

Freedom Now: The Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi



THE
**CHOICES
PROGRAM**
BROWN UNIVERSITY

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PREVIEW
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Introduction: The Struggle for Freedom

On August 28, 1963, before a crowd of over 200,000 people in Washington D.C., Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered the most famous speech of the U.S. civil rights movement. “I have a dream,” he declared, “that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.”

The March on Washington has become one of the most celebrated moments of the civil rights movement, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is the movement’s most famous leader. But the story of the fight for civil rights has more to it than large marches and speeches on national television.

Often out of sight of the national media, most civil rights activity occurred in local communities, in states like Mississippi, where thousands of everyday people organized themselves to fight against racial injustice. Instead of one national civil rights movement led by a few, we can think of the struggle of the 1950s and 1960s as a series of local movements for racial justice with many participants and leaders. Taken together, these local movements made up what is called the mass civil rights movement.

As Dr. King noted in his speech, Mississippi had a reputation as the most violent and oppressive racist state in the United States. Mississippi symbolized both the vicious, systemic racism that existed throughout the South, and the powerful black movement that developed in response. The civil rights movement that emerged in small towns throughout Mississippi rarely made national headlines, but thousands of black Mississippians put their lives on the line everyday in pursuit of a better life. They had numerous goals, including desegregation, economic justice, and an end to the racial violence and intimidation that cast a shadow over their daily lives. By trying to register to vote, helping civil rights workers, or pursuing an education, local people in Mississippi worked to change their communities with small, often dangerous steps towards freedom.

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was just one chapter in the black freedom struggle. As many historians have noted, African Americans have been fighting for their freedom since the first slave ships arrived in the Americas. The Civil War ended slavery in the United States, but

emancipation did not bring equal rights or economic opportunities to black people. While the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s spurred the federal government into action and won many legal rights for African Americans, challenges remain today. The black freedom struggle continues.

In the following pages you will explore the civil rights movement and focus on events in Mississippi. Part I examines emancipation, the rise and fall of Reconstruction, and the Jim Crow era in Mississippi—a period of racial violence and intimidation as well as inequality. Part II addresses the development of the mass civil rights movement, and explores how the movement played out in Mississippi. It culminates in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party’s attempt to be seated at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. Part III examines the outcome of the convention and the course of the civil rights movement in the years that followed. It also looks at the movement’s accomplishments and challenges that continue to this day.

Introduction Definitions

Race—The idea of race is often presented as science, but it lacks a scientific basis. Race is an idea created by societies, and it changes over time. For example, the definition of “white” has changed throughout U.S. history in response to political, economic, and social circumstances. Throughout U.S. history, the idea of race has supported a system of classifying people based on their physical characteristics in order to exploit the labor of some groups and allow other groups to profit from that exploitation.

Racism—A system of social structures (laws, policies, practices, and attitudes) that provides or denies power, resources, opportunities, and safety based on racial categories. This system creates inequities across society. Racism is more than prejudice or bigotry. Racism exists when prejudice or bigotry based on race is backed up by the institutional or structural power to harm the lives of those facing racial prejudice or bigotry. Racism exists in the attitudes and actions of individuals as well as in the larger institutions and structures of which they are a part.

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Teacher Resource Book



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The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells

Objectives:

Students will: Explore the work of an early civil rights activist.

Understand the role of violent white supremacy in the history of the United States.

Required Reading:

Students should have read Part I and completed “Study Guide—Introduction and Part I” (TRB 4-5) or the “Advanced Study Guide—Introduction and Part I” (TRB-6).

Handouts:

“Biography of Ida B. Wells” (TRB-12)

“The Writings of Ida B. Wells” (TRB 13-16)

In the Classroom:

1. Introduction—Ask students to recall the previous night’s reading. What is white supremacy? How did some whites use violence to control Southern society? Distribute “Biography of Ida B. Wells” and ask students to read it individually, or read it aloud together as a class. Discuss the biography if necessary.

2. Working in Groups—Divide the class into groups of three to four students. Give each student a copy of “The Writings of Ida B. Wells.” Instruct students to read the excerpts and discuss the questions together. Each student should record responses to the questions.

Note: Some of the language in the excerpts is challenging. Students may find it useful to underline sections or phrases that they do not understand, and then address these as a class.

3. Class Discussion—Review the excerpts and ask students to share their responses to the questions. What were the dominant white views about lynching at the time? What were Wells’s messages to her readers? What strategies did she use to convince readers of the injustice of lynching and the need for action?

Whom do students think Wells was hoping to reach with her writing? Why might Wells have chosen to address an audience beyond the regions where lynching occurred? How might increasing

global awareness about lynching influence the U.S. reputation in the world (for example, as a leader in democracy)?

Although it may be difficult or upsetting for students to consider lynching as an aspect of U.S. history, consider asking students to contemplate what it might have been like to live as an African American with the threat of violence or lynching during this time period. How might this have affected people’s daily lives? What challenges did African Americans face in trying to resist this system?

Read the following statement to the class:

“The men and women in the South who disapprove of lynching and remain silent on the perpetration of such outrages, are... accomplices, accessories before and after the fact, equally guilty with the actual law-breakers...”

—Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases*, 1892

What does this statement mean? Do students agree with this statement? Why or why not? Why do students think that members of society tolerated lynching? What difficulties would a white person wishing to challenge white supremacy face?

Ida B. Wells believed that documenting lynching and disseminating accurate information was a necessary step in creating change. Although she and other anti-lynching activists increased awareness about lynching, the practice continued for decades. Do students believe that journalism is an effective means of activism? Can students think of any current examples of writing or journalism that has raised awareness about injustice?

You may wish to conclude the discussion by asking students to make connections between violent white supremacy during this period of U.S. history and violent white supremacy in U.S. society today.

Homework:

Students should read Part II and complete “Study Guide—Part II” (TRB 17-18) or “Advanced Study Guide—Part II” (TRB-19).

Biography of Ida B. Wells

Ida B. Wells was an African American journalist and activist. She worked to promote equal rights and justice for African Americans and women, and was an early leader in the campaign against lynching in the United States.

Wells was born in 1862 in Holly Springs, Mississippi to enslaved parents during the early years of the Civil War. As a young teacher in Tennessee, Wells refused to budge when a train conductor ordered her to move from the first-class seat she had purchased to a crowded train car designated for African Americans. After being removed from the train, she took legal action against the railroad company.

Wells frequently wrote about racial injustice, and became a co-owner, editor, and reporter for a newspaper in Memphis, Tennessee. In 1892, after several of her friends were lynched, she focused her writing on the topic. Lynching is the mob killing of someone for an alleged offense, without authorization by the law. Mobs killed victims by hanging, shooting, burning, or other means. Lynching was a problem that worsened throughout Wells's lifetime—it increased in the wake of the Civil War and intensified after Reconstruction. In 1892, several men in Tennessee threatened to torture and kill her because of her work. She left the South, and continued writing and speaking internationally on the topic of lynching. Wells also contributed to the founding of the National Association for Colored Women (NACW) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Wells's campaign challenged popular misperceptions about lynching, and advocated for equal treatment and protection for African Americans under the rule of law. By providing information about specific cases, Wells portrayed lynching as a brutal and oppressive tool that whites used to maintain power and authority.

In the preface to one of her pamphlets on lynching, Wells writes,

“This statement...is a contribution to truth, an array of facts, the perusal of which it is hoped will stimulate this great American Republic to demand that justice be done.... It is with no pleasure I have dipped my hands in the corruption here exposed. Somebody must show that the Afro-American race is more sinned against than sinning, and it seems to have fallen upon me to do so.”

—Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases*, 1892



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The Writings of Ida B. Wells

Instructions: Below are excerpts from Ida B. Wells's work. Read the quotes carefully and complete the questions that follow. Be prepared to report back to the class. Note that section A is made up of quotations from white newspapers that Wells included in her publication. Sections B, C, and D are Wells's original writing.

A. Southern White Newspapers

Wells's work challenged popular beliefs about the causes and justifications for lynching. Below, she quotes two Southern newspaper articles that express widely held views about the need for lynching at that time. The "crimes" that lynching victims were accused of were often not things that we would consider crimes today. The accusations of more serious offenses, such as rape or murder, were often false.

From Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases, 1892

[The Memphis *Daily Commercial*, May 17] "Nothing but the most prompt, speedy and extreme punishment can hold in check the horrible and bestial propensities of the Negro race.... The generation of Negroes which have grown up since the war have lost in large measure the traditional and wholesome awe of the white race which kept the Negroes in subjection.... There is no longer a restraint upon the brute passion of the Negro. What is to be done? The crime of rape is always horrible, but [for] the Southern man there is nothing which so fills the soul with horror, loathing and fury as the outraging of a white woman by a Negro...."

[The Memphis *Evening Scimitar*, June 4] "Aside from the violation of white women by Negroes...the chief cause of trouble between the races in the South is the Negro's lack of manners. In the state of slavery he learned politeness from association with white people, who took pains to teach him."

Questions:

1. The second paragraph describes how whites "took pains to teach" enslaved people "manners" and "politeness." How does this racist perspective differ from what you know about race relations and the effects of slavery?
2. According to the newspapers that Wells cites, what are two justifications for the lynching of African Americans?

B. Lynching Cases

Wells wrote detailed accounts of lynching that occurred throughout the country and challenged the widespread belief that lynching victims were men who had committed violent crimes. She documented many attacks targeting successful African Americans or those who attempted to participate politically in their communities. Wells also described cases of women and children being lynched.

Case 1

From Mob Rule in New Orleans, 1900

“Feb. 22d, 1898, at Lake City, S.C., Postmaster Baker and his infant child were burned to death by a mob that had set fire to his house. Mr. Baker’s crime was that he had refused to give up the post office, to which he had been appointed by the National Government. The mob had tried to drive him away by persecution and intimidation. Finding that all else had failed, they went to his home in the dead of night and set fire to his house, and as the family rushed forth they were greeted by a volley of bullets. The father and his baby were shot through the open door and...were burned to death. The remainder of the family, consisting of the wife and five children, escaped with their lives from the burning house, but all of them were shot, one of the number made a cripple for life.”

Case 2

From A Red Record, 1895

“At Moberly, Mo., February 18th and at Fort Madison, S.C., June 2d, both in 1892, a record was made in the line of lynching which should certainly appeal to every humanitarian who has any regard for the sacredness of human life. John Hughes, of Moberly, and Isaac Lincoln, of Fort Madison, and Will Lewis in Tullahoma, Tenn., suffered death for no more serious charge than that they ‘were saucy to white people.’ In the days of slavery it was held to be a very serious matter for a colored person to fail to yield the sidewalk at the demand of a white person, and it will not be surprising to find some evidence of this intolerance existing in the days of freedom. But the most that could be expected as a penalty for acting or speaking saucily to a white person would be a slight physical chastisement to make the Negro ‘know his place’ or an arrest and fine.... After being charged with their offense and apprehended, [the men] were taken by a mob and lynched. The civil authorities...did not feel it their duty to make any investigation after the Negroes were killed.”

Questions:

1. According to Wells, why were the individuals in Cases 1 and 2 lynched?

Case 1:

Case 2:

2. How do these cases provide a different perspective on lynching than the newspaper excerpts that Wells cites in Part A?

C. Message to African Americans

Although any challenge to white violence was incredibly dangerous, Wells called upon African Americans to use a variety of methods to stop lynching.

From Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases, 1892

“To Northern capital and Afro-American labor the South owes its rehabilitation. If labor is withdrawn capital will not remain. The Afro-American is thus the backbone of the South.... The Afro Americans of Memphis denounced the lynching of three of their best citizens, and urged and waited for the authorities to act in the matter and bring the lynchers to justice. No attempt was made to do so, and the black men left the city by thousands, bringing about great stagnation in every branch of business. Those who remained so injured the business of the street car company by staying off the cars.”

From Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases, 1892

“Of the many inhuman outrages of this present year, the only case where the proposed lynching did *not* occur, was where the men armed themselves in Jacksonville, Fla., and Paducah, Ky., and prevented it. The only times an Afro-American who was assaulted got away has been when he had a gun and used it in self-defense. The lesson this teaches and which every Afro American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for the protection which the law refuses to give.... The more the Afro-American yields and cringes and begs...the more he is insulted, outraged, and lynched.”

Questions:

1. Based on the excerpt and Part I of the reading, why did Wells describe African Americans as “the backbone of the South”?
2. According to Wells, how can African Americans use their economic power to put an end to lynching?
3. Why does Wells argue that African Americans should defend themselves with force?

D. Appeal to a Broader Audience

Wells hoped to reach readers throughout the United States and around the world with her writing. She believed that a U.S. failure to resolve the issue of lynching would be a failure of the nation.

From A Red Record, 1895

“The Negro does not claim that all of the one thousand black men, women and children who have been hanged, shot and burned alive during the past ten years, were innocent of the charges made against them.... But we do insist that the punishment is not the same for both classes of criminals. In lynching, opportunity is not given to the Negro to defend himself against the unsupported accusations of white men and women. The word of the accuser is held to be true and the excited bloodthirsty mob demands that the rule of law be reversed and instead of proving the accused to be guilty, the victim of their hate and revenge must prove himself innocent. No evidence he can offer will satisfy the mob.”

From A Red Record, 1895

“‘Equality before the law,’ must become a fact as well as a theory before America is truly the ‘land of the free and home of the brave’... It is the white man’s civilization and the white man’s government which are on trial. This crusade will determine whether that civilization can maintain itself by itself, or whether anarchy shall prevail; whether this Nation shall write itself down a success at self government, or in deepest humiliation admit its failure complete.”

From A Red Record, 1895

“[W]e demand a fair trial by law for those accused of crime, and punishment by law after honest conviction.... Surely the humanitarian spirit of this country which reaches out to denounce the treatment of the Russian Jews, the Armenian Christians, the laboring poor of Europe...will no longer refuse to lift its voice on this subject.... Can you remain silent and inactive when such things are being done in our own community and country? Is your duty to humanity in the United States less binding?”

Questions:

1. Wells writes, “‘Equality before the law,’ must become a fact as well as a theory before America is truly the ‘land of the free and home of the brave.’” According to her writing and last night’s reading, in what ways were African Americans *unequal* before the law during this time period?
2. What does Wells believe African Americans are entitled to? (See the third excerpt.)
3. According to Wells, why should readers care about the issue of lynching? (Each excerpt provides a different reason.)