Article

The Selma-to-Montgomery Marches

How a 54-mile walk helped a journey for civil rights

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For 100 years after African Americans were granted the right to vote, that right was steadily taken away. In March 1965, thousands of people held a series of marches in the U.S. state of Alabama in an effort to get that right back. Their march from Selma to Montgomery, the capital, was a success, leading to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

African Americans first earned their right to vote in 1870, just five years after the United States ended the Civil War. That year, Congress adopted the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, which guaranteed the right to vote to black men of voting age. (Black women, like all other women, were not allowed to vote until 1920.)

The 15th Amendment was successful in getting black men to the polls. Selma elected its first black congressman, Benjamin Sterling Turner, the year the amendment passed. Citizens of Selma then elected black city councilmen and a criminal court judge.

However, in 1876, the U.S. Supreme Court and many state courts narrowed the scope of the 15th Amendment. They said it did not always guarantee the right to vote. Soon, black men began to lose their voting rights, especially in the South. This region of the United States had supported the Confederacy during the Civil War and had relied on slaves for much labor before their emancipation, or freedom.

Black voters were disenfranchised. To be disenfranchised means that a person or group of people loses the right to vote. Disenfranchisement happened in many ways.

Disenfranchisement

People who register a person to vote are called voter registrars or voting registrars. In the South, voter registrars were given broad powers to prevent black people from registering to vote any way they could.

Black people wanting to register to vote were given what were called “literacy tests.” Literacy is the ability to read and is not a requirement to vote in the United States. However, these literacy tests did not even test reading ability.

Registrars could ask people any kind of question about local, state, and federal government. If a potential voter did not answer correctly, the registrar did not allow that person to vote. Questions could be ridiculously difficult. A sample question asked on a literacy test was, "Name one area of authority over state militia reserved exclusively to

the states." (Answer: The appointment of officers.) White people were not given literacy tests.

If black voters passed a literacy test, they were often forced to pay a poll tax. A poll tax was a fee that a voter had to pay in order to vote. The amount of the poll tax varied—usually between $1 and $2. This seems like a small amount. However, the yearly income of a person in the 1880s could be as low as $70 or $80.

Civil rights leader Rosa Parks wrote about the poll tax in her autobiography, *My Story*. "You had to pay the poll tax back to the time you were twenty-one," she remembered. "I got registered in 1945 when I was thirty-two years old, so I had to pay $1.50 for each of the eleven years between the time I was twenty-one and the time I was thirty-two. At that time $16.50 was a lot of money."

Finally, after the tests had been passed and the poll tax paid, blacks had to find a registered voter willing to say they were good people and would make fine voters. Most voters in the South were white and would not do this.

As a result, very few black people were able to vote. They were fired from their jobs and received death threats just for trying to register. By 1965, there were counties in Alabama where not a single black person had voted for more than 50 years. In Selma, about half the voting-age population was black, but only 14 blacks had been added to the voting rolls between 1954 and 1961.

Civil Rights Movement

But things were starting to change. In 1963, Bernard Lafayette, a member of a civil rights group called the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced "snick"), came to Selma's Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church. It was the first mass meeting for voter rights in the South. For the next two years, SNCC and the Dallas County Voters League registered 200 new voters. (Selma is in Dallas County, Alabama.) This was progress, but it was barely 1 percent of the 15,000 eligible black voters in Dallas County.

Amelia Boynton of the voters league wrote Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.— already the most famous civil rights leader in the United States—and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and asked them to help with their voting rights campaign.

Alabama was the center of the civil rights movement, which defined itself on nonviolence and political action. King helped lead the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, which led to a Supreme Court decision that said segregated busing was unconstitutional. In 1963, King wrote "Letter from Birmingham Jail," where he was confined after taking part in a protest of segregation in Birmingham, Alabama.

Selma itself had a history of political activism. The town's black citizens were committed to helping people register to vote. But they were challenged by Sheriff Jim Clark, the Dallas County law enforcement leader. Clark was a vicious racist and was often violent. Civil rights activists believed that if people from across the United States knew how badly Clark treated the citizens of Selma, they would be moved to help.

On January 2, 1965, King held a mass meeting in Selma, declaring: "We are going to bring a voting bill into the streets of Selma, Alabama." Demonstrators would walk from Brown Chapel AME, the church were King delivered the speech, and end up at the Dallas County courthouse. There, they would register to vote.

Clark met the protesters with violence. The front pages of national newspapers carried photos of him treating the demonstrators very badly. He shoved Amelia Boynton half a block down to a patrol car and beat hotel manager Annie Lee Cooper in the head with his billy club. (A billy club, also called a baton or truncheon, is the stick that law enforcement officers often carry.) Clark hit the Rev. C.T. Vivian so hard that he broke a finger. On February 10, Clark and his men rounded up a group of children in front of the courthouse and forced them to run five miles to a prison camp outside of town.

Clark's actions strengthened the determination of the marchers, and drew the attention of the rest of the nation.

The marches and demonstrations in Selma were not the only ones happening in Alabama. To the west, in neighboring Perry County, a night march was held to protest the jailing of activist the Rev. James Orange. Police and racist whites beat the marchers. Army veteran Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot in the stomach by a state trooper as he rushed to protect his mother from attack. Jackson died in Selma's Good Samaritan Hospital eight days later. It was Jackson's death that sparked the idea of a march from Selma to Montgomery to demand equal voting rights.

The idea of expanding the march from the courthouse of Dallas County to the Alabama State Capitol in Montgomery, 87 kilometers (54 miles) away, showed how much the movement had grown. Marchers wanted to pressure Alabama Gov. George Wallace to guarantee black people the right to vote in his state.

First March: Bloody Sunday

The first march took place on March 7, 1965. Marchers filed out of Brown Chapel AME and tried to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge, heading west out of Selma and toward Montgomery.

Sheyann Webb was 8 years old. She was the youngest marcher that day. She describes getting to the high part of the bridge and seeing Clark and his men on the other side. "They were in a line—they looked like a blue picket fence—stretched across the highway."

Clark's group included law enforcement officers, state troopers, and local citizens recruited as a "posse." Gov. Wallace and Clark called the march a threat to public safety and were determined to stop it.

As about 525 marchers made their way across the bridge, officers asked them to stop the march and disperse, or scatter. The leaders of the march, John Lewis of SNCC and the Rev. Hosea Williams of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, said the march was a peaceful protest. The marchers did not disperse.

All local and state police were armed. Many of the sheriff's posse had their own weapons. After Lewis and Williams refused to disperse the marchers, troopers threw canisters of tear gas at them. Police on foot and on horseback beat marchers with billy clubs. They shot water from fire hoses with enough pressure to knock down and bruise the marchers. Members of the posse attacked the marchers with crude weapons made of rubber tubing wrapped in barbed wire.

Marchers fled back across the bridge to Brown Chapel and the surrounding neighborhood. Physicians at Good Samaritan Hospital reported that wounds ranged from broken teeth and severe head gashes to fractured ribs and wrists. John Lewis suffered a fractured skull and Amelia Boynton was beaten unconscious. About 70 to 80 people were treated, and 17 of the most seriously injured were sent to the hospital overnight.

This first march to Montgomery is known as Bloody Sunday.

Second March: Turnaround Tuesday

Photographs and television footage of the events of Bloody Sunday were national news. Americans were forced to recognize the violent racism in their own borders. Millions of Americans were horrified by the acts of Clark and Wallace, and became supporters of civil rights.

King encouraged these new supporters to come to Selma for a second march to Montgomery. Specifically, King sent a telegram to religious leaders across the country asking them to join him in Selma. Many people of all races and spiritual backgrounds responded to him.

On Tuesday, March 9, just two days after the events of Bloody Sunday, King led a second march to the Edmund Pettus Bridge. This time, there were about 1,500 marchers. Again, they were met by troopers and other law enforcement officers. However, as the officers approached King to ask him to disperse the crowd, King knelt in prayer.

Marchers prayed and turned back to Brown Chapel, deciding not to risk another day of violence. This second march is sometimes called Turnaround Tuesday for this reason.

Tuesday evening, three ministers in town for the march were brutally attacked in Selma. One, the Rev. James Reeb, died from his wounds.

President Lyndon Johnson called the violence that was happening in Alabama "an American tragedy." A week after Reeb's death, Johnson's voting rights proposals reached Congress.

Third March: Success

The third march to Montgomery started on March 21, 1965. During the next four days, peaceful protesters from all over the country marched for civil rights. This time, marchers were protected by members of the National Guard, ordered there by President Johnson.

Between 3,000 and 8,000 people marched from Brown Chapel on March 21. However, only 300 were allowed to march on the two-lane highway to Montgomery.

Marchers walked an average of 12 miles per day and slept in farmers' fields. The weather was unusually cold. Temperatures dropped below freezing, and it rained almost every day. Food was supplied by local churches and other organizations that supported civil rights. The final "campsite" of the march was on land owned by the City of St. Jude, a Catholic charity that had supported the black community outside Montgomery for years.

Marchers were joined at the City of St. Jude by celebrities. Some, like actor and musician Harry Belafonte, had marched from Brown Chapel days earlier. Others, such as entertainers Sammy Davis Jr., Nina Simone, Tony Bennett, and Peter, Paul, and Mary, joined for the final walk to Montgomery.

Twenty-five thousand peaceful protesters made their way to the Alabama State Capitol on March 25. Gov. Wallace refused to meet King. King's speech, given on the steps of the capitol, encouraged civil rights supporters not to give up hope.

"I know some of you are asking today, 'How long will it take?' I come to say to you this afternoon however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth pressed to the earth will rise again. How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long, because you will reap what you sow. How long? Not long, because the arm of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

Voting Rights Act of 1965

The Voting Rights Act was signed into law on August 6, 1965, in the same room where President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. The law stopped literacy tests in 26 states, including Alabama. It replaced local voter registrars with examiners from the federal government. It allowed the attorney general of the United States to prosecute state and local authorities that still charged a poll tax.

The law had immediate effect. Thirty-two thousand black people registered to vote by the end of August in Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and Louisiana. By October, that number rose to 110,000. From 1964 to 1966, the number of registered voters in Alabama went from 23 percent to 51 percent. In Mississippi, the number went from

6.7 percent to 33 percent; in 1968, the number rose to 59 percent.

Candidates quickly realized they could not appeal to racist whites and still get elected. One of those candidates was Clark. He lost to Wilson Baker in the 1966 sheriff's race.

Black voters helped elect black candidates and moderate whites to public office. By 1970, 711 blacks held elected positions in the South, nearly 10 times more than they had just a decade earlier.

In 2006, Congress voted to extend the Voting Rights Act for another 25 years.

John Lewis, the SNCC leader who was involved with the Selma to Montgomery marches from the beginning, is now a Georgia congressman. Lewis has returned to Selma many times for marches on the anniversary of Bloody Sunday.

On the 40th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, Lewis said, "President Johnson signed that Act, but it was written by the people of Selma."

VOCABULARY

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
Abraham Lincoln	*noun*	(1809-1865) 16th American president.
Amelia Boynton	*noun*	(1911present) American civil rights leader.
amendment	*noun*	change made to a law or set of laws.
annual	*adjective*	yearly.
appoint	*verb*	to assign to a position.
barbed wire	*noun*	twisted metal with sharpened points, often used for fences.
Bernard Lafayette	*noun*	(1940-present) civil rights leader.
billy club	*noun*	club carried by a police officer. Also called a truncheon or baton.
black	*adjective*	person of African descent.
Bloody Sunday	*noun*	March 7, 1965, when police and supporters violently assaulted peaceful marchers near the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama.
brutally	*adverb*	roughly or not gently.
capital	*noun*	city where a region's government is located.
Catholic	*adjective*	having to do with the Christian denomination with the Pope as its leader.
celebrity	*noun*	famous person.
century	*noun*	100 years.
charity	*noun*	organization that helps those in need.
city councilman	*noun*	person who is elected to the council, or governing body, of a town or city.
civil rights movement	*noun*	(~1954-1968) process to establish equal rights for all people in the United States, focusing on the rights of African Americans.

Civil War	*noun*	(1860-1865) American conflict between the Union (north) and Confederacy (south).
committed	*adjective*	dedicated or loyal.
Confederacy	*noun*	Confederate States of America, states which broke from the United States to form a new government during the Civil War.
criminal court judge	*noun*	person who decides the facts in criminal trials.
crude	*adjective*	basic or raw.
decade	*noun*	10 years.
define	*verb*	to identify or associate with.
demonstrate	*verb*	to show how something is done.
disenfranchise	*verb*	to take away certain rights, usually voting.
disperse	*verb*	to scatter or spread out widely.
eligible	*adjective*	qualified or worthy.
emancipation	*noun*	freedom.
Emancipation Proclamation	*noun*	(1863) declaration by President Abraham Lincoln during the American Civil War that freed all people held as slaves in most rebellious states.
exclusive	*adjective*	limited to a few characteristics.
expand	*verb*	to grow or get larger.
federal	*adjective*	having to do with a nation's government (as opposed to local or regional government).
fee	*noun*	price or cost.
fracture	*verb*	to break.
frustrate	*verb*	to discourage or impede.
gash	*noun*	deep cut.
George Wallace	*noun*	(1919-1998) four-term governor of Alabama.
government	*noun*	system or order of a nation, state, or other political unit.
Harry Belafonte	*noun*	(1927present) American entertainer and civil rights activist.
highway	*noun*	large public road.
horrify	*verb*	to shock and scare.
Hosea Williams	*noun*	(19262000) American civil rights leader.
immediate	*adjective*	quickly or right away.
indicate	*verb*	to display or show.
Jim Clark	*noun*	(19222007) Alabama sheriff.
John Lewis	*noun*	(1940present) American politician and civil rights leader.
law enforcement	*noun*	individuals or organizations that make sure people obey government rules.

literacy	*noun*	ability to read and write.
literacy test	*noun*	written proof that a person can read and write, sometimes used to deny sufferage to certain groups.
Lyndon Johnson	*noun*	(1908-1973) 36th president of the United States.
Martin Luther King, Jr.	*noun*	(1929-1968) American pastor and civil rights leader.
militia	*noun*	group of armed, ordinary citizens who are called up for emergencies and are not full-time soldiers.
Montgomery Bus Boycott	*noun*	(December 1, 1955December 20, 1956) protest to end discrimination on city buses that took the form of people in Montgomery, Alabama, refusing to ride buses until African Americans were given equal rights to seating.
moral	*adjective*	right, just, or good.
narrow	*verb*	to restrict the focus of something, or make it smaller.
National Guard	*noun*	military force controlled by a U.S. state but funded by the federal government and called up as part of the Army during national emergencies.
nonviolence	*noun*	philosophy of rejecting physical force and transforming society through peaceful protest.
pastor	*noun*	spiritual leader of a church.
polls	*noun*	places where people vote.
poll tax	*noun*	discriminatory tax on voting, intended to disenfranchise black people.
posse	*noun*	group of people who help a sheriff or other official with law enforcement.
potential	*noun*	possibility.
prevent	*verb*	to keep something from happening.
proceed	*verb*	to go forward.
progress	*noun*	forward movement.
proposal	*noun*	suggested plan.
racism	*noun*	government or social system based on the belief that one ethnic group is superior to all others.
racist	*adjective*	community or government policy of denying certain rights to people based on their ancestry, usually signified by skin color.
reap	*verb*	to take in or harvest a crop.
recognize	*verb*	to identify or acknowledge.
requirement	*noun*	something that is needed.
ridiculously	*adverb*	in an absurd manner.
Rosa Parks	*noun*	(1913-2005) American civil rights leader.
SCLC	*noun*	(Southern Christian Leadership Conference) civil rights group often associated with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

segregation	*noun*	separation.
Selma to Montgomery March	*noun*	(March 21, 1965-March 25, 1965) protest to support voting rights for African Americans, taking the form of a 87-kilometer (54-mile) walk between the Alabama town of Selma and the capital, Montgomery.
severe	*adjective*	harsh.
sheriff	*noun*	law enforcement officer, usually of a county.
slave	*noun*	person who is owned by another person or group of people.
SNCC	*noun*	(Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) leading civil rights organization in the U.S. during the 1960s.
sow	*verb*	to plant or scatter seed.
state trooper	*noun*	police officer who works for a U.S. state, not a local agency or the federal government.
Supreme Court	*noun*	highest judicial authority on issues of national or constitutional importance in the U.S.
tear gas	*noun*	aerosol gas that causes extreme irritation of the eyes, leading to tears and sometimes vomiting. Also called CS gas.
telegram	*noun*	message sent by an electronic method of communication called a telegraph.
the South	*noun*	geographic and political region in the southeast and south-central parts of the United States, including all the states that supported the Confederacy during the Civil War.
town	*noun*	human settlement larger than a village and smaller than a city.
tragedy	*noun*	very sad event.
truncheon	*noun*	club carried by a police officer. Also called a billy club or baton.
Turnaround Tuesday	*noun*	(Tuesday, March 9, 1965) day Martin Luther King, Jr., led a group of protesters in Selma, Alabama, from Brown Chapel to the Edmund Pettus Bridge and back.
unconscious	*noun*	unaware, asleep, or in a sleep-like state.
unconstitutional	*adjective*	against the laws of the United States Constitution.
universe	*noun*	all known matter, energy, and space.
varied	*adjective*	diverse.
viciously	*adverb*	in a mean or cruel manner.
violence	*noun*	acts that cause physical harm to another person.
voting registrar	*noun*	person who registers someone else to vote.
Voting Rights Act	*noun*	(1965) American legislation outlawing practices designed to prevent eligible voters from voting.

For Further Exploration

Articles & Profiles

- National Geographic News: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Civil Rights Dream at 40
- National Geographic Traveler: Family Vacation Planner—Alabama

Websites

- National Park Service: Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail
- National Voting Rights Museum and Institute