

SPECIAL REPORT

DOCUMENTING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the “Children’s March” in Birmingham, Alabama, in May 1963, students at the University of California, Riverside, TRIO Mentoring Program were asked in Winter 2012 to volunteer to participate in a research project to document children and young people’s activities during the civil rights campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s. While actions of the young people in Birmingham were captured in film footage as they marched peacefully and were attacked by policeman with billy clubs, water hoses, and dogs, it was also the case that children and teenagers were involved in civil rights campaigns throughout the country, and they organized numerous demonstrations, boycotts, strikes, and protests for racial justice. Fourteen TRIO students signed up for “Independent Study” and read and reported on books that touched on those events. They used the reference work, *My Soul Is a Witness: A Chronology of the Civil Rights Era, 1954–1965* (2000) by Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin, to trace civil rights activism in U.S. cities and towns and identified locations where children and teenagers played significant roles and reported their findings.¹

UC Riverside students enrolled in Fall 2012 and Winter 2013 in the “Research Seminar—Children and Young People in the Civil Rights Movement” began gathering information on children and young people’s contributions to social activism in locations identified by the TRIO students. The goal was to gather newspaper articles, magazine stories, photographs, cartoons, and other primary sources that would be used in an exhibit to be mounted at the UC Riverside Orbach Library beginning in May 2013 as part of the half century commemorations of the Children’s March. While much has been researched and written on the roles of college and university students in civil rights activities, there has been little focus on elementary and high school students’ activism.²

UC RIVERSIDE COMMEMORATES THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
"CHILDREN'S CRUSADE" IN BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

Children, Youth, and Civil Rights, 1951-1965:

A Student Exhibit

Orbach Science Library - Lobby Level
6 May 2013 - 17 June 2013



Sponsored by the Department of History, the African Student Programs,
and the *Journal of African American History*

YOUNG PEOPLE AND MOVEMENTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Children and teenagers had participated in marches, demonstrations, boycotts, and other nonviolent direct action protests before the 1950s. *If We Could Change the World: Young People and America's Long Struggle for Racial Equality* (2009) by historian Rebecca de Schweinitz documented the social and political activism of student groups beginning in the 1930s. Young people organized marches and demonstrations throughout that decade calling for the freedom of the Scottsboro Boys, nine teenagers who were unfairly condemned to death in Scottsboro, Alabama, after being falsely accused of raping two white women. In Baltimore, Maryland, in 1931 the City-Wide Youth Forum, led by Juanita Jackson, offered lectures, circulated petitions to "Free the Scottsboro Boys," and participated in the boycotts of neighborhood stores and restaurants where no African Americans were employed. The "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns were organized in numerous cities by African American organizations, and in Baltimore it was the young people in the "Youth Forum" who

spearheaded the boycotts of local merchants who engaged in discriminatory hiring practices.³

The Youth Forum leader, Juanita Jackson, was tapped by NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White in 1936 to become the director of “Youth Programs” for the NAACP, and she established numerous college chapters, youth councils, and junior youth councils around the country. The student groups participated in marches and demonstrations against lynching and mob violence, job discrimination, voter disfranchisement practices, and the racist and demeaning portrayals of African Americans in elementary and high school textbooks used in the public schools.⁴ In Lumberton, North Carolina, in September 1946, African American students in the local youth council organized a boycott of the all-black high school and demanded more adequate facilities. Their strike in Lumberton gained national attention and the NAACP decided to take up the students’ cause. Sarah Caroline Thuesen’s *Greater Than Equal: African American Struggles for Schools and Citizenship in North Carolina, 1919–1965* documents the high school students’ successful campaign to improve school facilities and outcomes.⁵

The UC Riverside student researchers investigated the boycott launched by the black high school students who went on strike in April 1951 because Moton High School in Prince Edward County, Virginia, was old, rundown, and had few resources. The African American students were not interested in desegregating all-white Farmville High School, but they wanted up-to-date facilities similar to what was provided for white students. News of the student boycott, led by junior Barbara Johns, spread nationally. When local school officials resisted their demands, the student protestors found legal representation in NAACP lawyers Robert Carter, Oliver Hill, and Spottswood Robinson. In 1954 the case made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court as *Davis v. Prince Edward County School Board* and was included in the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision that declared legal segregation in public education unconstitutional.⁶

Unfortunately, Prince Edward County school officials decided to close the public school system altogether rather than obey the school desegregation mandate. In September 1959 the system was disbanded and parents in the county were expected to find other “private” schooling for their children. While the existing school facilities were used to house private “academies” for white students, the African American children had to find other ways to receive their schooling. Some moved in with relatives or willing families in other cities and states to attend school, but many were without access to public education for many years. It was not until officials in the Kennedy administration intervened and opened several schools in 1963, and the courts ruled that county officials had to provide public schooling, that the Prince Edward County public school system reopened in September 1963 on a desegregated basis. The student exhibit includ-

ed photos of the black and white high schools in Prince Edward, information on the NAACP litigation, and testimonies from African American students affected by the school closing.⁷

The team of researchers working on Prince Edward County, Virginia, gathered photos of Farmville High School in Prince Edward County (for whites) and photos of R. R. Moton High School, the “separate and unequal” high school for African American students, including one showing the antiquated heating from a coal stove. They also identified a photo of Barbara Johns, Moton High School student strike leader. Newspaper columns on the NAACP decision to include the students’ demands in a lawsuit against the county school board, *Davis v. Prince Edward County School Board*, were downloaded into the research team’s power point presentation. Once the public schools were closed, photos of the academies opened for white students (using the existing school facilities), and conferences took place between American Friends Service volunteers and African American children and parents to try and find suitable accommodations outside the county to attend schools.

CIVIL RIGHTS CAMPAIGNS AND SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

Another research team gathered materials on the famous “Little Rock Nine” who desegregated Center High School in Little Rock, Arkansas only after President Dwight D. Eisenhower called out the 101st Army Paratroopers to carry out the court’s order and to protect the teenagers. There have been numerous books and articles written on this incident, but the student researchers decided to present their own version using photos, magazines and newspaper articles, and interviews with the nine students who consistently demonstrated “grace under pressure.”⁸

Less well known nationally was the struggle to desegregate Girard College, a privately funded and state supported secondary school in North Philadelphia. Founded in 1837 through the bequest of merchant Stephen Girard to educate “poor, orphan white boys,” the local branch of the NAACP waged a 13-year struggle to gain the admission of black orphan boys. Under the leadership of NAACP president Cecil B. Moore, in addition to litigation, beginning in May 1965, protest marches were organized at the 10-foot high walls surrounding the school. Moore recruited neighborhood teenagers to serve as marshals for the picket lines and some were arrested after they scaled the walls and attempted to enter the school. The research team gathered photos of the teenage protesters and youthful litigants, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking at demonstrations, newspaper columns on the court rulings and other events, and images of the first black orphan boys enrolled at Girard College in September 1968.⁹

Elementary and secondary school students who engaged in district-wide boycotts to protest segregated, inadequate, and overcrowded schools became participants in the civil rights activism taking place in Chicago, New York City, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, and Riverside (California) in the 1960s. Student research teams gathered photos, flyers, posters, interview transcripts, attendance statistics, school reports, and newspaper and magazine articles that documented the movement for “Quality Integrated Education” in those cities. The student researchers also found photos of children attending the “freedom schools” opened to provide an alternative to the curriculum in the traditional public schools. The freedom school students learned about African American history, citizenship rights, and how their participation in the school boycott was part of the civil rights activism taking place in those cities. The student researchers also found the “freedom diplomas” and “freedom certificates” that hundreds of thousands of students received for attending one- or two-day courses of instruction at the hundreds of freedom schools that were opened.¹⁰

FREEDOM SCHOOLS AND YOUTH ACTIVISM

The original “freedom schools” were those opened during the Civil War by free African Americans in their homes and churches, by black and white missionaries sent to teach the newly-emancipated, and eventually by the federal government through the military and the Freedman’s Bureau (1865–1872). Some freedom schools became the first public schools in many parts of the South when state-sponsored schooling was adopted at the urging of the freedpeople.¹¹ While the hundreds of freedom schools opened during and after the Civil War are well known, the thousands of freedom schools opened in northern, midwestern, and western cities during the Quality Integrated Education movement in the early 1960s have been overshadowed by the highly successful Mississippi freedom schools open during the 1964 “Freedom Summer.”

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organizers working in Mississippi in 1963 and 1964 decided to invite people from throughout the United States to the state to participate in the voter registration campaigns and work in the freedom schools. There have been many personal and scholarly accounts of Freedom Summer, and the student researchers used those works and various online archives to identify photos of students attending some of the 40 freedom schools opened, and serving thousands of black students, as well as photos of the places where they met, and the materials—such as flyers and newspapers—they produced. Graduates of the freedom school summer program went on to become active in civil rights campaigns at their local schools, neighborhoods, and towns.¹²

In addition to Freedom Summer and the Mississippi freedom schools, the incident most closely associated with youth activism in civil rights activism is the Children's March in Birmingham, Alabama, in May 1963, as part of the protests organized by Dr. King, the Southern Christian Leadership Committee, SNCC, Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, and other local leaders. After Dr. King and others were arrested and sent to the Birmingham jail, the children and teenagers mobilized and began to descend on the downtown area when they were attacked violently and arrested by the police forces of Sheriff "Bull" Connor. The purpose of the student exhibit was to commemorate the political actions taken by the brave young people in Birmingham. While there is the stirring documentary film, *Mighty Times: The Children's March* (2004), produced by Hudson & Houston for the Teaching Tolerance project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, the student research team did their own work to recover the voices of the young protesters themselves while they were marching and jailed for their participation in "The Movement."¹³

The student exhibit is meant to answer the question: If children and teenagers marched and protested to gain equal rights and treatment in Birmingham in May 1963, what roles did they play in civil rights activism in other locations? It turns out they played a much greater role than has been recognized in the scholarship on the Civil Rights Movement. While there are many important scholarly works on the activism of middle class professionals, the Black Church, women, Democratic politicians, and federal officials on black civil rights advances, there has been much less attention paid to the youth. Rufus Burrow, Jr., in *And a Child Shall Lead Them: Martin Luther King Jr., Young People, and the Movement*, argues that "it was children and young people who boldly led the way in many civil rights campaigns, who energized the movement at strategic moments. They asserted themselves, making it clear once and for all that they were fully aware of the racial discrimination and its adverse effects on them." Tracing youth activism associated with Dr. King's campaigns in Montgomery and Birmingham, Alabama, and in Mississippi during the 1964 Freedom Summer, the 1965 Selma March, and other SCLC/SNCC demonstrations, Burrow found that "Martin Luther King never lost faith in young people and their ability and determination to help move this society in the direction of the beloved community."¹⁴

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Children and teenagers organized their own social justice campaigns before, during, and after the emergence of the civil rights campaigns organized and led by SNCC, SCLC, the Congress of Racial Equality, and Dr. King. As early as the 1870s and 1880s African American students protested the quality of schooling

they were receiving at Tuskegee, Hampton, and other black normal schools that were supposed to be providing training in the skilled trades such as carpentry, printing, and the “technical training needed in the industrial age.”¹⁵ In the 1920s black college students at Fisk, Hampton, Howard, and other colleges launched widespread protests against the racial segregation on the campuses and the absence of African American leadership.¹⁶


As was mentioned, the NAACP Youth Councils were active in many cities in the 1930s and 1940s—setting up picket lines to protest lynching and mob violence, supporting anti-lynching legislation that was pending in the U.S. Congress, and organizing boycotts of businesses that discriminated against African American workers and schools with inadequate resources.

DILLARD UNIVERSITY COMMEMORATES THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
MISSISSIPPI “FREEDOM SUMMER” AND FREEDOM SCHOOLS

CHILDREN, YOUTH AND CIVIL RIGHTS, 1951 - 1968

A Student Exhibit

Will W. Alexander Library
15 September 2014 - 15 October 2014



Sponsored by the Office of Academic Affairs and Will Alexander Library,
Dillard University, and *The Journal of African American History*.

In the 1950s and 1960s youth activism in support of civil rights activism spread throughout the United States, and research projects are being launched to document those activities on a state by state basis. “Children, Youth, and Civil Rights, 1951–1968—A Student Exhibit” begins the telling of that remarkable story and it has

been mounted in university libraries in California, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Louisiana, and will be traveling to other states. Under the guidance of Professors Sharlene Singel DeCuir and Cireci Olatungi, student researchers at Xavier University of Louisiana are gathering materials for an exhibit on “Children, Youth, and the Civil Rights Movement in Louisiana.” Hopefully, faculty at universities in other states would be interested in having their students engage in the documentation of children and teenagers’ contributions to civil rights campaigns in their states.¹⁷

NOTES

“**Children, Youth, and Civil Rights, 1951–1968**”: UC Riverside *Faculty Sponsor*; Prof. V. P. Franklin; *Exhibit Design*, Edward D. Collins; *Graphic Design*, Kyle Anderson; *Student Assistants*, Viet N. Trinh and Juan Carlos Jauregui; *Student Researchers*: Caitlin Awrey, Harrison Buckley, Esmeralda Cano, David Chavez, Crystal Chambliss, Vincent Chrismon, Deborah Clark, Ameer Covarrubias, Jonathan Dai, William Diermissen, Gabriel Flores, Eduardo Fornes, Reanna Gibbs, Jessica Gutierrez, Kia Harris, Reyna Harvey, Ryan Hazinski, Shaina Ho, Tien Thuy Ho, Aiesha Khan, Charles Kim, Jade King, Nicholas Lam, Nikita Lau, Andres Lozano, Celina Lozano, Roslyn Ludden, Sean McElliott, Arman Markazi, Somailia Miller, Michael Morales, Ty Oberdank, Teresa Palafox, Jesus Peña, Victoria Phillips, Dario Puccini, Talia Ramirez, Jennifer Rener, Gessenia Rivas, Antonio Rodriguez, Cassiopeia Rogers, Veronica Sandoval, Jennifer Sayed, Gregory Schwab, Ieasha Serrat, Paul Sinkiewicz, Lila Sultan, Jin Sung, Fabiola Escobeda Torres, David Tran, Diana Vincenty, Brandon Walker, Briana White, Ed Wimpenny, and Sarah Wolk.

¹Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin, *My Soul Is a Witness: A Chronology of the Civil Rights Era, 1954–1965* (New York, 2000).

²V. P. Franklin, “Black High School Student Activism: An Urban Phenomenon?” *Journal of Research in Education* 17 (2000): 3–8; James Collins, “Taking the Lead: Dorothy Williams, NAACP Youth Councils, and Civil Rights Protests in Pittsburgh, 1961–1964,” *The Journal of African American History (JAAH)* 88 (Spring 2003): 126–137; Dionne Danks, “Chicago High School Students’ Movement for Quality Public Education, 1966–1971,” *JAAH* 88 (Spring 2003): 138–150; Dwayne C. Wright, “Black Pride Day, 1968: High School Student Activism in York, Pennsylvania,” *JAAH* 88 (Spring 2003): 151–162.

³Rebecca de Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World: Young People and America’s Long Struggle for Racial Equality* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009).

⁴Thomas L. Bynum, “‘We Will March Forward!’: Juanita Jackson and the Origins of the NAACP Youth Movement,” *JAAH* 94 (Fall 2009): 487–508. See also Thomas L. Bynum, *NAACP Youth and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1936–1965* (Knoxville, TN, 2014).

⁵Sarah Caroline Thuesen’s *Greater Than Equal: African American Struggles for Schools and Citizenship in North Carolina, 1919–1965* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012), 159–200.

⁶Jill O. Titus, *Brown’s Battleground: Students, Segregationists, and the Struggle for Justice in Prince Edward County* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010).

⁷Christopher Bonastia, *Southern Stalemate: Five Years Without Public Education in Prince Edward County, Virginia* (Chicago, IL, 2012); and Terence Hicks and Abul Pitre, eds., *The Educational Lockout of African Americans in Prince Edward County, Virginia, 1959–1964* (Lanham, MD, 2010).

⁸There are numerous accounts of the crisis at Little Rock’s Central High School in 1957 and 1958, see Elizabeth Jacoway, *Turn Away Thy Son: Little Rock, The Crisis That Shocked the World* (New York, 2007); Karen Anderson, *Little Rock: Race and Resistance at Central High School* (Princeton, NJ, 2010), and Elizabeth Huckaby, *Crisis at Central High School, Little Rock, 1957–1965* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1980). For the perspective of one of the “Little Rock Nine,” see Carlotta Walls-Lanier and Lisa Paige, *A Mighty Long Way: My Journey to Justice in Little Rock Central High School* (New York, 2010).

⁹Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin, *A Chronology of the Civil Rights Era in the United States and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1954–1975* (Philadelphia, PA, 1994); and Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, PA, 2007).

¹⁰James R. Ralph, *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge, MA, 1993); and Alan B. Anderson and Charles Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line: The Broken Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in Chicago* (Athens, GA, 2008). For a personal account by someone who taught in the “freedom schools,” see Robert B. McKersie, *Decisive Decade: An Insider’s View of the Chicago Civil Rights Movement During the 1960s* (Carbondale, IL, 2013). Clarence Taylor, *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools* (New York, 1995); and *Civil Rights in New York City: From World War II to the Giuliani Era* (New York, 2010); Paul Grenen, *Civil Rights Activism in Milwaukee: South Side Struggles in the 60s and 70s* (Clemson, SC, 2014); Ian Haney-Lopez, *Racism on Trial: The Chicano Fight for Justice* (Cambridge, MA, 2004); and Arthur L. Littleworth, *No Easy Way: Integrating Riverside Schools—A Victory for Community* (Riverside, CA, 2014).

¹¹Heather A. Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007); Christopher Span, *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse: African American Education in Mississippi, 1862–1875* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009); Ronald Butchart, *Schooling the Freedpeople: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861–1876* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2013).

¹²Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York, 1984); Bruce Watson, *Freedom Summer: The Savage Season of 1964 That Made Mississippi Burn and Made Democracy in America* (New York, 2011); Jon Hale, “‘The Student as a Force for Social Change’: The Mississippi Freedom Schools and Student Engagement,” *JAAH* 96 (Summer 2011): 325–348; Public Broadcasting System, American Experience, *Freedom Summer: A Documentary Film* (CD) (Washington, DC, 2014).

¹³Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York, 1984); Glen Askew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997); Southern Poverty Law Center, Teaching Tolerance, *Mighty Times: The Children’s March*. A Documentary Film (Montgomery, AL, 2004).

¹⁴Rufus Burrow Jr., *A Child Shall Lead Them: Martin Luther King Jr., Young People, and the Movement* (Minneapolis, MN, 2015), xvi & xxxii.

¹⁵James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1988), 57–78.

¹⁶Raymond Wolters, *The New Negro on Campus: Black College Rebellions of the 1920s* (Princeton, NJ, 1975).

¹⁷Those interested in learning more about the current and forthcoming student exhibits should contact V. P. Franklin at the JAAH Editorial Office, University of New Orleans, Department of History, 2000 Lake Shore Drive, New Orleans, LA 70148; www.jaah.org.