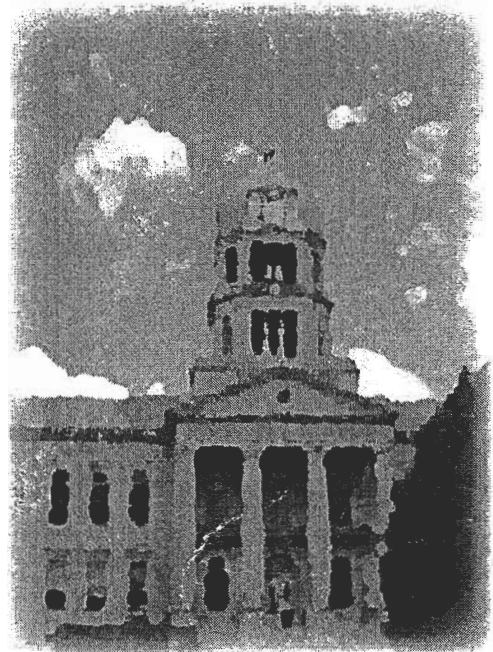
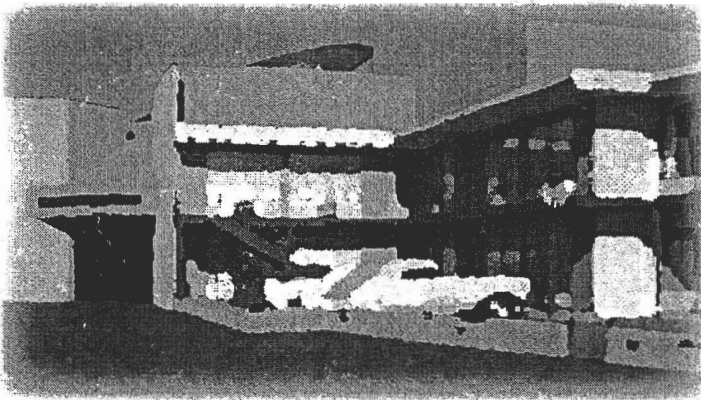
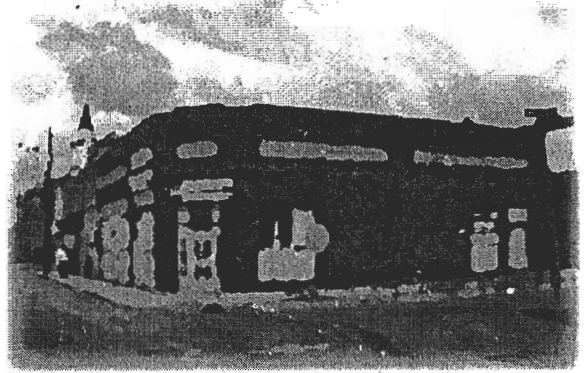
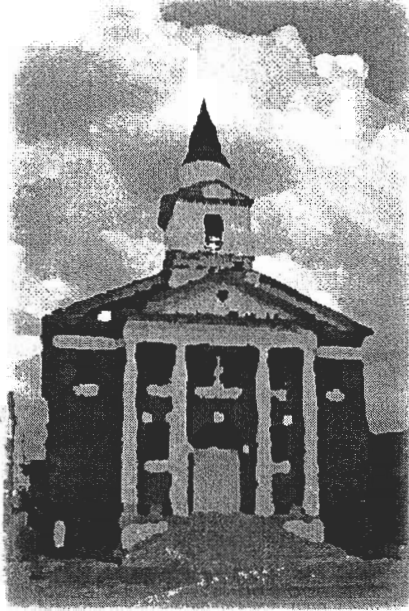


Landmarks of American Democracy: From Freedom Summer to the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike



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ORGANIZING FREEDOM SCHOOLS

CHARLIE COBB

Organizing Freedom Schools

I'm thinking of freedom songs, almost obscure now, or viewed as quaint musical icons of a different era; but three decades ago their vital lyrics provided much sustenance to the Southern Civil Rights Movement: *Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'roun*, we sang. *We'll never turn back*, and *Keep your eyes on the Prize*.

All the songs affirm. They express what we are going to do. They assume that "freedom" is affirmative, that freedom starts with deciding what you want to achieve and is reached by finding the ways and means of organizing toward that goal or goals. You'll find no reasoning that the struggle for human and civil rights is in any way determined by what cannot be done. Only, as the old song goes, . . . *that freedom is a constant struggle*. Always, a constant faith in human ability and possibilities.

We tend to analyze the Movement in terms of strategy and tactics, especially because it is true that the effectiveness of those strategies and tactics did indeed break down the barriers preventing blacks from exercising voting rights and brought an end to at least the legal justifications for racial segregation in public schools and public accommodations. But such a narrow approach misses the point, or perhaps more exactly, is only a half-right portrayal of what was unfolding in the Deep South during the sixties.

As powerful and rigid as the structures of white supremacy were, they were more easily defeated than the manner in which thought—and with thought, behavior—imprisoned the

communities in which we worked.

Yes, we wanted an end to segregation, discrimination, and white supremacy. However, at the core of our efforts was the belief that black people had to make decisions about and take charge of the things controlling their lives; the effective movement was grounded in grassroots local leadership. We were organizers in Mississippi, not leaders, even if at moments we led. The distinction was important to us, and a practical necessity.

Most of us organizing soon learned that our main challenge was getting black people to challenge themselves. Stated another way, people would have to redefine themselves. That was the foundation on which white supremacy could be effectively challenged. As SNCC organizer Larry Guyot, a native Mississippian, put it once: "To battle institutions we must change ourselves first."

While the ever present threat of economic reprisal and personal assault was of genuine concern to any black person considering an attempt at voter registration, the words an organizer heard most often in a sharecropper's home were: "Register? That's white folks business, boy." And it reflected something more than fear. In Issaquena County, a narrow, almost all-black strip of cotton plantation land along the Mississippi River, Henry Sias, well into his sixties when I met him in 1963, cautioned me in two ways during a long conversation. Be careful was the first. "These white folks know you're here."

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Then later and more tellingly: "We could do [register, vote, take county offices], but to tell you the truth, we don't know what we could do. Won't think on it. That's what I mean when I say we down far."

The most important struggles in Mississippi were within the black community: whether to allow a movement worker to speak in church or use the church for mass meetings and voter registration workshops; whether to trust that worker with your life, your family's life, or your family's economic survival. Every step in the fight against racism and discrimination was preceded by a deeper and more profound struggle that involved confronting oneself.

The Freedom Rides to Jackson notwithstanding, SNCC and CORE organizers were working in Mississippi because a handful of Mississippians had already confronted themselves in this way and had decided to risk everything for change. They were the virtually underground NAACP chapters, sometimes at odds with the national organization, working invisibly at voter registration; the Amzie Moore's who had to guard the filling station he owned with rifles simply because it was a black-owned gas station in the white-ruled Delta; the Herbert Lee's pressing for school desegregation, and he paid for it with his life. There were others, young and old.

They trained us in how to listen to people and talk to people. And to measure risk. What they thought in urging us to work in Mississippi was that if we listened and learned we could help the communities *they* led see a way toward change.

The arguments for and against the 1964 Mississippi summer project framed the issue of change in terms of race, nonviolence, and the need for national pressure on the state. But at its most basic, the debate was over whether hundreds of white college students would take over the Movement and, with what was presumed to be their superior resources, education, and connections, stifle local black leadership, some of it just developing. Or, did the inarguable and im-

mediate facts of terrible violence, economic reprisal, and the low level of national concern outweigh this? After all, violence *was* on the increase. Federal authorities still insisted their hands were tied in responding to it. Media, for the most part, did not get to the out-of-the-way rural counties where SNCC and CORE organizers worked. And, insofar as success could be measured by attempts at voter registration, few in the prevailing climate of terror were attempting it.

In a sense, the debate was never resolved, although by default, plans for the summer project went ahead; the students were on the way. If SNCC/COFO didn't bring them down, the National Council of Churches said it was going to. Organizers, no matter where they stood in the complex debating about the summer project, finally said, if they're coming down, we'll organize them. It was in this ambivalent context that the idea of "freedom schools" emerged.

One of the things you learn as an organizer is to constantly be on the lookout for issues and openings that encourage people to challenge their ideas and habits. The person who may not see the value of attempting voter registration, or who may see the value but not be willing to run the risk, might eagerly embrace the idea of a farm workers union. Many more people attended church "mass meetings" than braved the danger of going to the voter registrar's office at the county seat.

In Mississippi, as was the case throughout the South, on education there was broad black consensus: black schools were inferior to white schools; and along with this, the almost contradictory belief that education was one of the main avenues to greater opportunity and a better life.

The oppressive narrowness of Southern black public schools still seems almost unbelievable today despite the grim problems confronting contemporary public education. In the Mississippi Delta, the fall school term was delayed while cotton was picked. New brick school buildings built to give the illusion of "separate but equal" contained virtually bookless libraries

and science labs with no equipment.

But more than the inadequacies of the physical plant, the idea of ideas, thought, and creativity among black people, was ruthlessly suppressed. As we wrote in the original freedom school proposal: "Here, an idea of your own is a subversion that must be squelched; for each bit of intellectual initiative represents the threat of a probe into the why of denial. Learning here means only learning to stay in your place. Your place is to be satisfied—a 'good nigger.'" It is true that many teachers struggled heroically against these conditions, giving inspiration and imparting knowledge in spite of the state. However, the schools as institutions remained part of the apparatus of repression. Indeed, the police were likely to be called if an organizer showed up on school grounds.

Few parents would accept a direct challenge to the existence of even these public schools. For although black schools were more like sandbars than islands of hope, they were something in a land of nothing. Something that offered some chance of a better life.

What if, it occurred to some of us, we could extend the worlds of possibilities opening up to us through activism, in a broader, more institutional way in the communities where we organized? What if we showed what was possible in education? We had already been approaching this through "literacy workshops" within the context of organizing for voter registration. And SNCC itself had created a "nonviolent high school" during the 1961 protests in McComb, Mississippi. A few of us had even begun to experiment with programmed learning materials in Selma, Alabama, as well as the Mississippi Delta. But we hadn't really tackled education as an approach to community organizing in and of itself.

Significantly, the model for how to do this emerged from a specific political organization that also grew out of grassroots organizing: the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

The Department of Justice had long claimed that apathy was one of the important reasons

for the low number of blacks registered to vote. We argued that in Mississippi and throughout the blackbelt South, to ask blacks to enter a hostile white county seat was to guarantee that few blacks would attempt to register.

A "freedom registration" and "freedom vote" was one result of our effort to prove the point. Blacks were registered at home with simple forms. Candidates were selected to run for state offices. Thousands of blacks both registered and voted within this "mock" but meaningful framework. And thus the MFDP was born.

Freedom schools were a variation of this idea. We could "parallel" the state structure "to fill an intellectual and creative vacuum in the lives of young Negro Mississippians."

Although the actual planning of the freedom school project was delegated (among those key early planners were Myles Horton of the Highlander Center, SCLC's Septima Clark, a former schoolteacher, New York teacher and United Federation of Teachers activist Norma Becker, Noel Day who wrote a citizenship curriculum in question and answer format, and Staughton Lynd who wrote "A Guide to Negro History" and later became statewide director of the freedom schools), the idea of the bringing schools into existence became integrated with the daily work of field organizers in the months leading up to the summer project. For those of us still trudging plantation roads, it offered an additional route by which the paralysis freezing black Mississippians in a place where they were acted upon instead of acting could be challenged.

Traditional and widely embraced notions of education were transformed by placing programs—whether remedial reading or African American history—in the arena of social change. As with the voter registration drive and all other organizing in the state, the essence of the schools was that black people could begin to rethink in their own terms the ways and means of shaping and controlling their own destiny. Fannie Lou Hamer put it to me this way, "We can start learning to learn."

About two thousand students attended

classes in some forty schools. If the number seems small, it was twice what we had estimated attendance would be. There were remedial classes as well as courses in literature, the humanities, creative writing, foreign languages, art, drama, typing, and Afro-American history and culture. Discussion of civil rights and social change was continuous. It should be pointed out that many students were attending public schools in the summer, for cotton was picked in the fall.

As a practical matter, the schools effectively struck a balance between the reluctance of organizers to use inexperienced, white student volunteers in the dangerous rural areas of the state and the need to deal with the reality that they were coming and would have to be used in some manner that was concretely beneficial during the summer.

That the program in some respects seemed to accept traditional liberal concepts and approaches to education, which in many ways did not then—and does not now—grapple with the deeper flaws in education and society, does not negate the important benefit of the schools' contribution to expanding the idea in black Mississippi that black people could shape and control at least some of the things that affected their lives. Perhaps the fact that the schools existed at all was their greatest success. As Staughton Lynd noted in a report to COFO that summer, the schools helped "to loosen the hard knot of fear and to organize the Negro community."

The freedom schools hardly broke down hundreds of years of oppression, but near the end of the summer when freedom school stu-

dents from around the state convened, they reflected a substantial growth of political awareness. Their resolutions asked for slum clearance, low-cost federal housing, jobs programs, and even sanctions against South Africa among a long list of proposed reforms.

After the summer, some freedom schools continued. But never would the number of schools or the number of students attending them equal those of that first summer. For a variety of reasons the Movement was changing. In part it was a victim of its success. We had in one sense accomplished what we set out to do: a public accommodations law had been passed; a voting rights law seemed certain. Mississippi was now prominently on the political map. New organizations, like the Mississippi Child Development Group, with deeper financial pockets were establishing themselves.

Many of us were unsure of what to do next. Grassroots organizing—the lifeblood of the Movement—diminished. Many organizers scattered. Some were shattered and never recovered. Others took advantage of the opportunities they had helped create. Increasingly, black elected officials filled the vacuum. And at the first dinner of the Congressional Black Caucus, one congressman proclaimed, "We are the new Civil Rights Movement." That, of course, was not and is not true. The "new" Civil Rights Movement, like the "old," is still made up of the people organizing in many black communities today, often as invisible as the Movement was thirty years ago. ❖