

1965 - A Year of Civil Rights Marches

Chronology prepared for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville from various Internet sources and personal experience by Frederick S. Beckner and edited by Lee Blue in connection with the Wonderful Wednesday Civil Rights Presentation on September 15, 2004.

In **May 1954** Brown vs. the Board of Education was issued. In December that year Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat at the front of the "colored section" of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She was arrested and the following bus boycott lasted for more than one year. During that time Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association. In **1957** he and other ministers organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) with King as president. The SCLC became a major force in organizing the civil rights movement across the nation.

On **July 2, 1964** President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act, "making segregation in public facilities and discrimination in employment illegal."

Ten years after Rosa Parks's refusal, and after winning the Nobel Peace Prize in **December 1964**, Dr. King and the SCLC decided to turn their attention to Selma, Alabama, a town of about 30,000 people located in Dallas County, where only 1% of the blacks were registered to vote. When Mayor Joseph Smitherman heard of these plans he urged Sheriff Jim Clark not to use violence against the civil rights leaders. He had been elected the past fall with a promise to bring industry to Selma and did not want the negative publicity violence could bring.

Clark, however, proved difficult to control. At one SCLC protest the club-wielding Clark pushed Amelia Boynton, a well respect member of the black community and civic activist, to the ground and arrested her.

January 22, 1965 – The **first 1965 civil rights march** composed of over 100 schoolteachers then took place from the Selma black community to the Dallas County Courthouse in downtown Selma to protest Boynton's arrest.

February 17 - State troopers shot 26- year- old-Jimmy Lee Jackson, a black hospital worker (or sawmill worker), Vietnam veteran and church deacon, as he tried to protect his mother during a **second march** for voting rights from a church to the jail in nearby Marion, Alabama. He died 7 days later.

One of the organizers of this protest, Jim Bevel, said "it would be fitting to take Jimmie Lee's body and march it all the way to the state capital in Montgomery." Out of this remark a plan grew for a march from Selma to Montgomery, 54 miles away.

February 26 – At the memorial service for Jackson the SCLC announced that a march from Selma to Montgomery would begin on March 7.

March 7, Bloody Sunday - A group of 525 to 650 mostly black voting-rights demonstrators from the SCLC and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), led by Hosea Williams and John Lewis, attempted a **third march**. Governor Wallace had ordered that the march be stopped. These marchers were attacked with billy clubs, bull whips and tear gas on U.S. Route 80, after crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, by state highway patrolmen under the direction of Al Lingo and sheriff's deputies under the leadership of Jim Clark.

Martin Luther King, Jr. then called on people from all over the country to join him in Selma for a new march the following Tuesday. The leaders of this proposed march sought a Federal court order prohibiting the police from stopping the march. Although Federal District Court Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr. often sided with civil rights workers, in this instance he issued a restraining order preventing the march from taking place until he could hold additional hearings later in the week.

The civil rights leadership was confronted with a dilemma. On one hand hundreds of people had arrived in Selma for the Tuesday march. Moreover, SCLC did not want to anger one of the few southern judges who was on its side. On the other hand, it was believed that another march without a police restraining order would result in another Bloody Sunday.

March 9, Tuesday – King finally decided to make a “ceremonial” **fourth march** to the Edmund Pettus Bridge, hold a prayer meeting, and then turn around and return to Brown’s Chapel on Sylvan Street, the focal point of Selma civil rights protests. In this way at least part of the march would take place, and the marchers would not violate their restraining order, which only prohibited a march from Selma to Montgomery. Many of the marchers were unaware of this strategy and were confused when the leaders of the march ended the march without attempting to proceeding to Montgomery.

The first wave of white religious leaders--- about 450 ministers, including Unitarian Reverend James Reeb---and others arrived in Selma for this abbreviated peaceful march. Thirty- eight- year-old Reeb had served as Assistant Minister at All Souls (Unitarian) Church in Washington, D.C. before going to work for the American Friends Service Committee in Boston.

That evening Reverend Reeb, accompanied by Unitarian ministers Clark Olsen and Orloff Miller, had dinner at a black restaurant, Walker’s Café. They began to return to their quarters by a shorter route that, unknown to them, passed through a tough white community. As they passed the Silver Moon Café four whites attacked them. Reverend Reeb was clubbed in the head and fell to the ground mortally injured.

March 10, Wednesday - The Board of Trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Association adjourned its meeting in Boston and reconvened in Selma, in a show of support for the civil rights movement.

March 11, Thursday – President Lyndon Johnson sent yellow roses to Reverend Reeb’s hospital room in Montgomery. Reverend Reeb died.

March 13, Saturday – The delegation from the Unitarian Church of Rockville, Maryland arrived in Selma in the second wave of protestors from across the country to attend the Reeb memorial service and to participate in the voting rights protest. The delegation was composed of Gerry Bailey, Barbara Makris, Martha Warner, Jim Wyckoff, George Leonard, Dorothy Millon-Ladd, Fred Beckner, and Reverend David Cole. During the next two evenings Fred Beckner met with 4 or 5 black Selma Henry Hudson High School students, their parents and a faculty advisor to plan a visit by the students to Rockville. Many visitors to Selma were housed with black families in the Carver Houses, a Selma public housing project adjacent to Brown's Chapel.

President Johnson addressed the nation and Congress. He described the voting rights bill he would submit to Congress in two days and used the slogan of the civil rights movement, "We Shall Overcome."

March 15, Monday - Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at the memorial service for Reverend Reeb in Brown's Chapel at 3:00 PM (after an hour's delay) and the **fifth march** took place later that afternoon to the Dallas County Courthouse. This march of religious leaders and concerned lay people was peaceful after being held behind a barricade on Sylvan Street near Brown's Chapel for three days as permission to proceed was negotiated. Marchers were asked to be silent during the march and stay on the sidewalk. We also were instructed to drop to the ground and cover our heads if attacked. The Sylvan Street barricade was referred to as the "Selma Wall" or the "38th Parallel" and was the site of daily tense but uneventful confrontations between the police and militia and the protestors. The President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Reverend Dana McLean Greeley, estimated that at least a thousand people participated once the march was allowed to move forward. Other estimates range from 400 to close to 3,000 marchers. Reverend Greeley was in the front line.

President Johnson had invited King to attend the joint session of Congress on the 15th but King declined, placing greater importance on his being present at Reverend Reeb's memorial service in Brown's Chapel and available to offer Reeb's eulogy. The text of Dr. King's powerful eulogy is on the web at [A Witness to Truth](#) or http://www.ptsem.edu/read/inspire/6.2/feature_4/feature4_index.htm. An insightful description of the memorial service by Reverend Richard D. Leonard is at <http://www.uuworld.org/2001/02/feature3.html>.

March 16, Tuesday - Police and sheriff's deputies on horseback beat black and white demonstrators in Montgomery.

March 21, Sunday to - March 25, Thursday - Over 3,000 protest marchers left Selma for a **sixth march**. This march to Montgomery was protected by federal troops. They were joined along the way by many other protestors, swelling the total to 25,000 marchers. Upon reaching the capital they hear an address by Dr. King. Niki Davis (then Alice Wyckoff) and her daughter Janice Wyckoff from UCR joined the march on Thursday, March 25.

March 25, Thursday - Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, the white wife of a Detroit Teamsters Union business agent, was shot and killed by Klansmen while driving a black marcher back to Selma.

April to June 9-14 - Representatives of several Rockville churches, primarily the Twinbrook Baptist Church, the Rockville United Church (on June 25, 1967 this Congregation was born from the merger of Faith United Church of Christ and St. Andrew United Presbyterian Church) and the Rockville United Methodist Church, arranged a 6-day visit to Rockville by approximately 35 black students and their advisors from the Selma Henry Hudson High School. All visitors were accommodated in the homes of Rockville residents and provided extensive opportunities for sightseeing in the Rockville and Washington, D.C. areas. These students formed the Henry Hudson High School choir. The visit concluded with a concert by the choir at the Rockville United Methodist Church. People occupied all seats, lined the walls and filled all space in the aisles of the Church. The Rockville City Council had refused to endorse or participate in the visit and one member said publicly: "Rockville is not ready." This was proven to be wrong.

August to December - In Alabama, SCLC spearheaded voter registration campaigns in Greene, Wilcox, and Eutaw counties, and in the cities of Montgomery and Birmingham.

August 6 -- President Johnson signed The 1965 Voting Rights Act.

August 11 to 16 - In Watts, the black ghetto of Los Angeles, riots left 35 dead, of whom 28 were black.

April 4, 1968 – Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.

Note: All accused murderers in each of the three fatal Selma incidents reported here were tried and acquitted.

About 100 photographs of the Reeb memorial service and the fifth march are available through the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville.

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