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Freedom Day in Hattiesburg (Jan)

Hattiesburg, Mississippi, population 35,000 in 1960, is the seat of Forrest County where almost every white is registered to vote, but only 12 of the 7,500 eligible Blacks — far less than 1% — are on the rolls. Unlike the Delta counties where Blacks are the majority, in Forrest County Blacks are a bit under one-third of the population. And also unlike the Delta where agriculture completely dominates the economy and poverty is extreme, Hattiesburg has the benefit of some Black-owned farms, some timber-based manufacturing, the University of Southern Mississippi, and adjacent Camp Shelby, the second largest Army base in America. So while most Hattiesburg Blacks are poor — median annual family income is \$4,000 (equal to \$29,600 in 2012) — their economic situation is not as desperate as in the Delta. Just south of Hattiesburg is the unincorporated town of Palmer's Crossing, one of Mississippi's historically Black communities where African-Americans own property and businesses, and which to some degree serve as havens from white oppression.

[Today, Palmer's Crossing is incorporated into Hattiesburg.]

Hattiesburg & Palmer's Crossing are no strangers to the freedom struggle. When [Clyde Kennard](#) was framed and jailed in 1959 for trying to integrate the university, NAACP leader Vernon Dahmer and many others worked to free him. For years, Forrest County Blacks filed voting rights lawsuits against Therron Lynd, the notoriously racist Registrar of Voters. As of March 1962, he has not allowed a single Black to register, but he's registered 1,836 whites without requiring them to even fill out an application or take the literacy test. Lynd not only requires Blacks to take the official test, he is famous for making up questions on the spot such as "*How many bubbles in a bar of soap?*" then "failing" the applicant regardless of the answer. As in the rest of the state, Blacks who try to register face brutal violence, jailing, firings, and evictions. And also as elsewhere in Mississippi, anyone who tries to picket, march, sit-in, or protest in any other way, is instantly arrested.

In March of 1962, two SNCC organizers — [Curtis Hayes](#) and Hollis Watkins, both veterans of the [McComb](#) project and the Pike County jail — arrive in Hattiesburg to begin a [COFO](#) voter registration campaign and shake Hattiesburg to its social roots. They find fertile ground. In addition to Vernon Dahmer, there is NAACP leader J.C. Fairly, beauty-shop owner Peggy Jean Connor, and over in Palmer's Crossing there is Victoria Jackson Gray — an SCLC [Citizenship School](#) teacher, and later a SNCC field organizer of renown. Along with John Henry Gould, Johnnie Mae Walker, and others, they found the Forrest County Voters League and begin holding voter-

registration meetings in St. Johns United Methodist Church in Palmers Crossing. When Hayes and Watkins are transferred to the Delta in September, Victoria Gray assumes leadership of the Voters League.

By the Fall of 1963, Hattiesburg and Palmer's Crossing are centers of Movement activity. A storefront owned by Mrs. Lenon Woods on Mobile Street in the heart of Hattiesburg's Black community becomes the SNCC Freedom House and COFO headquarters. After being released from jail in [Winona](#), SNCC organizer [Lawrence Guyot](#) is assigned to Hattiesburg as project director. When [Freedom Ballot](#) votes are cast in November, almost half (3,500 of 7,500) of Forrest County's eligible Blacks participate in the mock vote, the highest percentage of any county in the state.

Building on the Freedom Ballot success, movement leaders call for a Freedom Day in Hattiesburg. Modeled on the one in [Selma](#), it is to be a major mobilization of potential voters, local activists & students, and SNCC leadership. Working with the Commission on Religion and Race (CORR) of the National Council of Churches, SNCC asks northern ministers, most of them white, to participate in the hope that as in Selma they will draw national media attention and that their presence will both prevent police repression and pressure the Federal government to enforce legal rulings requiring Theron Lynd to stop blocking Black voting rights.

This experiment of using northerners occurs in the context of a fierce debate within SNCC over the idea of a [Mississippi Summer Project](#) to bring a large number of white supporters into Mississippi. SNCC's Black activists are divided. The presence of whites might (it is hoped) provide some protection for local Blacks, focus national attention on denial of human rights, and increase pressure on the Johnson administration to enforce the Constitution and Federal court rulings. But using whites for protection that is not given to Blacks perpetuates the racist double-standard they so strongly oppose, and there is deep concern that highly educated whites will dominate the fledgling community organizations being slowly built by Mississippi Blacks. Local leaders in Hattiesburg, however, are clear — they want all the support they can muster and if white clergymen are willing to put their bodies on the line at the Forrest County courthouse they are welcome.

On the eve of Freedom Day, some fifty northern clergymen — mostly Presbyterians, some Episcopalians and Methodists, a Unitarian, and two Jewish Rabbis — arrive in Hattiesburg and Palmer's Crossing. Most are white, a few are Black and one is a Chinese-American from San Francisco. Led by the Rev. John Coventry Smith, some are ready to picket the courthouse which they know in Mississippi normally means immediate arrest. Others are there to witness, but are not yet ready to face jail.

The mass meeting that night is the largest held to date. More than 600 people are jammed into St. Paul's Methodist church and overflow outside. Among them are James Forman, Fannie Lou Hamer, John Lewis, Amzie Moore, and Bob Moses. State NAACP President Aaron Henry is arrested on some pretext as he drives into town, but he's bailed out in time to address the meeting. Annelle Ponder of SCLC, Dave Dennis of CORE, Lawrence Guyot of SNCC, and local leaders Vernon Dahmer and Victoria Gray speak. As does Ella Baker of SNCC who says:

Even if segregation is gone, we will still need to be free; we will still have to see that everyone has a job. Even if we can all vote, if people are still hungry, we will not be free ... Singing alone is not enough; we need schools and learning ... Remember, we are not fighting for the freedom of the Negro alone, but for the freedom of the human spirit, a larger freedom that encompasses all mankind." — Ella Baker. [1]

January 22nd, 1964, is Freedom Day in Hattiesburg. A cold rain is falling. Fifty Blacks, mostly students plus a few adults, and thirty of the northern clergy, picket the Forrest County courthouse. Some carry signs with [SNCC's new slogan](#) "One Man One Vote." Close to 100 Black adults are lined up at the building to register, their numbers dwarfing all previous attempts.

A phalanx of cops and volunteer "auxiliary police" (possemen) in helmets and rain slickers, guns on their hips, clubs in their hands, march down the middle of Main Street towards the protesters. Using a bullhorn, they issue their order: "*This is the Hattiesburg Police Department. We're ordering you to disperse. Clear the sidewalk!*" The pickets hold the line. No one leaves. The cops threaten again. The pickets hold. SNCC leader Bob Moses is arrested for "Disturbing the Peace" when he tries to escort an elderly Black woman into the courthouse to register. But none of the pickets are arrested. For the first time in living memory, an inter-racial civil rights demonstration in Mississippi is not suppressed. As it becomes clear there won't be a mass jailing, more people join the line, swelling it to over 200 who by the end of the day are massed on the courthouse steps singing freedom songs (*see [photos](#)*).

Theron Lynd allows only four voter applicants at a time into the building. He slowly takes an hour to process each application. Meanwhile, the other applicants continue to stand in the cold rain waiting their turn. Whites are allowed to freely enter the building, but Blacks are not. Justice Department officials and FBI agents take notes, but refuse to intervene. When the courthouse is closed at noon for lunch, only 12 applicants have been processed. The rain, the waiting, and the pickets continue all day until the courthouse closes at 5pm.

Yale graduate Oscar Chase, a white member of SNCC, is arrested on a phony vehicle charge. He is put in a cell with white prisoners who beat him into bloody un-

consciousness while the guards watch. The most brutal of the white inmates is rewarded with early release. After he is bailed out the next morning, historian Howard Zinn and two Movement lawyers take him to the FBI office to file a complaint. His clothes are covered with blood, his nose broken, and his face swollen and bruised. The FBI agent studies the clean-shaven college professor, the two lawyers in their neatly-pressed suits, and the battered freedom fighter. Then he asks: "*Who was it got the beating?*"

Freedom Day is considered a Movement victory. The pickets are not dispersed by police billy clubs, nor are there mass arrests. More than 150 Forrest County Blacks defy generations of repression by trying to register. Therron Lynd is forced to allow at least some of them into the office to fill out the application and take the literacy test. But it is only a small, partial victory. Neither the Justice Department nor the FBI enforce either the Constitution, Federal law, or court orders to protect voting rights and few, if any, Blacks are actually registered. And when some of those who protested or attempted to register are later fired from their jobs, the Federal government does nothing.

The next day, the picket line returns to the courthouse. All day they picket, and the following day, and every day, in what becomes known as the "Perpetual Picket." Week after week, month after month until the late spring when the focus shifts to [Freedom Summer](#) organizing, relays of northern clergy join local Blacks on the line. Though there are no mass busts, individual activists continue to be arrested, Guyot makes a freedom speech and is jailed for "corrupting minors." Then in April the state legislature passes a draconian (and utterly unconstitutional) anti-picketing law. The Hattiesburg movement defies it, and 44 pickets, including 8 northern ministers, are arrested.

Beatings, violence, evictions, and firings continue, but for the first time since the end of Reconstruction, Blacks file to run for national office — Fannie Lou Hamer of Ruleville and John Cameron of Hattiesburg for the 2nd and 5th Congressional Districts. And Victoria Jackson Gray of Palmers Crossing for U.S. Senate against the arch-racist John Stennis of Mississippi. The crack in the iceberg of segregation that began in [McComb](#), widened in [Greenwood](#), and expanded across the state in the [Freedom Ballot](#), now threatens to shatter and obliterate the old order.