200,000 protestors. It was at this event that Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous **"I Have a Dream"** speech. A few weeks after the March on Washington, white terrorists bombed the Southern Baptist church in Birmingham, killing four young girls.



Major African American Organizations

Organization	Year of Founding	Background
NAACP – National Association for the Advancement of Colored People	1909	Organized by black and white progressives; W.E.B. DuBois was an early leader, favored court challenges to segregation, appealed mostly to professionals and college-educated
National Urban League	1910	Began as the Urban League and wanted African Americans to enter the economic and social mainstream, secure economic self-reliance, equality, power, and civil rights
Nation of Islam	1930	Known as Black Muslims , a black separatist group that became the voice of black nationalism in the 1960's. Cassius Clay converted to Muhammad Ali in 1964, Malcolm X assassinated in 1965
CORE -Congress of Racial Equality	1942	Best known for the “ Freedom Rides ” in the 1960's to desegregate interstate transportation
SCLC -Southern Christian Leadership Conference	1957	Founded by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to organize black churches and act non-violently
SNCC -Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee	1960	Started with student “sit-ins” and other protests but later supported the idea of “ Black Power ” put forward by Stokely Carmichael . African Americans should work together to use their economic and political power to gain equality

After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November 1963, the new president, **Lyndon B. Johnson** worked tirelessly for civil rights legislation.

Civil Rights Act of 1964

- Protection of voting rights for **all** Americans
- Opened public facilities to people of **all** races
- Created a commission to protect equal job opportunities for **all** Americans
- Outlawed race discrimination in public accommodations
- This Act came just months after the **Twenty-Fourth Amendment** that **abolished Poll Taxes**.

A major component of this act used the Supreme Court case of ***Heart of Atlanta Motel v. United States*** where motels had refused to give rooms to African Americans. The Court judged this unconstitutional. The Act also created **Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, also known as the Fair Housing Act**, which prohibited discrimination in the sale, rental, or financing of dwellings based on race, color, national origin, sex, or marital status.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965

Many southerners continued to resist civil rights and in response, President Johnson passed the **Voting Rights Act in 1965**.

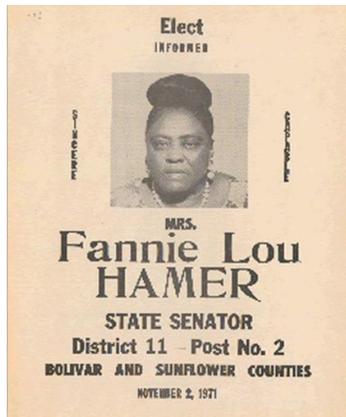
- It ended the literacy test used to prevent African Americans from voting
- Authorized federal examiners to register voters in areas suspected of denying African Americans the right to vote
- Directed the attorney general of the United States to take legal action against states that continued to use poll taxes in state elections



President Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act in 1964

Changes in the Civil Rights Movement

The summer of 1964 was known as **“Freedom Summer”** and after the passing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, it was the high point of the Civil Rights Movement. New leaders were to emerge within the movement.

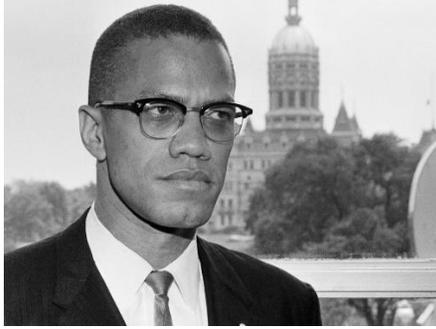


Fannie Lou Hamer was a representative of the **MFDP – Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party**, to have more African Americans vote in that state. In 1964, she spoke at the National Democratic Party Convention telling how African Americans still had difficulties voting in Mississippi.

The MFDP was offered two delegate seats **“at large”** meaning they were not designated by state, an effort to increase minority representation in the future. The MFDP rejected the offer and regular Democratic representatives also left in protest not liking that these compromises had even been offered. She continued her civil rights activism until she died in 1977

Stokely Carmichael believed that new legislation did not improve conditions so he demanded **“Black Power”** stressing African Americans take total control of the political and economic aspects of their lives. Some members advocated for the use of violence but the more moderate leaders called for nonviolent protests. These splits weakened the effectiveness of the civil rights movement.





Malcolm X was a militant leader who spoke **against integration** and **promoted black nationalism**, a belief in the separate identity and racial unity of the African American community. He was a member of the **Nation of Islam** until 1964 and then formed his own religious organization called the **Muslim Mosque**. Upon return from his hajj to Mecca he changed his views of integration and started to work towards a more unified civil rights movement. In February 1965, he was assassinated at a rally in New York City.

Violence as a result of the movement

There were still many who did not support the civil rights movement and tensions between blacks and whites was predominant.

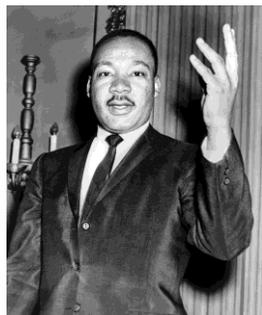
In 1964 and 1965 frustrations over housing discrimination, education, and employment turned into **riots in New York City, Rochester, and the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles where 34 people were killed and over a thousand injured**. In response, the federal government set up the **Kerner Commission** to investigate the cause. It concluded that they were a result of the anger that had been building up in many American cities for years.



Scenes from the Watts Riots

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was awarded the Nobel peace Prize in 1964 **“for the furtherance of brotherhood among men.”** He always supported the underprivileged and the needy and in April 1968, while supporting a sanitation workers strike in Memphis, he was assassinated by a white assassin. His death set off new rounds of rioting in American cities.

Just two months after King’s death, **Senator Robert F. Kennedy**, brother of the former president and now a presidential candidate committed to civil rights was assassinated. More violence followed and the goals of both King and Kennedy seemed far off to many Americans.



Martin Luther King Jr.



Robert F. Kennedy