



Black Power in the Black Belt

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Overview

The Encyclopedia of Alabama reports that Lowndes County, Alabama – a rural town situated midway between Selma and Montgomery – had a 20% white population and was controlled by only 86 white families who owned 90 percent of the land and 100% of the vote. In fact, no Black resident had successfully registered to vote up to that point. According to author Jo Freeman, it was 1965 before African Americans in Lowndes County openly challenged white supremacy. “Although they were 80 percent of a population of fifteen thousand,” Freeman writes, “they grew up knowing that whites would retaliate, often violently, to the slightest sign that they did not know their place. ‘Bloody Lowndes’ earned its reputation.” Nevertheless, it was the elusive right to vote that woke up the Black residents in Lowndes County, Alabama and empowered the disenfranchised to join the fight that had already ignited the South.



After the historic Selma to Montgomery march, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) descended on Lowndes County to help them organize and initiate a formal movement. By December 1965, the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) was born. As required by the State of Alabama, to be formally recognized as a political party, one must present a logo. The LCFO put forth a ferocious black panther, and officially became known as, “the black panther party” – a predecessor to the organization of the same name that was made famous in Oakland,

California. SNCC field organizer, Stokely Carmichael, served as a bridge between the two organizations.

The Lowndes County Freedom organization began educating Blacks about their right to vote and preparing them for the many obstacles that would stand in their way – most importantly, the literacy tests made “necessary” by the white antagonists. In this lesson, students will test themselves to see if they would be eligible to vote in the Jim Crow South and work towards educating others about the injustice.

New Words

White Supremacy; Voter Suppression; Disenfranchised; Predecessor; Field Organizer; Antagonist; Demographics

Grade Level

Middle to Upper

Primary Learning Objective(s)

The students will:

- recognize that some citizens were denied their right to vote.
- uncover the facts about voting rights in Alabama during the 1960s.
- create informational fliers to promote voter registration in Lowndes County, Alabama.

Approximate Duration of Lesson

One or two class periods.

Materials and Equipment Needed

Access to the Internet or research books from the library; blank typing paper; art supplies; writing materials; computer; printer; copies of the voting literacy test

Background/Preparation

The teacher should become familiar with the facts mentioned in the introduction to this lesson and study the resources provided in the reference section of this lesson as well. The teacher will need to check out related books from the library, download and print information from the Internet to distribute to students or perhaps secure computers with Internet access for student use. The teacher will also need to print out copies of the voting literacy test located at the end of this lesson and gather art supplies necessary to make brochures or allow the students to utilize computers to make brochures.

Procedures/Activities

- With a serious look and no prior warning, the teacher will ask students to clear their desks, only leaving out a pencil in preparation for a pop-quiz (This notion should cause panic among the class).
- As if speaking from a script, inform students that they just turned 18 years of age, and as of residents of Lowndes County, Alabama, they are now eligible to vote, but must first pass the literacy test portion of the 4-part voter's application process.
- Distribute the test located at the end of this lesson. Tell students that they have approximately 15 minutes to finish the exam. Give them a start and end time and let them proceed.
- Once students have completed their literacy tests, ask them to share their thoughts about the experience. Did they know the answers? Was it fair to have to take a literacy test in order to be able to register to vote?
- Explain to students the history of voter suppression and the barriers established by white law makers in an attempt to hinder Blacks from registering to vote. Engage them in a discussion about the inequities surrounding this fact. Encourage students to express empathy for Blacks who were not treated as full citizens by many of their white neighbors
- Next, introduce students to the work of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee.
- Tell them that they will have the opportunity to conduct further research on the demographics of Lowndes County, Alabama; the rights that were provided protection under the federal Voters Registration Act of 1965; and the strategies implemented by activists to assist Blacks in getting registered to vote (like Citizenship Schools that were established to help teach citizens how to pass the tests).

- Once the students have gathered their facts, they will create a brochure or pamphlet that can later be distributed door-to-door throughout Black neighborhoods in rural towns. The literature should be able to inform citizens of the injustice, of their rights, and of the programs in place to assist them in registering to vote. They should emphasize the gross difference in numbers mentioned in the introduction of this lesson (20% of the population ruled and disenfranchised 80% of the majority). Students should be reminded that this was a scary process for many, so their words should also include safety tips and be empowering for those that need an extra push. Students should also be told to use layman's terms – simple, everyday words that the most basic reader can understand. Perhaps they should consider including pictures for those limited in reading.
- Students should share their final product with the entire class. Perhaps a class bulletin board can be created to share their work with visitors and serve as a reminder of our responsibility to take our privileges seriously, in honor of the martyrs who sacrificed for our rights.
- This would be a great activity for the month of November when elections most frequently take place.

Assessment Strategies

The students should be graded on the quality of their brochures and pamphlets. Their literature should include information about Lowndes County demographics, to illustrate the inequities found in numbers; the rights citizens had but were being denied; strategies in place to assist them; warnings on how to remain safe in their attempt to unsettle the establishment; and empower citizens to defend their rights. The students should not be graded on how well they did on the literacy test. The test was just an exercise to make a point.

Extension

The teacher could give each student a different county in Alabama to research or assign groups of students' different states in the Southeast. The research assignment and activity can remain the same; however a display can be created to illustrate how common voter suppression was during this era.

The teacher could also pick up voter registration cards for the area in which their school is located and have students compare and contrast the voter registration application today with the application used in 1965. Voter registration cards are free and can be found at local government offices, including the U.S. Post Office and the public library.

Remediation

Students can create a timeline of events or a fact sheet about the Lowndes County, Alabama voter registration campaign.

References

Jo Freeman's review of Hassan Jefferies book: "Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama Black Belt"

<http://www.jofreeman.com/reviews/Lowndes.html>

Lowndes County Freedom Organization

<http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Article.jsp?id=h-1781>

Voting Rights: Are You Qualified to Vote?

<http://www.crmvet.org/info/lithome.htm>

Carson, Clayborne. *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981.

Cobb, Charles E. Jr. *On the Road to Freedom: A Guided Tour of the Civil Rights Movement*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 2008.

The Lowndes County Freedom Organization, produced by the University of Alabama Center for Public Television and Radio, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Gaillard, Frye. *Cradle of Freedom: Alabama and the Movement that Changed America*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004.

Jeffries, Hasan K. *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*. New York: NYU Press, 2009.

Literacy Test

Most citizens register to vote without regard to race or color by signing their name and address on something like a postcard. But it was not always so. Prior to passage of the federal Voting Rights Act in 1965, southern, and some western, states maintained elaborate voter registration procedures whose primary purpose was to deny the vote to those who were not white. In the South, this process was often called the 'literacy test'. It was more than a test; it was an entire system designed to deny African Americans the right to vote.

The following test has a sample of questions that might have appeared on literacy tests prior to passage of the Voting Rights Act.

Literacy Test Directions: Answer each question to the best of your ability.

1. What body can try to impeachments of the president of the United States?
2. A person appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court is appointed for a _____ term.
3. When the Constitution was originally approved, how many states had to ratify it in order for it to be in effect?
4. Prior to the adoption of the United States Constitution, the organization of states was known as _____.
5. Of the original 13 states, the one with the largest representation in the first Congress was _____.
6. What words are required by law to be on all coins and paper currency of the United States?
7. Which of the following is a right guaranteed by the Bill of Rights: public education, employment, trial by jury or voting?
8. What officer is designated by the Constitution to be president of the Senate of the United States?
9. To serve as President of the United States, a person must be how old: 35, 40 or 45 years of age?
10. The first sentence of the United States Constitution is called the Preamble. True or False?

11. The electoral vote for President is counted in the presence of two governmental bodies. Name them: _____ and _____.
12. If no candidate for President receives a majority of the electoral vote, who decides who will become President?
13. The president is forbidden to exercise his or her authority of pardon in cases of _____.
14. If the president does not wish to sign a bill, how many days is he or she allowed in which to return it to Congress for reconsideration? _____ days
15. At what time of day on January 2nd each four years does the term of the president of the United States end?
16. Can a state coin money with the consent of Congress? Yes or No?
17. The power to declare war is vested in _____.



Birmingham Civil Rights Institute Lesson Plan-Standards

Social Studies Course of Study Standards

SIXTH GRADE

Standard 13. Describe the role of major civil rights leaders and significant events occurring during the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Examples: civil rights leaders—Rosa Parks; Martin Luther King, Jr.; events—Brown versus Board of Education; Montgomery bus boycott; student sit-ins; march on Washington, D.C.; Freedom Rides; Civil Rights Act of 1964; Malcolm X; voter registration efforts; Selma-to-Montgomery march.

SEVENTH GRADE – Citizenship

Standard 11. Describe examples of conflict, cooperation, and interdependence of groups, societies, and nations, using past and current events.

- Tracing the political and social impact of the modern Civil Rights Movement from 1954 to the present, including Alabama's role. *Extension to consider the impact.*

ELEVENTH GRADE

Standard 14. Trace events of the modern Civil Rights Movement from post-World War II to 1970 that resulted in social and economic changes, including the Montgomery bus boycott, the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School, the march on Washington, and the Freedom Rides.

- Tracing the federal government's involvement in the modern Civil Rights Movement, including the abolition of the poll tax, the desegregation of the armed forces, the nationalization of state militias, Brown versus Board of Education, the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965
- Explaining contributions of individuals and groups to the modern Civil Rights Movement, including Martin Luther King, Jr., James Meredith, Medgar Evers, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)
- Identifying people and events in Alabama that influenced the modern Civil Rights Movement, including Rosa Parks, Autherine Lucy, John Patterson, George C. Wallace, Vivian Malone, Fred Shuttlesworth, *the Children's March*, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, and the Selma-to-Montgomery march
- Describing the development of a Black Power movement, including the change in focus of the SNCC, the rise of Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael and the Black Panther Movement
- Describing the impact of African-American entrepreneurs on the modern Civil Rights Movement Examples: S. B. Fuller, A. G. Gaston

English Language Arts Course of Study - Appendix D:

Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

Standard 7. *Integration of information from Walking Tour, sculptures, and original photographs.*

Grades 6-8. Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

Grades 9-10. Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts).

Grades 11-12. Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

Standard 7.

Grades 6-8. Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.

Grades 9-10. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Grades 11-12. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

English Language Arts Course of Study

Speaking and Listening Standards

Comprehension and Collaboration

[SL.6-12.1] Engage [initiate and participate – grades 9-12] effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grade-level topics, texts, and issues*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Information from Walking Tour, sculptures, and original photographs.

[SL.6.2] Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how it contributes to a topic, text, or issue under study.

[SL.7.2] Analyze the main ideas and supporting details presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how the ideas clarify a topic, text, or issue under study. *With extensions to lesson plan.*

[SL.8.2.] Analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and evaluate the motives (e.g., social, commercial, political) behind its presentation. *With extensions to lesson plan.*

[SL.9-12.2] Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally), [in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, - grades 11-12] evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source [and noting any discrepancies among the data – grades 11-12]. *With extensions to lesson plan.*

Language Standards

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

[L.6-8.6]. Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate general academic and domain-specific words and phrases; gather vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.