

# Mississippi Summer Project: Freedom Summer

by Sarah Collinge

In 1964, the Civil Rights Act became law and granted all people access to public places regardless of the color of their skin. Up until that time, black people in the South could not drink from the same water fountains as white people, and they had to sit in areas separate from whites in restaurants and on public transportation. Black people even had to attend schools that were for blacks only. Black people did not receive as good an education as white people, or medical services as good as those available to white people. Black people were treated like second-class citizens.

Unfortunately, when the Civil Rights Act became law, many businesses and communities did not abide by the new law and continued to segregate the black community. In some cases, businesses chose to close their doors to prevent having to provide services to black people.

Another big problem in the South was that most blacks were excluded from voting. Many black people wanted to vote, but were worried they might lose their jobs if they registered to vote. In Mississippi, those that tried to register had to pass a test that required them to read and interpret the state constitution. At that time, much of the black population was illiterate and therefore could not pass the test. In Mississippi in the 1950s, only 5% of blacks of voting age were registered to vote.

## Fast Facts:

- In the early 1960s, 86% of the black community in Mississippi lived below the national poverty line.
- In 1962, Mississippi had the lowest percentage of African Americans registered to vote.
- In 1964, all of the schools in Mississippi were segregated.

The Mississippi Summer Project, or Freedom Summer, was started in June 1964 and lasted for 10 weeks. It was a campaign to help register as many African American voters in Mississippi as possible. Additionally, the project set up medical clinics, community centers, and Freedom Schools. Thousands of volunteers were needed.

The volunteers who participated in the Freedom Summer project were trained at the Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, and then sent to the communities of Mississippi. They were told to be prepared to be arrested, harassed, and even killed for their participation in desegregating the South. Despite the risk to their own lives, well over 1,000 volunteers participated.

By 1969, 66.5% of African Americans in Mississippi were registered to vote.

## Fast Facts:

### During Freedom Summer in Mississippi...

- More than 100 medical professionals opened clinics and provided health education classes.
- Volunteer lawyers provided free legal services to the black community.
- More than 3,500 students attended Freedom Schools.

References:

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