

Historical Context The Civil Rights Movement

After the Civil War, a period of **Reconstruction** took place in our country. The 14th and 15th amendments were approved and were supposed to give rights to the newly freed black men of America. Unfortunately, freedom did not mean the same to a black man and as a white man. African Americans were discriminated against and the laws put in place to protect them were overruled by local and state governments. **Jim Crow laws** were put in place by white community leaders to create a new system of separate but equal. These laws oppressed African Americans, who got the worst of everything, housing, jobs, education, bathrooms, you name it.

The 1960s was a period of massive change in America. A new generation of Americans was sick of the injustices in our country. So they took to the streets to protest gender inequality, the Vietnam War, and racial injustice. The Civil Rights movement formed to address racial injustice in America. The black community organized **sit-ins**, marches, and **boycotts** pressuring the American government for radical changes. Thousands of people participated in peaceful protests that were sometimes met with violence. Televisions all over America captured peaceful protesters of all ages being violently attacked. America was horrified, most could not believe what they saw. People like Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Muhammad Ali, and Ruby Bridges were model activists that inspired people to fight for their rights. They wanted equal rights for all and to put an end to the discriminatory Jim Crow laws.

Their combined efforts led to important court cases and laws that changed many areas of American life for the better. It is important to understand that activists inspired other Americans to find their own voice. Without leaders to look up to it is hard to have an organized movement. Without an organized movement nothing would have changed. These leaders remind us to be brave, think for ourselves, and always do the right thing.

Protests

Freedom Riders

In 1961, groups of black and white Civil Rights activists known as the Freedom Riders traveled by bus to the Deep South to protest **segregated** bus terminals. At every stop they would sit at white-only lunch counters and use white-only bathrooms. They were often attacked by police and local people who wanted things to remain the same. Check out the Freedom Riders map (pdf) to see where they went during this protest movement.

March on Washington / MLK's "I Have a Dream" Speech

Martin Luther King Jr. was a Civil Rights activist and minister who inspired the American people to protest peacefully during the Civil Rights movement. In 1963 MLK led the March on

Washington. It was a large and peaceful protest to bring awareness to the injustices and struggles African-Americans continue to face a century after **emancipation**. MLK gave his famous “I have a dream” speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial.



Source: NPR
MLK at Lincoln Memorial

Chicago Freedom Movement

The Civil Rights era was mainly focused on the South, but racial discrimination was all over America. MLK and followers knew they had to protest in the North as well. In 1966, MLK launched the Chicago Freedom Movement to protest the issues facing black Chicago residents including segregated and unequal housing, education, health care services, and employment.

Athletic Activism

Some athletes played a significant role in the struggle for Civil Rights. Muhammad Ali was a famous American boxer who supported many African American causes and was a role model for the black community. Ali was not the only African American athlete that stood up for his rights. During the 1968 Olympics, two African-American athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, raised their fists during the US national anthem at their medal ceremony. They both agreed to use their camera time as an opportunity to tell the world that African Americans were dealing with injustices at home.

Memphis Sanitation Strike

On February 1, 1968, two African American garbage collectors, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were killed by a malfunctioning truck. Over a thousand black employees from the Memphis Department of Public Works went on strike. This was known as the March on Memphis or the

Memphis Sanitation Strike. The protesters' goals were to have better safety standards, higher wages, and union recognition.

Court Cases

School Desegregation

In 1954, the Supreme Court case *Brown vs. the Board of Education* ruled that school segregation was **unconstitutional**. Six-year-old Ruby Bridges was the first African-American child to desegregate an all-white school in the South. She had to be escorted to school and classes to be safe. Many parents pulled their children out of the school to protest school **desegregation**. The decision to let Ruby attend this school made her family suffer. Her father lost his job and her grandparents lost their land due to people not buying their crops. It took a while for all the schools in America to **desegregate**, especially in the South. Louisa County Public Schools were not fully integrated until 1970.



Source: timeforkids.com
Photo of Ruby Bridges

Interracial Marriage

Interracial marriages were illegal in sixteen states in America at the time. In 1967, *Loving v. Virginia* was a court case involving an interracial couple, Richard and Mildred Loving. The couple married in Washington D.C. but lived in Virginia where interracial marriage was illegal at the time. They were arrested and had the option to serve 5 years in prison or leave Virginia. They decided to move leaving their extended family behind. A couple of years later, they decided to sue the federal court for violating their rights and won.



Source: brooklynhistory.org
Photo of Richard and Mildred Loving with children

Acts

Civil Rights Act

Many people realized that America could not be known to the world as the land of the free when it had a system of racial inequality. It took many years, but eventually the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed. This act prohibited **segregation** in public places and employment discrimination based on race and sex.

Voting Rights Act

Black people faced discrimination when they tried to register to vote. Civil Rights activists wanted to fix this issue because more black voters would lead to more change. MLK launched a voting rights campaign in Selma, Alabama to bring awareness to this issue. The news captured the true injustices peaceful protesters faced during the march on Selma. This protest led the federal government to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which prohibited racial discrimination in voting.



Source: pewresearch.org
Voting Rights Campaign in Selma, Alabama

Fair Housing Act

After the assassination of MLK, black communities were very angry that their peaceful leader was killed. There was a lot of activism and protest which led to the Fair Housing Act of 1968. This act prohibited discrimination based on race, sex, national origin, and religion when buying or renting a house.

Key Words

Reconstruction - a period of rebuilding the country after the Civil War and the end of slavery.

Jim Crow Laws - state and local laws that enforced racial segregation in the southern US.

Sit-ins - events when African Americans peacefully protested by sitting at white-only lunch counters.

Boycotts - refusing to use services, products, or goods from a person, organization or business.

Segregation - the separation of races in communities and businesses.

Emancipation - freedom from slavery.

Unconstitutional - not agreeing with the United States constitution.

Desegregation - the ending of the separation of two racial groups.