

FREEDOM SCHOOLS

Freedom Summer 1964



Children visiting exhibit of Freedom School Students' work at Palmers Crossing Community Center. Hattiesburg, Mississippi, 1964. Herbert Randall Freedom Summer Photographs USM - SNCCDigital.org

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The SNCC Digital Gateway is a collaborative project of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Legacy Project, Duke's Center for Documentary Studies, and Duke University Libraries.

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FREEDOM SUMMER

In the summer of 1964, the Civil Rights Movement launched one of its most ambitious and transformative campaigns: Freedom Summer. Organized primarily by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), along with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the NAACP, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the project was aimed at dismantling the deeply entrenched system of racial exclusion in Mississippi. With Black citizens systematically denied the right to vote and subjected to inferior schools and services, Freedom Summer sought to change the political and educational landscape of the state through grassroots action.

FREEDOM SUMMER AND THE RISE OF FREEDOM SCHOOLS (1964): EDUCATION AS LIBERATION



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Organizers came to believe that to break through the silence and expose the brutal realities of segregation to the rest of the nation, they would need to take a bigger, more public step. In 1963, the idea for Freedom Summer began to take shape. SNCC joined forces with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the NAACP, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to form the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO).³

The summer of 1964 marked a turning point in the civil rights movement. Known as Freedom Summer, this bold campaign was launched in Mississippi to confront one of the most racially oppressive and politically entrenched systems in the country. The campaign aimed to register Black voters, challenge segregation, and expand educational opportunities in a state where Black citizens had long been denied basic civil and human rights.¹

Freedom Summer emerged from years of grassroots organizing by local Black leaders and civil rights activists, particularly through the efforts of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Since 1961, SNCC had been working quietly in Mississippi, facing daily threats of violence and constant resistance. Black Mississippians risked their jobs, their homes, and even their lives to support SNCC's efforts.²

But despite their hard work, voter registration numbers remained extremely low, and public attention to the crisis in Mississippi was limited.



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FREEDOM TEACHING

Under COFO's leadership, they planned a massive campaign to bring over 1,000 mostly white, Northern college students to Mississippi in the summer of 1964.⁴ These volunteers would work alongside local Black communities to register voters, support legal advocacy, and—most importantly—teach in newly created Freedom Schools.

The concept of Freedom Schools emerged from a recognition that education in Mississippi had long been used as a tool of oppression. The public school system was racially segregated, underfunded, and deliberately designed to prepare Black children only for lives of subservience and labor. Many students received little or no instruction in Black history, civic engagement, or the broader possibilities of democratic participation. Freedom Schools were envisioned as an antidote to this injustice—spaces where Black youth could learn about their history, their rights, and their power.⁵ The idea for the Freedom Schools was largely developed by Charles Cobb, a young SNCC organizer and former Howard University student.⁶

Cobb wrote a proposal in late 1963 suggesting that in addition to registering voters, the movement should offer education that helped young people develop leadership skills and understand the political system that denied them a voice. He argued that true change would require more than votes—it would require a generation of informed, conscious citizens.

By the summer of 1964, this vision had become a reality. More than 40 Freedom Schools were established in church basements, homes, community centers, and anywhere space could be found. Volunteer teachers, many of them college students and recent graduates, traveled from across the country to teach in these schools. They worked closely with local families, many of whom had long supported the idea of quality education but had never been given the resources or support to build it themselves.



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THE LEGACY

The Freedom School curriculum was unlike anything students had encountered in Mississippi's segregated schools. Instead of rote memorization and obedience, students were encouraged to ask questions, express themselves, and explore ideas. They studied African and African American history, the U.S. Constitution, and the workings of the political system. They read works by Black authors, wrote essays and poems, and engaged in deep conversations about justice, democracy, and identity. Lessons often began with simple, but profound, questions like "What does it mean to be free?" or "What do you want to see changed in your community?"⁷

Importantly, Freedom Schools were also about healing and confidence-building. Many students had been made to feel inferior in their public schools or discouraged from thinking critically. In Freedom Schools, they were treated as thinkers and leaders. Teachers emphasized respect, encouragement, and intellectual curiosity. Students often worked together to identify problems in their communities and brainstorm solutions—planting the seeds of activism and community organizing that would continue well beyond the summer.

Over the course of Freedom Summer, more than 2,500 students attended these schools. Some stayed for just a few days, others for the entire summer. Despite the ever-present danger of white supremacist violence—including church bombings, arrests, and harassment—classes continued. In some towns, students had to sneak into class through back doors or meet secretly at night. The threat was constant, but so was the determination.

The impact of Freedom Schools extended far beyond the classroom. Many students went on to become leaders in the civil rights movement and in their communities.⁸ They carried with them not only knowledge, but the memory of being seen, heard, and valued. Freedom Schools also helped shift national conversations about education, influencing future movements for culturally relevant teaching, community-based schools, and educational justice.

Although the formal Freedom Schools ended with the summer, their legacy lived on. They represented one of the clearest examples of education as liberation—a core belief of the civil rights movement that the classroom could be a powerful space for social change. Freedom Summer revealed that the fight for voting rights, civil rights, and education were deeply connected, and that transforming society required not only changing laws but also changing minds.

In the end, Freedom Summer and the Freedom Schools stood as a powerful statement of hope and defiance in the face of oppression. They showed what could happen when communities and young people came together with purpose and courage, and they left behind a blueprint for how education can be used not just to inform, but to empower and inspire.



What do you think was the long-term impact of freedom teaching? Do you believe we need freedom schools today? Why or why not?

REFERENCES

1. Sandra E. Adickes, *Legacy of a Freedom School* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).
2. _____
3. Jon N Hale, *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
4. Judy Richardson Interview. <https://youtu.be/M2Pa03ZhKz8>
5. Joe Street, "Reconstructing Education from the Bottom-Up: SNCC's 1964 Mississippi Summer Project and African American Culture," *Journal of American Studies* (August 2004), 273-296.
6. Frank Smith Interview
7. SNCC Digital Gateway <https://snccdigital.org/inside-sncc/culture-education/freedom-schools/>
8. Bruce Watson, *Freedom Summer*, Penguin Publishing, 201

PEOPLE & PLACES OF FREEDOM SUMMER



A group of teenage male Freedom School students sit on and near the porch of a house on Gravel Line Street reading issues of Ebony magazine. Volunteer Arthur Reese (school principal from Detroit, Michigan), co-coordinator of the Freedom Schools in the Hattiesburg project, stands talking to them. - SNCC Digital Gateway

ANALYZE THIS IMAGE

- What do you notice first about this image?
- What details stand out, and why?
- Who do you think these individuals are, and what are they doing?
- What clues from their body language or surroundings support your interpretation?
- Where and when do you think this photo was taken?
- What makes you think that? Consider clothing, architecture, and the style of books or magazines.
- What can this image tell us about education and activism?
- Do you think this scene was part of a formal school or a different kind of learning environment?

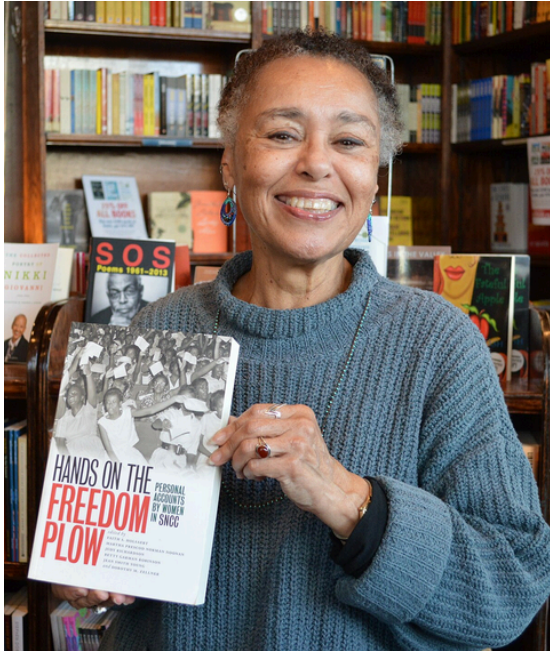


Three local African-American children stand in the exhibit area of the Palmers Crossing Community Center where Freedom School students' artwork is on exhibit. The large sign with handprints down the left wall spells "Freedom." - SNCC Digital Gateway

ANALYZE THIS IMAGE

- How does this image connect to the struggle for civil rights and equality?
- What do you think the children in the image might be thinking or feeling?
- If you were there, what would you want to say or ask these children?
- What questions would help you understand their experience?
- How does the word "freedom" connect to education, youth, and the future?

JUDY RICHARDSON



Read Judy's full bio



A native of Terrytown, New York, Richardson received a four-year scholarship to attend Swarthmore College when she was swept into the Movement. Swarthmore's chapter of Students for a Democratic Society was organizing students to join a local movement protesting segregated facilities on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Seeing it in part as "adventure," Richardson boarded a bus to Cambridge, Maryland, in the fall of 1962. She soon found herself in Cambridge almost every weekend, participating in demonstrations, going to jail, and meeting people like SNCC's Reggie Robinson and Cambridge leader Gloria Richardson. Eventually, her movement work took her to full-time work in Cambridge with SNCC.

Interview Discussion Questions

- How were Freedom Schools different from traditional segregated schools in the South?
- Why was education seen as a powerful tool during the Civil Rights movement?
- What role did young people play in the Freedom Schools, both as students and as leaders?
- How does Richardson describe the danger involved in their work?
- What can Freedom Schools teach us about the connection between education and social justice?
- If you could ask Judy Richardson one question about her experience, what would it be?
- If you were to design a modern Freedom School, what subjects or topics would you include?

FRANK SMITH



Read Frank's full bio



Frank Smith, Ph.D., laid the groundwork to establish a national memorial for the African American Civil War troops during his four elected terms with the District Council in Washington, D.C.

Dr. Smith oversaw the dedication of the African American Civil War Memorial in July 1998. He fulfilled his lifelong dream to honor the United States Colored Troops (USCT) based on his extensive leadership experience. Dr. Smith secured financing, District support, and the active involvement of public and private agencies to establish the African American Civil War Memorial Museum.

Interview Discussion Questions

- How were Freedom Schools different from traditional segregated schools in the South?
- Why was education seen as a powerful tool during the Civil Rights movement?
- What role did young people play in the Freedom Schools, both as students and as leaders?
- How does Smith describe the danger involved in their work?
- What can Freedom Schools teach us about the connection between education and social justice?
- If you could ask Frank Smith one question about her experience, what would it be?
- If you were to design a modern Freedom School, what subjects or topics would you include?

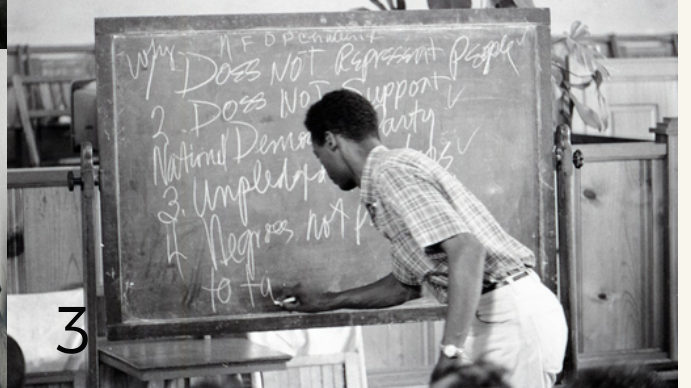


IMAGE LIST

What is different about these learning environments from schools today?

1. Volunteer Arthur Reese lectures to a class of Freedom School students at Palmers Crossing in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, during Freedom Summer, 1964. - SNCC Digital Gateway
2. Four Freedom School students participate in class at Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Hattiesburg. - SNCC Digital Gateway
3. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee field secretary Sandy Leigh (New York City), director of the Hattiesburg project, lectures Freedom School students in the sanctuary of True Light Baptist Church. - SNCC Digital Gateway
4. Freedom School student Cynthia Perteet (left) and volunteer Beth More (right) in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, during Freedom Summer, 1964. More was a teacher in the Freedom School hosted by Mt. Zion Baptist Church. - Digital Gateway.
5. Freedom Summer volunteer, Barbara Schwartzbaum, teaching Freedom School class at Morning Star Baptist Church, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, 1964, Herbert Randall Freedom Summer Photographs, USM - Digital Gateway
6. An MFDP lecture in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, July 1964, Herbert Randall Freedom Summer Photographs, USM - SNCC Digital Gateway
7. Children visiting the exhibit of Freedom School students' artwork at the Palmers Crossing Community Center, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, 1964, Herbert Randall Freedom Summer Photographs, USM - SNCC Digital Gateway