

# “First-Class” Citizenship Education in the Mississippi Delta, 1961–1965

By DEANNA M. GILLESPIE

IN THE SUMMER OF 1961, SEPTIMA P. CLARK, DOROTHY F. COTTON, and Andrew Young loaded up Cotton’s two-toned Buick and headed out of Atlanta. They were on a mission to recruit volunteers for the voter registration campaign of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The cornerstone of this effort was the Citizenship Education Program (CEP), a community-based project designed to prepare southern blacks to pass the literacy tests required by southern states for voter registration. Throughout the summer, the three staff members hopscotched across the South searching for volunteers to teach local classes. By August, they had reached the Mississippi Delta. Meeting with small groups, they explained the program and emphasized that they were not particularly interested in recruiting professional educators. According to Clark, an ideal CEP teacher was “one who would not be considered high falutin, who would not act condescending to adults.” Instead of formal training, effective CEP teachers possessed “some skills, a great dedication to the cause, and patience.” The SCLC staff members knew from experience that this kind of person could encourage his or her friends and neighbors to participate in a potentially radical venture.<sup>1</sup> For African Americans in the Jim Crow South, learning to read and write held the key to “first-class citizenship” and freedom.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Septima Clark, *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement*, edited by Cynthia Stokes Brown (Navarro, Calif., 1986), 48 (first quotation), 60–76; Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (New York, 1996), 140–44; Dorothy F. Cotton, *If Your Back’s Not Bent: The Role of the Citizenship Education Program in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 2012), 103–17; Septima Clark to Anne Lockwood, undated (second quotation), Folder 12, Box 9, Highlander Research and Education Center Records (Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison); hereinafter cited as Highlander Records. For insightful comments and challenging questions as this work progressed, I thank Kathryn Sklar, Tom Dublin, John Stoner, Todd Moye, Ann Short Chirhart, Françoise Hamlin, Melyssa Wrisley, and Denise Lynn. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of Southern History*.

<sup>2</sup> While citizenship schools focused on adult literacy, classes also included a wide range of topics related to “community development.” Through these topics, the CEP defined “first-class”

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Between 1961 and 1965, community leaders, primarily black women, responded to the SCLC's invitation and taught CEP classes in the Mississippi Delta and across the South, blending historical traditions of black women's leadership in education and emerging theories of participatory democracy to build grassroots support for civil rights action. Focusing on CEP classes in the Delta restores these local black women's voices to the historical narrative, embedding their experiences within a local history of struggle and resistance. This perspective complicates the history of the civil rights movement in the region by highlighting the critical role of "less militant" gendered organizing strategies as well as the SCLC's rural work.<sup>3</sup> In the Delta, the CEP provided a significant and often overlooked entry point for individual activists who became instrumental in the activities of both the SCLC and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Delta CEP teachers incorporated citizenship classes into voter registration and direct-action strategies, expanding local initiatives and helping build the foundation for Freedom Schools and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP).<sup>4</sup>

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citizenship to be something more than casting a ballot. "First-class" citizens understood the function and structure of government, were well educated about government programs, and obeyed laws. The use of the phrase "first-class citizenship" was ubiquitous among CEP staff members, becoming a rallying cry and trademark for the program. Southern Christian Leadership Conference, *Citizenship Workbook* (n.p., n.d.), p. 2, Folder 23, Box 153, Subseries 2: Records of Dorothy Cotton, 1960–1969, Series III: Records of the Citizenship Education Program, 1956–1967, Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954–1970, Part 4: Records of the Program Department (Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Ga.; hereinafter cited as MLK Center); hereinafter cited as SCLC Records, Pt. 4.

<sup>3</sup>In his study of the roots of 1960s civil rights action, Aldon D. Morris includes citizenship schools as an example of "'less militant' aspects of the movement." According to Morris, citizenship schools "were a significant mobilizing factor throughout the movement, often serving as 'quiet structures' behind what appeared to be spontaneous uprisings." Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York, 1984), 239. In his 1995 study of the Mississippi movement, Charles M. Payne redefines black women's contributions within the civil rights movement as gendered leadership. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, 1995), 266–83. Recent studies have continued to refine and expand notions of how gender affected leadership and organizing strategies. See, for example, Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill, 2009); Kathryn L. Nasstrom, "Down to Now: Memory, Narrative, and Women's Leadership in the Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta, Georgia," *Gender and History*, 11 (April 1999), 113–44; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, 2003); and Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York, 1997).

<sup>4</sup>In his study of Sunflower County in the Mississippi Delta, J. Todd Moyer traces "three distinct though interconnected civil rights movements . . . between 1945 and 1986" to show how activists "redefined the notion of community leadership itself. They injected a vigorous notion of citizenship into a fundamentally undemocratic society." Moyer, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945–1986* (Chapel Hill, 2004), 20–39 (first quotation on 25; second quotation on 36).

CEP teachers' efforts have received relatively little attention in the historiography of the Mississippi movement. Instead, historians have focused on SNCC and its collaboration with local leaders.<sup>5</sup> These studies join an array of autobiographies and memoirs penned by activists.<sup>6</sup> Scholars interested in education-based strategies in the Delta have focused almost exclusively on SNCC-organized Freedom Summer, when hundreds of college students traveled south to teach in Freedom Schools and operate community centers during the summer of 1964.<sup>7</sup> Bringing the CEP into the narrative forces a reinterpretation of the civil rights movement in the Delta, as well as of the SCLC's role in rural organizing efforts.<sup>8</sup> Between 1961 and 1964, direct-action campaigns in cities like Albany, Georgia, and Birmingham, Alabama, drew national attention to the SCLC, and these events continue to influence historical interpretations. However, emphasizing these high-profile direct-action campaigns distorts the SCLC narrative and exaggerates differences between the SCLC and student-led organizations like SNCC. Shifting attention to the CEP in the Delta reveals that, on the ground in real time, ideological differences blurred as SCLC staff members provided crucial resources and collaborated with SNCC leaders and local activists to support grassroots community leadership development.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, 1994); Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill, 2007); Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana, 1999); Moye, *Let the People Decide*; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*; and Kim Lacy Rogers, *Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change* (New York, 2006), 121–49.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Endesha Ida Mae Holland, *From the Mississippi Delta: A Memoir* (New York, 1997); and Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York, 1968).

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Perlstein, "Teaching Freedom: SNCC and the Creation of the Mississippi Freedom Schools," *History of Education Quarterly*, 30 (Fall 1990), 297–324; John R. Rachal, "We'll Never Turn Back: Adult Education and the Struggle for Citizenship in Mississippi's Freedom Summer," *American Educational Research Journal*, 35 (Summer 1998), 167–98; Mary Aickin Rothschild, *A Case of Black and White: Northern Volunteers and the Southern Freedom Summers, 1964–1965* (Westport, Conn., 1982).

<sup>8</sup> For work beginning this reinterpretation, see Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–65* (New York, 1998), 66–74; Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 322–31; Françoise N. Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta after World War II* (Chapel Hill, 2012); and Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*.

<sup>9</sup> Scholars of the Mississippi movement focus on the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), the umbrella organization in the Delta, to evaluate SCLC's involvement in the state. Historian John Dittmer offers a particularly critical evaluation: "Although the Southern Christian Leadership Conference also participated [in COFO], its presence in Mississippi was mostly limited to a voter education 'citizenship' program, and it did not play a major role in COFO." Dittmer, *Local People*, 119. Adam Fairclough makes a similar assessment: "SCLC's material contribution to COFO was negligible. . . . [O]nly the Citizenship Education Program, directed by [Annell] Ponder and Victoria [Gray] Adams, gave it an organizational presence in the state."

CEP teachers in the Mississippi Delta continued work that began in 1956–1957 through a partnership between local leaders on the South Carolina coast and the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, a unique educational institution with roots in labor organizing among Appalachian workers in the 1930s and a focus on school desegregation by the early 1950s. Early citizenship schools borrowed heavily from Highlander’s commitment to community leadership development and participatory democracy. According to Highlander director Myles Horton, oppressed people could develop their own solutions to social problems if given the opportunity. To facilitate this process, local citizenship school teachers taught the fundamentals of literacy in an environment that avoided a hierarchical relationship between teachers and the adult students. By 1959, program directors in South Carolina pointed to important gains in black voter registration and community organization. However, as citizenship schools expanded south along the neighboring Georgia coast, Horton became concerned that the program would swamp Highlander’s other efforts. In the spring of 1961, he transferred the newly named Citizenship Education Program to the SCLC.<sup>10</sup>

Cotton, Clark, and Young’s recruiting trip that summer signaled their intention to use the CEP to lay “the foundation for a Southwide movement.”<sup>11</sup> Throughout their journey, they intentionally blended Highlander’s model of community leadership development with gendered traditions of education as a political strategy. Since the late nineteenth century, teaching was one of the few professions open to African American women. And, as Stephanie J. Shaw has written, “regardless of the type of school, and particularly in the South, teachers did not anticipate the luxury of merely teaching. Nor did they define their work that way.” Across the region, teachers expanded their activities beyond the classroom, linking social institutions and establishing traditions of black women’s leadership and activism.<sup>12</sup>

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Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens, Ga., 1987), 194–95.

<sup>10</sup> David Levine, “Citizenship Schools” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1999), 41–53; Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 141–55; Carl Tjerandsen, *Education for Citizenship: A Foundation’s Experience* (Santa Cruz, Calif., 1980), 139–75, 182–83, 204–6; Aimee Isrig Horton, *The Highlander Folk School: A History of Its Major Programs, 1932–1961* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1989).

<sup>11</sup> Young, *Easy Burden*, 144.

<sup>12</sup> Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago, 1996), 176 (quotation); Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 13–45. Katherine Mellen Charron offers a detailed analysis of black schoolteachers’ activities in rural southern communities, countering others’ arguments that

The CEP drew on these traditions to mobilize black women in local civil rights efforts.

CEP teachers' attendance records and project reports offer rich details to fill in this narrative. Unlike direct-action protests, CEP classes were intimate gathering places where learning inspired collective action. Meeting with students twice a week for three months in makeshift classrooms, community leaders, primarily black women, taught reading and writing skills in the context of citizenship. As a result of these efforts, southern African Americans successfully passed literacy tests and registered to vote. Yet the CEP had an even broader influence on individuals and communities. In these relatively protected spaces, teachers and students cast off identities assigned to them through Jim Crow segregation and intentionally crafted a new identity. They were not "apathetic," or "lazy," or "uneducated," as a racist society claimed. Instead, African Americans discussed the way things were and the way things ought to be, and then they acted to address locally defined problems. Leaders emerged, and communities were organized. Local classes transformed the very meaning of citizenship, turning it into something one did, not something one had.

Implanting this idea of active and democratic citizenship in the Mississippi Delta in the summer of 1961 was not easy. Jim Crow held a tight grip on the South, and nowhere was the grip tighter than in the Mississippi Delta. Since the late nineteenth century, Mississippi lawmakers had maintained a complex web of political, economic, and educational restrictions for African Americans, with each strand of the web entangling and reinforcing the other strands. Education, particularly literacy education, could start to unravel the web. Since 1896, the Mississippi legislature had ensured that black and white children were educated in facilities that were separate and certainly not equal. As late as 1950, the state spent \$32.55 for each black student in the state's segregated schools while spending nearly three times more on each white student. By 1950, only one in four high-school-age black

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characterize teachers' efforts "as an apolitical 'tragedy.'" She argues that black teachers capitalized on the limited supervision to teach lessons rooted in African American history, creating "a 'point of entry,' driving a wedge into the walls of segregation." See Katherine Mellen Charron, "Teaching Citizenship: Septima Poinsette Clark and the Transformation of the African American Freedom Struggle" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2005), 4 (first quotation in note); Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 50–80 (second quotation in note on 79). For similar conclusions see Ann Short Chirhart, *Torches of Light: Georgia Teachers and the Coming of the Modern South* (Athens, Ga., 2005); and Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and Do*. For the characterization of teachers' efforts as tragic, see Adam Fairclough, "'Being in the Field of Education and Also Being a Negro . . . Seems . . . Tragic': Black Teachers in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History*, 87 (June 2000), 65–91.

Mississippians were enrolled, and only 13 percent remained in school through twelfth grade, primarily because the majority of the population lived in rural areas without black public high schools or transportation.<sup>13</sup>

As historian Neil R. McMillen has argued, "By limiting the quality and the extent of black education, the white minority could hope to cramp black political aspirations, inhibit black ability to compete economically, and assure an adequate supply of low-wage menial black labor." In the Delta, cotton was king, and towns and villages served as trading posts in the one-dimensional economy. Restricted educational opportunities locked black laborers into economic dependence, leaving them vulnerable to intimidation and physical violence. Limited education also had political consequences, due to the literacy test required for voter registration. At the height of Congressional Reconstruction in 1868, 96.7 percent of eligible black voters in Mississippi had registered to vote. After the institution of the literacy test in 1892, only 5.9 percent of the black voting-age population was on the registration rolls. As late as 1955, only 4.3 percent of this population was registered to vote.<sup>14</sup> In the Delta's majority-black rural counties, the results were even more dramatic, with less than 1 percent of the eligible black population registered.<sup>15</sup> Bolstered with blunt force, voter registration tests effectively ensured that Mississippi's black population had little political influence well into the twentieth century.

By the mid-1950s, Jim Crow was under attack from federal court decisions in landmark voting and school desegregation cases. White Mississippi officials acted quickly to shore up the pillars of white supremacy. In Delta communities, local politicians joined forces with bankers, landowners, and businessmen to form White Citizens' Councils, using economic intimidation to quell civil rights organizing.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Mississippi officials responded quickly to so-called outside agitators who might inspire local black residents to action. As Cotton, Clark, and Young arrived in the Delta in the summer of 1961, the Freedom Riders had finished serving sixty-day sentences at Parchman Farm, the Mississippi State Penitentiary, for violating the state's strict

<sup>13</sup> Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana, 1989), 73–89.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 73 (quotation), 36.

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Price, *The Negro and the Ballot in the South* (Atlanta, 1959), 11.

<sup>16</sup> Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954–64* (Urbana, 1971); Dittmer, *Local People*, 45–69; Moye, *Let the People Decide*, 64–73.

segregation codes in their coordinated protests against segregated interstate travel.<sup>17</sup>

This history of repression and discrimination had defined life in the Delta for generations, but it was not the entire story. Within this environment, African Americans nurtured the seeds of resistance and change through chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and locally organized groups focused on economic and political disparities. Cotton, Clark, and Young believed that these endeavors could provide the catalyst for CEP classes in the Delta. In return, CEP classes could help sustain and expand local efforts, rocking the foundations of economic and political power in “the most southern place on earth.”<sup>18</sup>

When Andrew Young, Dorothy Cotton, and Septima Clark reached Clarksdale, Mississippi, local NAACP leaders welcomed the travelers and drew them into a deeply rooted resistance network. Almost immediately, Young knew that meeting Vera Mae Pigea was worth the trip. He observed that while Aaron Henry, president of the Mississippi NAACP, “provided intelligent and strong leadership,” Pigea “really ran the operations.”<sup>19</sup> Since the late 1950s, the beautician had served as the NAACP Youth Council director for Mississippi. As Young recalled, Pigea “became one of our first citizenship school recruits,” volunteering to extend the CEP into the Delta. After this successful recruiting trip across the South, the staff members returned to Georgia to prepare for the teacher training sessions.<sup>20</sup>

In November, Pigea and four companions traveled 650 miles east to the Dorchester Center, the CEP’s teacher training facility, on the Georgia coast. In the five-day workshops, Clark, Cotton, and Young passed on the lessons learned in the early South Carolina citizenship

<sup>17</sup> Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York, 2006), esp. 311–69. For a firsthand account of the Freedom Rides in Mississippi, see John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York, 1998), 167–74. See also Moye, *Let the People Decide*, 88–90.

<sup>18</sup> James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York, 1992), vii. For NAACP and other local efforts in the Mississippi Delta, see Dittmer, *Local People*, 29–58; Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale*, 9–41; and Moye, *Let the People Decide*, 52–56.

<sup>19</sup> Young, *Easy Burden*, 142. A pharmacist and World War II veteran, Henry became president of the Coahoma County NAACP branch in 1954 and “quickly built one of the largest chapters in the state.” In 1960 he was elected state president of the NAACP for Mississippi. According to Charles Payne, by that point “Henry was the closest thing there was to an official head of the resistance movement in Mississippi.” Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 56–66 (first quotation in note on 58; second quotation in note on 60).

<sup>20</sup> Young, *Easy Burden*, 142. For more on Pigea’s local leadership, see Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale*, 42–115.

schools, retaining the CEP's roots in the Highlander approach to community leadership development. Through role-play exercises, Pigeo and other recruits learned how, in Myles Horton's words, "to start where people are," using students' everyday activities to teach the fundamentals of reading and writing. The organizers explained that group discussions that connected literacy to citizenship "let the class see first-hand how they can help their people work on community problems and relate such activity to a knowledge of their rights as first class citizens."<sup>21</sup>

In the Dorchester workshops, Septima Clark provided the direct link between the initial South Carolina Sea Islands citizenship schools and the expanded program. In 1956 Clark brought Myles Horton together with Sea Islands leader Esau Jenkins. The collaboration resulted in the unique blend of Highlander's group-centered leadership development approach with practical literacy lessons that became the hallmark of CEP classes. As Katherine Mellen Charron has argued, Clark drew on her experience as a teacher and community leader to bridge Horton's ability to ask "searing questions that got people thinking about how they could change themselves and then affect positive change in their communities" and Jenkins's very practical desire to increase voter registration. As the SCLC assumed administration of the CEP from Highlander, Clark's active engagement ensured that these two strands of the program would remain intertwined.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the workshop, Vera Mae Pigeo followed Clark's example, proving to be as much a teacher as a participant. Music featured prominently at the training sessions, and in the evenings Dorothy Cotton often "lifted her lovely soprano voice" and led the group in song. As the group joined in the familiar anthem, singing, "We shall overcome some day," Pigeo interrupted the song. Displaying her "spirit and determination," Pigeo explained "that in Clarksdale they have changed the words to 'We shall overcome *today*.'"<sup>23</sup> Encouraged by Pigeo's example, the Mississippi delegation returned home.

<sup>21</sup> Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*, edited by Brenda Bell, John Gaventa, and John Peters (Philadelphia, 1990), 99–100 (first quotation on 99); Citizenship Education Program, "Report of the Citizenship School—Workshop and other activities," December 11, 1961, p. 5 (second quotation), Folder 28, Box 136, Subseries 2: Records of the Citizenship Education Program, 1961–1964, Series I: Records of Andrew Young, SCLC Records, Pt. 4. See also Young, *Easy Burden*, 143–54; Cotton, *If Your Back's Not Bent*, 111–21, 125–45; and Clark, *Ready from Within*, 62–64.

<sup>22</sup> Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 216–63 (quotation on 253–54).

<sup>23</sup> Young, *Easy Burden*, 149 (first quotation); Citizenship Education Program, "Report of the Citizenship School—Workshop and other activities," 3 (second, third, and fourth quotations; emphasis in original); Cotton, *If Your Back's Not Bent*, 147–59.

Pigee immediately confirmed the SCLC staffers' beliefs in her leadership when she threw her support behind an NAACP-organized economic boycott targeting local white businesses. Within a week of her return, local police arrested Pigee, Aaron Henry, and five other organizers, charging them "with conspiring to withhold trade." The arrests and boycott increased interest in the local movement, and Henry invited Martin Luther King Jr. to Clarksdale. For the SCLC, Henry's invitation was an opportunity to expand its reach into the Delta, specifically through the CEP. After King's appearances, SCLC director of voter registration Jack O'Dell and Andrew Young would encourage volunteers to attend CEP teacher training sessions on the Georgia coast, and those volunteers would return to the Delta to teach CEP classes. King put the recruiting plan into motion in Henry's hometown of Clarksdale in February 1962.<sup>24</sup>

King's public appearances in the Delta drew supporters but also drew attention from unwanted sources. Upon hearing the news of King's visit, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission dispatched Agent Tom Scarbrough to the Delta. Scarbrough, a dedicated and tenacious investigator, meticulously documented King's movements, including a meeting with local black youths organized by Vera Mae Pigee. In his detailed report, Scarbrough noted that Pigee was "a well known agitator" and called particular attention to a "pamphlet titled, 'Citizenship Education Program.'" Referring to Horton and the Highlander Folk School, Scarbrough warned that the "same group of communist teachers . . . who were teaching at Mount Eagle, Tenn.," continued the program at a center on the Georgia coast. The presence of the pamphlet in the Delta could only mean that the "communist teachers" were close at hand.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 121–22; Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale*, 91–95 (quotation on 92); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York, 1988), 577–79. This was not King's first trip into the Delta as a representative of the SCLC. In February 1958, under Ella Baker's leadership, the SCLC kicked off the Crusade for Citizenship to increase black voter registration across the South, arriving in Clarksdale in January 1959. According to Hamlin, Mississippi NAACP leader Medgar Evers saw the SCLC's effort as infringing on NAACP activities in the state, and he actively worked to limit the SCLC's influence in Mississippi. Hamlin writes, "As a result of his labors, the Crusade for Citizenship had only a minor presence in Mississippi, and the SCLC was unable to establish a major foothold in the state." Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale*, 54.

<sup>25</sup> Tom Scarbrough, "Martin Luther King, Jr. and Others," February 13, 1962, pp. 1–7 (first quotation on 4; remaining quotations on 7), SCR ID# 1-16-1-61-1-1-1, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records (Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi), available online at [mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/](http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/); hereinafter cited as MSSC Records, with the identification number of the document's first page. For more on the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, see Yasuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States' Rights* (Jackson, Miss., 2001); Dittmer, *Local*

By the time Scarbrough sounded the alarm, Pigeo and the other teachers had already established a foothold in Coahoma County, starting six CEP classes in January 1962.<sup>26</sup> In their improvised classrooms, Pigeo and the other teachers followed the instructions from the CEP training, using the SCLC's *Citizenship Workbook* to teach the fundamentals of literacy in the context of citizenship. For example, students improved their vocabulary and reading skills by learning how individual letters formed words related to voting and government functions. In the lesson, students learned that the letter *a* started words such as *attorney*, *amendments*, and *alderman*. Brief selections about African American history and lessons in nonviolence served as reading comprehension exercises. Students practiced writing and math skills using examples from their daily activities, such as filling out money orders and solving math problems related to farming or voter registration. Pigeo and the other teachers guided their students in mastering basic skills, often for the first time, so that at the end of the three-month class, students were prepared to stand before county registrars and demand first-class citizenship.<sup>27</sup>

By the spring of 1962, Andrew Young marveled at the students' progress. He wrote, "I don't understand how, but folk are learning to read and write, and with persistent effort they are getting registered."<sup>28</sup> The next month, Aaron Henry confirmed Young's assessment at the SCLC annual board meeting. Despite constant scrutiny and harassment, CEP teachers had successfully organized six schools in the Clarksdale area. As a result of these efforts, Henry reported, students learned to read and write and were actively involved in local voter registration activities.<sup>29</sup>

Success in Coahoma County fueled the program's expansion across the Delta. The SCLC dispatched Field Secretary James L. Bevel to work full-time in the region. Using NAACP leader Amzie Moore's

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*People*, 60; and John R. Rachal, "'The Long Hot Summer': The Mississippi Response to Freedom Summer, 1964," *Journal of Negro History*, 84 (Autumn 1999), 315–39.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Young to Myles Horton, April 24, 1962, Folder 5, Box 30, Highlander Records.

<sup>27</sup> Southern Christian Leadership Conference, *Citizenship Workbook*. For analysis of a photograph of Pigeo instructing students using the SCLC's CEP workbook in a back room of her beauty shop, see Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale*, 69.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Young to Myles Horton, April 24, 1962, Folder 5, Box 30, Highlander Records.

<sup>29</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 588. The CEP classes seemed to have escaped Tom Scarbrough's notice, as he did not mention them in surviving Sovereignty Commission reports from Coahoma County. For Henry personally, the "harassment continued"; he was "convicted on a trumped-up charge of molesting a white hitchhiker," and his wife, Noelle, a teacher, was fired from her job. See Dittmer, *Local People*, 122 (quotations in note); and Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale*, 97–102.

home in Cleveland as a base of operation, Bevel traveled throughout the region recruiting local leaders to attend CEP teacher training workshops, while Pigea and her fellow teachers continued to teach classes in and around Clarksdale. The program's growth in the Delta displayed the effective combination of SCLC resources and local participation and leadership.<sup>30</sup>

In Ruleville, Rebecca McDonald and Celeste Davis responded to Bevel's invitation. The pair reflected the CEP's reliance on recognized leaders as well as its ability to engage a new generation of activists. The program was twenty-three-year-old Davis's first formal experience with civil rights action and civic engagement. Through the CEP, she received on-the-job training in education and community organizing. For Davis, McDonald served as a role model and teacher. By the time she began teaching CEP classes, McDonald had already established a reputation, as activist Charles McLaurin put it, as "one of the hard fighting old ladies who have stuck it out and truly do believe." McDonald served as a deaconess of her church, and her husband, Joe McDonald, was "reportedly one of the very few active black registered voters in all of Sunflower County." In the early 1960s, the McDonald home was an important gathering place for civil rights activists. Organizational affiliations blurred in the area as Amzie Moore from the NAACP chapter in nearby Cleveland coordinated voter registration strategies with Robert "Bob" Moses of SNCC and James Bevel of the SCLC.<sup>31</sup>

In this emerging collaborative voter registration campaign, McDonald and Davis's CEP classes provided a necessary educational component. In March 1962 the women opened their Ruleville school on Lafayette Street and attracted forty students. After three months, only one of Davis and McDonald's students had successfully registered to vote.<sup>32</sup> Despite the disappointing voter registration results, the

<sup>30</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 142; Andrew Young to Myles Horton, April 24, 1962, Folder 5, Box 30, Highlander Records. For Amzie Moore's deep roots in the resistance movement in Mississippi, as a founder of the Regional Council on Negro Leadership (RCNL) and as president of the Cleveland chapter of the NAACP, see Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 29–47.

<sup>31</sup> Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York, 1993), 50 (first quotation); Tom Scarbrough, "Sunflower County—Negro Agitators . . ." September 11, 1962, esp. pp. 3–4, SCR ID# 2-38-1-45-1-1-1, MSSC Records; Dittmer, *Local People*, 136; Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 34 (second quotation); Moye, *Let the People Decide*, 108; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 153–55.

<sup>32</sup> Rebecca McDonald and Celeste Davis to Septima Clark, May 1962, Folder 25, Box 163, Subseries 5: School Reports, 1961–1965, Series III, SCLC Records, Pt. 4; hereinafter cited as School Reports.

combination of mass meetings and CEP classes continued to attract Ruleville residents into the Delta movement, including local sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer. At an August 1962 mass meeting, Hamer listened as Bevel connected religious faith and political action. Four days later, she joined seventeen other volunteers to make the trip to the Sunflower County Courthouse in Indianola to register to vote. When it was Hamer's turn, the circuit clerk turned to a section of the state constitution and asked about "de facto laws." Hamer copied the section from the book but was unable "to give a reasonable interpretation and tell the meaning of that section that I had copied." The clerk denied Hamer's application, and the remaining volunteers were also turned away.<sup>33</sup>

As news of the volunteers' trip to Indianola traveled back to Ruleville, town officials and local whites mobilized to end this latest threat to white supremacy, specifically targeting CEP teachers and participants. Hamer's employer demanded that she withdraw her registration application or leave the plantation where she and her family lived and worked. In response, she packed her belongings and moved to Ruleville. Mayor Charles Dorrrough withdrew the free water and tax exemptions from Williams Chapel Missionary Baptist Church, where the campaign workers had been meeting, forcing the deacons to cancel mass meetings and citizenship classes. Within days, Dorrrough also fired Celeste Davis's father-in-law, Lenard Davis, from his job as a city sanitation worker. On September 10, night riders added blunt force to the mayor's actions, firing shots into forty-two homes, including Joe and Rebecca McDonald's house.<sup>34</sup> As Bevel later reflected, the violence and reprisals were "the breaking point in Ruleville. We had to turn our efforts from voter registration to re-locating families and finding funds to sustain people."<sup>35</sup> The combination of economic intimidation and physical violence that had successfully ended earlier voter registration efforts threatened to do the same in the Delta.

<sup>33</sup> Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South* (paperback ed.; New York, 1983), 249–50 (quotations on 250); Mills, *This Little Light of Mine*, 36–37; Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 24–31; Moye, *Let the People Decide*, 97–100. The daughter of sharecroppers, Fannie Lou Hamer lived and worked on W. D. Marlow's plantation outside Ruleville. Historian Charles Payne notes that although Hamer described the August 1962 "mass meeting as a turning point, she was politically active before that," selling NAACP memberships and attending RCNL events. See Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 154–55.

<sup>34</sup> Moye, *Let the People Decide*, 100–102; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 154.

<sup>35</sup> [James Bevel], "Voter Registration in the Mississippi Delta," undated, p. 2 (quotation), Folder 8, Box 141, Subseries 3: Records of the Voter Education Project, 1962–1964, Series I, SCLC Records, Pt. 4.

In response, SCLC and SNCC organizers stepped up their efforts in surrounding Delta towns. In early 1962 Amzie Moore had introduced Bevel to his twenty-three-year-old neighbor Samuel T. "Sam" Block. Block had recently returned to the Delta after attending college in St. Louis and enlisting briefly with the U.S. Air Force.<sup>36</sup> Block's sister Margaret later recalled that Bevel and Moses met regularly in the Block family's kitchen, sharing news "that we didn't know because we couldn't get it on the local news or in the local newspaper." The movement veterans also related the growing folklore of the movement, describing student-led sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, and Nashville, Tennessee. The information sharing worked both ways, as the Blocks described "how people were getting shorted sharecropping and what we could do for the sharecroppers."<sup>37</sup> These conversations chipped away at another pillar of Jim Crow in Mississippi by connecting local concerns to broader civil rights action and undermining the isolation that was so crucial to the maintenance of white supremacy in the Delta.

Sam Block accepted Bevel's invitation to teach CEP classes. On a practical level, the SCLC's citizenship schools allowed Block to gain direct experience in civil rights action. But the organization also offered a monthly stipend of thirty dollars for teachers. For Block and other teachers, this stipend provided a source of income that was independent of local white employers, leaving the activists less vulnerable to the kind of economic reprisal that Hamer had faced.<sup>38</sup>

Block taught classes with Lois L. Rodgers, enrolling up to forty-six students at the Cleveland citizenship school. Their school served as a catalyst for local action. In May, the teachers led a voter registration "march" to the Bolivar County Courthouse and managed to get "only two people" registered. On their second attempt, "[nobody] would wait on the people that were to be [registered]." In July, Rodgers reported that ten of the forty-six students had registered to vote despite the clerk's continued efforts to discourage or deny their applications.<sup>39</sup> Following the conclusion of the CEP classes, the teachers' paths diverged. Block's work with the CEP caught the attention of SNCC organizers, and they offered him the opportunity to head up the

<sup>36</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 141–42.

<sup>37</sup> Author's interview with Margaret Block, August 7, 2006, Cleveland, Mississippi; recording and transcription in the author's possession.

<sup>38</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 142; Young, *Easy Burden*, 152.

<sup>39</sup> Sam Block to Andrew Young, May 31, 1962, Folder 53 (quotations); Lois Lee Rodgers, "Citizenship School Report," July 1962, Folder 56, both Box 161, School Reports.

organization's voter registration efforts in nearby Greenwood. Although the position did not include a salary, Block accepted the offer and moved to Greenwood.<sup>40</sup>

Rodgers continued her work in Cleveland, facing mounting resistance on the part of white officials. Classes stalled as local churches bowed to economic pressure and closed their doors to CEP teachers. Moving operations out of Cleveland did not alleviate the problem, as teachers learned when they tried to organize CEP schools in nearby Pace and Duncan. With Bevel's support, Rodgers concentrated on her hometown of Shaw. As Bevel reported in early 1963, "I don't know whether we should call it a class, workshop or mass meeting." Despite cold January temperatures, "ninety-two people" turned out. This figure represented the low point for the Shaw movement, as subsequent classes attracted "about 150 to 200 students at each meeting." According to Bevel, "We have not emphasized voter registration in Shaw; yet a number of people have gone down to register and others are asking us about getting registered." Bevel and Rodgers organized a local canvassing committee to increase awareness and participation in the voter registration efforts. The workshops provided a needed boost, and Bevel anticipated sending "two people from Shaw for [CEP] training."<sup>41</sup>

Twenty miles to the east, Ruleville teacher Rebecca McDonald solved the problem that had stopped other teachers in their tracks. When church leaders closed Williams Chapel to civil rights activities, McDonald held citizenship classes in her home, a move she clearly believed would be temporary. Just as white officials used economic pressure to halt civil rights organizing, McDonald applied some economic pressure of her own to continue the work. In January, she challenged the deacon board, declaring "that she had put more money in the church than anyone else and therefore they were going to use the church whether the white people liked it or not." In a report to the SCLC,

<sup>40</sup> Sam Block to Andrew Young, May 31, 1962, Folder 53, Box 161, School Reports. For Block's organizing work for SNCC during the summer of 1962, see Dittmer, *Local People*, 128–35. Throughout the summer, law enforcement officials routinely followed Block as he canvassed neighborhoods and accompanied potential voters to the courthouse. In August, the police stepped up their harassment, threatening Block and walking in on mass meetings. On August 9, Tom Scarbrough visited Leflore County circuit clerk Martha T. Lamb, who told him that "Samuel Black" had "brought in Negroes . . . on three different occasions." She described Block as "very courteous, but bold," and "said he asked many questions pertaining to the voting laws of Mississippi." Scarbrough made note of the names and addresses of the people who had accompanied Block. Tom Scarbrough, "Leflore County—Samuel Black (Block) and Robert Moses," August 14, 1962, pp. 1–7 (first, second, and third quotations on 2; fourth quotation on 3), MSSC Records, SCR ID# 2-45-4-51-1-1-1; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 144–52.

<sup>41</sup> James Bevel, "Mississippi Report SCLC Field Secretary," January 1963, Folder 5, Box 141, Subseries 3, Series I, SCLC Records, Pt. 4.

Bevel confirmed, "We are now back in the church." The renewed focus on voter registration encouraged Ruleville residents, including Fannie Lou Hamer, to travel once again to the Sunflower County Courthouse. In January 1963 she successfully added her name to the voter registration rolls. In response, four hundred of Hamer's Ruleville neighbors marched to the courthouse in Indianola in February 1963 to attempt the registration test, clearly demonstrating the results of the yearlong collaboration between local leaders, the SCLC, and SNCC.<sup>42</sup>

Recognizing the growing threat to white supremacy, Sunflower and Leflore County officials intensified economic pressure by discontinuing federal food subsidies. Because landowners routinely short-changed sharecroppers at harvests, low-income black families depended on the federal food subsidies during the winter months. Officials reasoned that halting the program would get the federal government out of the Delta and force desperately poor families to depend on local whites for assistance. As winter wore on, they realized that the plan had backfired. Rather than driving a wedge between black residents and civil rights activists, the strategy galvanized the two groups around the very tangible need for food and clothing. In addition, donations poured in from across the country, shining a national spotlight on the Delta's impoverished black residents. A White Citizens' Council member later lamented, "When we cut out the food giveaway program, that was our biggest mistake—'cause that's when our nigras embraced the civil rights crusade!"<sup>43</sup>

Throughout the winter of 1963, Sam Block organized volunteers to distribute donated food and clothing from Greenwood's SNCC office. The food and clothing drive coincided with the ongoing voter registration campaign, making Greenwood the center of civil rights action in the Delta. With increased attention came escalating threats and harassment, including break-ins at the SNCC office and reprisals directed against supporters. Much to the chagrin of white officials, the threats and harassment only seemed to strengthen the black community's support for civil rights action. For example, when police arrested Block in February 1963 on charges of disturbing the peace, more than 150 black residents responded by attempting to register at the Leflore County Courthouse.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* (quotations); Moyer, *Let the People Decide*, 107–8.

<sup>43</sup> Holland, *From the Mississippi Delta*, 210 (quotation); Dittmer, *Local People*, 143–47; Moyer, *Let the People Decide*, 108–14.

<sup>44</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 158–62; Dittmer, *Local People*, 146–47.

Events in Greenwood prompted a visit in late February 1963 from SNCC field secretary Bob Moses, accompanied by James Travis, a veteran of the Freedom Rides, and Randolph T. Blackwell, field director for the Southern Regional Council's Voter Education Project (VEP).<sup>45</sup> The three men met with Bevel, Block, and other SNCC workers to discuss "ways and means of moving into other counties and ways of getting dug into Greenwood." At the end of the meeting, Bevel headed north, while Moses, Blackwell, and Travis traveled west to Greenville. Seven miles outside Greenwood, their trip was cut short as shots rang out from a passing car. Unable to shield himself from the blasts, Travis, who was driving, was hit in the shoulder and the neck.<sup>46</sup>

While Travis recovered in the Greenwood hospital, field staff from the SCLC, SNCC, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) coordinated with VEP administrators to launch "a highly concentrated registration campaign in Leflore County." Participating organizations, including the SCLC, immediately reassigned field staff to concentrate resources in Greenwood.<sup>47</sup> Including the SCLC in this coordinated response reflected the SCLC's active participation in the Delta movement as well as its access to valuable resources, such as staff, funding, and the networks of CEP teachers that had been cultivated over the previous year in the Delta. Bevel served as the SCLC's point person for the CEP in Mississippi, but reinforcements were not far behind. In February 1963, Bevel had invited SCLC staff member Annell Ponder to visit the Delta. A Georgia native, thirty-year-old Ponder was serving as a field supervisor for the CEP. When she accepted Bevel's invitation, Ponder anticipated "a more or less routine field trip to visit the citizenship schools at Clarksdale where Mrs. Pigeon . . . and other leaders in Coahoma County had a good citizenship training program set up." Following the shooting, Bevel informed her of plans for

<sup>45</sup> In December 1961, five participating organizations—SNCC, the Congress of Racial Equality, the National Urban League, the SCLC, and the NAACP—agreed to pool resources in support of a South-wide voter registration campaign, the Voter Education Project. The Southern Regional Council administered the program, collecting data and managing reporting and funding requirements. Each organization operated voter education programs in designated areas across the South. See Leslie W. Dunbar and Wiley A. Branton, "First Annual Report of the Voter Education Project of the Southern Regional Council, Inc.: For the Fiscal Year April 1, 1962 through March 31, 1963," esp. pp. 1–6, 29, Folder 9, Box 138, Subseries 3, Series I, SCLC Records, Pt. 4. See also Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 478–82.

<sup>46</sup> James Bevel, "Field Secretary Report: February 28–March 8, [1963]" (quotation), Folder 6, Box 141, Subseries 3, Series I, SCLC Records, Pt. 4; Dunbar and Branton, "First Annual Report of the Voter Education Project of the Southern Regional Council," 29–30; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 162–63.

<sup>47</sup> Dunbar and Branton, "First Annual Report of the Voter Education Project of the Southern Regional Council," 30.

“a crash program in voter registration” and asked Ponder instead to stay in the Delta.<sup>48</sup>

Upon her arrival on March 4, Ponder was immediately swept up. That first evening, she and Bevel met with the Reverend David L. Tucker and the officers of Greenwood’s Turner Chapel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. As Ponder reported, “Tucker . . . made a strong appeal in favor of [the SCLC’s] request,” and by the end of the meeting, the officers agreed to open the church for citizenship classes, and “[m]any of them signed up to attend.” Staying true to the CEP’s origins in community leadership development, Bevel agreed to teach the class only “until a local teacher could be recruited and trained.” Within a week, eighteen-year-old Ida Mae Holland volunteered to teach. Working with Bevel and Ponder, she received on-the-job training and quickly assumed responsibility for the Turner Chapel class.<sup>49</sup>

Like Sam Block and Celeste Davis, Holland found an entry point to civil rights action in the CEP. Before her involvement in the program, Holland had excelled in school, but she also realized that her professional and economic opportunities would always be restricted in the Delta. Faced with limited prospects, she had turned to prostitution. In early 1963, after an unsuccessful attempt to proposition Bob Moses, Holland visited SNCC’s Greenwood office as activists planned the coordinated voter registration effort. When Moses found out she could read and write, Holland was immediately put to work. Though family and neighbors raised concerns about her involvement, she later reflected, “Being around the SNCC people had turned my narrow space into a country bigger than I’d ever imagined. Still, every country has its borders, and there were always those who lurked outside, trying to beat my borders back, to make me small again. I swore I would not let that happen again.” Like a growing number of young CEP teachers, Holland gained self-confidence through her experience in the program and assumed a leadership role in the Greenwood movement.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Annell Ponder, “Mississippi Report to Annual Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference,” 1963, Folder 26, Box 155, Subseries 4: Records of Annell Ponder, Series III, SCLC Records, Pt. 4. For Ponder’s background, see Southern Christian Leadership Conference, “Citizenship Education Project: Semi-Annual Report to the Field Foundation, July 1, 1962–January 31, 1963,” Folder 29, Box 136, Subseries 2, Series I, SCLC Records, Pt. 4.

<sup>49</sup> Annell Ponder, “Citizenship School Report: Greenwood, Miss.,” March 1963, Folder 7, Box 141, Subseries 3, Series I, SCLC Records, Pt. 4. See also Holland, *From the Mississippi Delta*, 214–15.

<sup>50</sup> Holland, *From the Mississippi Delta*, 214–19 (quotation on 219). In her autobiography, Holland refers to these early literacy education efforts as SNCC-sponsored “Freedom Schools.” She goes on to describe activities and events that clearly situate this early work in the spring of

Holland's characterization of all civil rights workers as "SNCC people" was testament to the close collaboration among civil rights organizations in Greenwood. Annell Ponder was welcomed into the fold, quickly forming "working relationship[s]" amid the barely controlled chaos of the Greenwood SNCC office, where "forty-five to fifty other staff workers . . . carr[ied] out the work of the massive campaign in Leflore County." Ponder brought important skills and talents to the local effort. On a practical level, she could teach CEP classes and train teachers. She also had direct experience in organizing local schools into a regional network. Finally, she was old enough to wield authority but still young enough to fit in with the cadre of young activists.<sup>51</sup>

Ponder knew that the CEP's success depended on her ability not only to collaborate with other organizations but also to mobilize community leaders, women like Atlean F. Smith. Like Vera Mae Pigea in Clarksdale, Smith was a local beautician, a position that allowed some economic independence from white employers and officials. By the time Ponder met Smith, Smith had already used this relative independence to become "an outspoken and dynamic leader in the Greenwood Movement." When Ponder described her difficulties in securing meeting space for the CEP, Smith agreed to hold citizenship school classes in her home. Like Ida Mae Holland, Smith received on-the-job training and eventually "assumed responsibility for the leadership of this class." For established leaders like Smith, the CEP was a vehicle to bring their established reputations, economic resources, and considerable community contacts in support of local action. Through their involvement, these teachers legitimated participation in civil rights action. Rather than being the work of radical outside agitators, such projects were the work of respectable, successful, churchgoing women in the community.<sup>52</sup>

With two classes underway, Ponder and Bevel faced significant logistical challenges in expanding the program: they needed to organize more citizenship schools in the Delta as soon as possible; they alone

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1963. CEP attendance records show that Holland taught CEP classes during this period. See, for example, Ida Holland, "Citizenship School Monthly Attendance and Record Sheet," May 1963, Folder 24, Box 162, School Reports.

<sup>51</sup> Annell Ponder, "Citizenship School Report: Greenwood, Miss.," March 1963, Folder 7, Box 141, Subseries 3, Series I, SCLC Records, Pt. 4.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* (quotations); Annell Ponder, "Citizenship Education in the 'Heart of the Iceberg,'" August 2, 1963, Folder 34, Box 155, Subseries 4, Series III, SCLC Records, Pt. 4. See also Atlean F. Smith, "Citizenship School Monthly Attendance and Record Sheet," April and May 1963, Folder 37, Box 162, School Reports.

could not teach enough classes; and they could ill afford the time to send teachers to the Georgia coast for training. The pair decided to initiate on-site training in the Delta. With SNCC workers' assistance, they recruited eight women, including Fannie Lou Hamer from Ruleville. On March 13, Bevel and Ponder opened the first training session in Greenwood. Holding teacher training sessions in the Delta presented unique challenges. "Because the people were so afraid, it was impossible to find a place where we could hold training sessions in the evenings," Ponder reported; she and Bevel thus convened their meetings during the day. In addition, the potential teachers "braved the jeers and criticisms of their neighbors who would take no part in the 'mess' which we were stirring up." Despite these challenges, the recruits completed the training and initiated classes in their local communities. Based on this initial success, Ponder and Bevel immediately organized a second workshop, enrolling a dozen new recruits.<sup>53</sup>

In Greenwood and in the surrounding counties, CEP classes offered a "less militant" alternative to marches and demonstrations. Local classes typically attracted older residents drawn by the promise of long-awaited literacy education. In Ida Mae Holland's class at Turner Chapel, only five of her thirty-seven students were younger than thirty years old.<sup>54</sup> In March 1963 Mattie Bell Pilcher opened a school in her home, down the street from Atlean Smith's classes. Of Pilcher's eight students, only one was younger than thirty years old. By the end of three months, five of her eight students had registered to vote.<sup>55</sup> Of Bettye Brown's eleven students at First Christian Church in Greenwood, only three were younger than fifty years old. After three months of instruction, Brown reported, "The Beginner student[s] are doing fine in their works and showing improvement. The advanced are doing very good."<sup>56</sup> Alice Blackwell's classes at Wesley Chapel AME Church in Greenwood attracted students whom she described as "elderly people but [who show] intense interest in learning about citizenship—non-violent voter registration." According to Blackwell, "Beginners

<sup>53</sup> Ponder, "Citizenship Education in the 'Heart of the Iceberg,'" 5–7 (quotations on 6); Annell Ponder, "Citizenship School Report: Greenwood, Miss.," March 1963, Folder 7, Box 141, Subseries 3, Series I, SCLC Records, Pt. 4.

<sup>54</sup> Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 239 (quotation); Ida Holland, "Citizenship School Monthly Attendance and Record Sheet," May 1963, Folder 24, Box 162, School Reports.

<sup>55</sup> Mattie Bell Pilcher, "Citizenship School Monthly Attendance and Record Sheet," May 1963, Folder 33, Box 162, School Reports.

<sup>56</sup> Bettye Brown, "Citizenship School Monthly Attendance and Record Sheet," May 1963, Folder 20, Box 162, School Reports.

who had difficulty in sounding and forming letters in the alphabet have very much improved.”<sup>57</sup>

Through their reports, CEP teachers documented multigenerational involvement and leadership in the Delta movement. For black residents, local classes in familiar, relatively protected spaces offered a welcome introduction to civil rights action. In addition, while “civil rights agitators” trained teachers and created an infrastructure to support local classes, CEP students gathered in classes with teachers who were acquaintances, friends, and neighbors. Most important, classes started where the students were, as teachers intentionally created an environment where personal achievement laid the foundation for more public demonstrations of citizenship. For CEP students, literacy education was the pathway to citizenship that had long been denied in Mississippi. As Bettye Brown explained, “I have one student who couldn’t read or write (Mr. Grace) now he can write and spell his name.” Following this accomplishment, “He has also been down to register.”<sup>58</sup> CEP teachers’ reports document numerous examples of such individuals, whose literacy education resulted in political empowerment, one person and one class at a time.

For CEP students, political empowerment was an important marker of citizenship, but on a more fundamental level, citizenship meant the ability to exercise power and authority in a variety of contexts. For example, “advanced students” in Alice Blackwell’s class applied their literacy skills “to deposit money in the bank . . . [and] write friendly business letters.”<sup>59</sup> In rural Mississippi in the early 1960s, these were not mundane daily activities. For southern African Americans, this knowledge served as the basis for safeguarding family resources and addressing personal concerns through legal and political channels. In addition, CEP classes served as information centers, where black residents learned about resources beyond the Delta, including federal programs such as Social Security. Ethel Shaw’s students learned “it will pay to check with [the] office. If we have put up enough time we will have some benefits coming that will help comfort and protect our families.”<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Alice Blackwell, “Citizenship School Monthly Attendance and Record Sheet,” September 1963, Folder 16, Box 162, School Reports. See also Alice Blackwell, “Citizenship School Monthly Attendance and Record Sheet,” April 1963, May 1963, and June 1963, all in Folder 15, Box 162, School Reports.

<sup>58</sup> Bettye Brown, “Citizenship School Monthly Attendance and Record Sheet,” June 1963, Folder 20, Box 162, School Reports.

<sup>59</sup> Alice Blackwell, “Citizenship School Monthly Attendance and Record Sheet,” June 1963, Folder 15, Box 162, School Reports.

<sup>60</sup> Pinkie Pilcher, “Mrs. Ethel Shaw,” January 10, 1964, Folder 35, Box 162, School Reports.

Establishing economic independence to “comfort and protect” families was citizenship in the Delta.

In addition to encouraging individual achievement, teachers effectively mobilized students in support of the broader Greenwood campaign. CEP students and teachers participated in a wide range of activities, including the “distribution of information re voter registration drive, canvass[ing], [and] accompany[ing] people to [the] courthouse to apply for registration.” Drawing on connections to other community organizations, teachers were also encouraged to “hold block parties, [and] make speeches at churches and other meetings.” Teachers also worked behind the scenes to “secure living quarters for workers . . . and prepare food for jailed voter registration workers.”<sup>61</sup> Through these efforts, CEP teachers and students transformed the meaning of citizenship. Citizenship was a legal status conferred by the state, but first-class citizens acted to ensure equal rights and protection under the law for all citizens, even those who did not directly participate in civil rights activities.

Although CEP teachers conducted their classes within the relative safety of Greenwood’s black neighborhoods, they did not escape physical harassment and economic intimidation. In late March 1963, Ida Mae Holland’s participation in a protest march to city hall resulted in her arrest on charges of “disorderly conduct.”<sup>62</sup> As church leaders buckled under threats and harassment, teachers held classes in their homes. While this strategy allowed teachers to sustain classes, CEP teachers who rented their homes soon realized that they did not have the same protections as home owners. According to Annell Ponder, landlords routinely refused to repair dilapidated homes and threatened to evict teachers. One teacher “was shot at 16 times after attempting to register.” Though she continued to hold classes at her home, Ponder reported that “[p]olicemen park in front of her house, let the police dog bark all night, . . . and follow her as she goes about canvassing the neighborhoods.” Local officials also tried to stop the teacher’s activities by punishing her husband: “he loses every job he gets as soon as it becomes known that she is his wife.”<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Annell Ponder, “Citizenship School Report: Greenwood, Miss.,” March 1963, Folder 7, Box 141, Subseries 3, Series I, SCLC Records, Pt. 4. See also Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 266–83; and Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 66.

<sup>62</sup> Ida Mae Holland, “Report: Greenwood Mississippi,” March 31, 1963, Folder 7, Box 141, Subseries 3, Series I, SCLC Records, Pt. 4; Holland, *From the Mississippi Delta*, 227–29 (quotation on 228).

<sup>63</sup> Ponder, “Citizenship Education in the ‘Heart of the Iceberg,’” esp. 7–8 (quotations on 8).

White officials' attention to CEP teachers' activities was due, in part, to the broader context of the Greenwood movement. With public demonstrations on the rise and the arrival of outside civil rights workers, white officials were on edge for any sign of civil rights "agitation." That they specifically targeted CEP teachers indicated that white officials were keenly aware of the radical potential of this seemingly "less militant" literacy education effort. By teaching African Americans to read and write, the CEP threatened to destroy a critical pillar of white supremacy. If black sharecroppers could read contracts, they could not be manipulated to sign long-term commitments that led to persistent debt and poverty. If African Americans could read, they could pass literacy tests for voter registration and obtain political power. CEP teachers' reputations as respectable, churchgoing women would not shield them and their families from economic and physical reprisal.

As Greenwood teachers and students continued their defiant support of the local movement, Ponder and Bevel rejuvenated earlier CEP efforts outside Greenwood. In March 1963, newly trained CEP teachers Earnestine Foster and Fannie Lou Hamer continued Rebecca McDonald's efforts in Ruleville, opening a school at Williams Chapel. Together, they taught fourteen faithful attendees. By early May, six students had registered to vote.<sup>64</sup> Farther west, Lois Rodgers maintained a busy schedule in Bolivar County. She committed two days a week to canvassing local neighborhoods and reserved three days to "take groups to register." On Thursdays and Fridays, she taught citizenship classes. When a white grocery store owner "shot a Negro woman, for speaking about his discourteous[ness]," Rodgers and four others "boycotted [the store] in the Negro community." In April, she traveled to Boyle and Cleveland to organize CEP classes and accompanied nineteen Shaw residents to the county courthouse.<sup>65</sup>

In June, Rodgers engaged her students in a discussion about sustaining their efforts after the three-month class was over. In response, her students designed a strategy to challenge the bonds of economic dependence in the Delta. According to Rodgers, "The adults will make quilts, (plain and fancy) throw rugs, [doilies], and table clothes. . . . [T]he goods can be sold at a very good price. The money will be put in a fund

<sup>64</sup> Earnestine Foster, "Citizenship School Report," May 1963; Earnestine Foster to the SCLC, May 3, 1963, both in Folder 24, Box 163, School Reports.

<sup>65</sup> Lois Lee Rodgers, "Reports for the Month of March," received April 9, 1963 (quotations); Lois Lee Rodgers, "Report for April," received May 6, 1963, both in Folder 57, Box 161, School Reports.

to help people when there is no work. To help person[s] in the community with utilities bills, doctor bills etc.”<sup>66</sup> Like lessons in literacy, this strategy represented the radical potential of local CEP classes. Students connected with each other, shared interests and skills, and then organized to address a locally defined need. Through this strategy, Rodgers’s students politicized women’s work, redefining domestic and apolitical activities as the basis for economic empowerment and independence for themselves and their community.

As Rodgers’s students applied CEP lessons, Annell Ponder capitalized on the Greenwood-based momentum to extend the CEP to new locations. After completing a weeklong training session, Leonia V. Luckett opened the first citizenship school at Hopewell Church in Bevel’s hometown of Itta Bena, between Greenwood and Indianola. By January 1964, Luckett’s responsibilities had expanded to include supervising other CEP teachers in the Itta Bena area.<sup>67</sup> That month, Luckett reported on her class’s progress in relating reading lessons to everyday activities. For example, the class materials included reading selections that described the historical experiences of African Americans. In “One Hundred Years from Slavery,” students sounded out words to learn about slaves who “were needed to clear the trees to make farm land and roads” and who “planted and harvested the crops.” Although the passage emphasized “progress” and “the rugged determination to be free,” Luckett’s students had a “touching discussion” about “how conditions are much the same to day because some [students were] treated almost the same way in the year 1963 as in 1619.”<sup>68</sup> This long historical perspective shook long-standing status quo arguments that urged delay until the time was “right” for change. For Luckett’s students, three hundred years was long enough, and literacy education provided the vehicle for change.

Ponder’s outreach and Luckett’s classes struck a chord with eighteen-year-old Willie Baxter. Baxter started canvassing with SNCC workers but soon realized, “Our primary focus was trying to get [them]

<sup>66</sup> Lois Rodgers, “Report for June,” received July 12, 1963, Folder 1, Box 162, School Reports. For more on Lois Rodgers’s activities, see Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 324–26.

<sup>67</sup> Annell Ponder, “Citizenship School Report: Greenwood, Miss.,” March 1963, Folder 7, Box 141, Subseries 3, Series 1, SCLC Records, Pt. 4; Leonia V. Luckett, “Citizenship School Monthly Attendance and Record Sheet,” April 1963, Folder 53, Box 162, School Reports. Luckett’s reports and correspondence as a supervisor, January–March 1964, are in Folder 53, Box 162, School Reports. Her reports indicate the range of lesson plans and discussions that students had in CEP classes.

<sup>68</sup> Southern Christian Leadership Conference, *Citizenship Workbook*, 24 (first through fifth quotations); Leonia V. Luckett, “Report for Jan.,” January 1964 (sixth and seventh quotations), Folder 53, Box 162, School Reports.

registered, but a lot of people couldn't read." The SCLC's CEP classes filled a gap in a broader local movement. She later recalled, "When SCLC came out with their classes, that was the perfect situation." Gathering at Hopewell Church, "the team" canvassed and distributed clothing and food during the day. At night, they convened citizenship classes and mass meetings. Like the teachers in Greenwood, Baxter found her classes attracted "mostly older" students. Using "little textbooks" and "letters . . . like in a primary tablet," she "got [students] to a point where [they] could read, write [their] names, and recognize numbers." Although students could read and write, the interpretation portion of the literacy test continued to be a barrier. In response, Baxter and her fellow Itta Bena teachers adjusted their lessons so that "all [they talked] about was the Constitution."<sup>69</sup> Baxter's and Luckett's classes resulted in noticeable registration activity. By late 1963, Ponder reported to the SCLC annual convention, "It is highly significant . . . that the citizenship schools of Itta Bena . . . have proportionately sent down more people to register than any other comparable place."<sup>70</sup>

In the busy spring of 1963, the Itta Bena teachers' success was matched by citizenship schools in Holmes County, just south of Greenwood. Holmes County proved to be fertile ground for the citizenship program because although few of the county's majority-black residents were registered voters, eight hundred black farmers owned land. Coupled with political empowerment, this economic independence could be an effective weapon against white supremacy. Local landowner Ralthus Hayes and his neighbors organized the Holmes County movement and invited SNCC workers to initiate voter registration classes at the Reverend Jesse James Russell's church in Mileston.<sup>71</sup> The SNCC activists soon "merged" their classes with the SCLC's ongoing citizenship classes "because we ultimately saw the end results being the same." CEP teachers tailored lessons to meet the students' needs and build on their interests. According to SNCC activist Hollis Watkins, teachers were "very mindful of rural people and farmers": "[W]e tried to make sure that we didn't hold the classes long. . . . And we also incorporated dealing with the numbers, with small addition and subtraction teaching as part of that. . . . because we

<sup>69</sup> Author's interview with Willie Baxter McGee, August 11, 2006, Itta Bena, Mississippi; recording and transcription in author's possession.

<sup>70</sup> Annell Ponder, "Mississippi Report to the Annual Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference," 1963, Folder 26, Box 155, Subseries 4, Series III, SCLC Records, Pt. 4.

<sup>71</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 190–91; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 278–79.

understood that the farmers would have to do a lot of that in doing farm recordkeeping.”<sup>72</sup>

For fifty-nine-year-old farmer Hartman Turnbow, the argument that one could “make your livin’ standard better” convinced him to get involved. In a scene repeated across the Delta, Turnbow and eleven others traveled to the Holmes County Courthouse after they completed the CEP class. After an altercation with the local sheriff and a two-hour wait, Turnbow faced the circuit clerk, Henry McClellan. As Turnbow later recalled, McClellan “give me the questionnaire. They was mighty hard, the questions, but . . . I filled ’em in correct at that time.” Upon his exit, he announced to the others, “I redished.” Following Turnbow’s example, the others “commenced to goin’, one by one.” By the close of business, according to Turnbow, all twelve had “redished.”<sup>73</sup> As a result of the group’s success, Holmes County CEP teachers expanded their efforts, recruiting new students and expanding local civil rights activities.

With classes meeting across the region, Ponder accompanied nine Delta teachers to an advanced training session on Johns Island, South Carolina, in June 1963. For the travelers, the trip was a welcome break from the near-constant physical and mental strain of working in the Delta. With support from SCLC staff and citizenship school program founders, they learned new strategies for CEP classes, discussed common concerns, and planned next steps. At the end of the week, Ponder and the Mississippi teachers headed back to the Delta. Riding through the night, the bus crossed into Mississippi in the early morning hours. Sixteen-year-old June Johnson grew increasingly concerned as she noticed that the driver placed a phone call at each stop. At 11:15 A.M., the bus pulled into Winona, one of the last stops before its final destination of Greenwood.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Hollis Watkins interview with John Rachal, Part 2, October 29, 1996, pp. 27–28 (first and second quotations on 27; third and fourth quotations on 28) (Mississippi Oral History Program, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg), available online <http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/ref/collection/coh/id/7570>.

<sup>73</sup> Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 260–62 (first quotation on 260; remaining quotations on 262). Whether Turnbow successfully registered to vote is not clear. Charles Payne relies on Turnbow’s oral history account to conclude “the registration proceeded from there.” Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 279. Drawing on Turnbow’s oral history interview and local newspaper sources, Dittmer concludes that while Turnbow and his companions completed the registration test, they failed to pass. Dittmer, *Local People*, 192.

<sup>74</sup> Annell Ponder testimony, undated, Folder 8, Box 24, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Collection (MLK Center); Dittmer, *Local People*, 170; Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake*, 45–46; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 819. Accounts vary on how many people made the trip with Ponder. I draw on Annell Ponder’s and Fannie Lou Hamer’s court testimonies for my account. In her testimony, Ponder reported, “I was returning on the bus with Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, June Johnson, Euvester Simpson, James West, Rosemary Freeman, and four other people.”

Inspired by their experience on Johns Island, the travelers staged an impromptu test of desegregation at the bus station, as they entered to get something to eat and use the restrooms. News of the group's action traveled fast in the small town, and local law enforcement officers quickly intervened and transported Ponder and five others to the Montgomery County jail. Group members were well aware of the danger they were in. Friends and allies in nearby Greenwood knew the group's travel plans but could attribute a delayed arrival to any number of causes and wait to sound the alarm. Staring into the angry faces of the Winona police, the teachers feared what could happen in that time.<sup>75</sup>

Their fears heightened when the officers divided the activists into available cells after a failed group interrogation. Over the next several hours, officers brought Johnson, Ponder, and Hamer separately into the booking room to face further questioning. Punctuating their demands "with blackjacks, and a belt, fists, and open palms," the white men wanted to know about each woman's involvement in civil rights action.<sup>76</sup> At the end of the ordeal, Johnson's clothes were badly torn, and blood streamed down her face.<sup>77</sup> Hamer recalled that Ponder was a "horrifyin'" sight, her "mouth was bleedin' and her hair was standin' up on her head." Hamer's back and legs were "hard as a bone," forcing her to collapse facedown on a cot, unable to sit upright.<sup>78</sup>

For Ponder, the violence confirmed her beliefs about white Mississippi officials but shook her faith in the federal system. It was four days before agents "got around to visiting" the Montgomery County jail. In her later report, Ponder noted that they "were very explicit in telling me, too, that they were merely the 'guests of the police chief,' that they had to follow his regulations," including the prohibition of photographs.<sup>79</sup> After almost a yearlong campaign in the Delta, preceded by numerous campaigns in Mississippi and other southern states, preceded by Supreme Court rulings in favor of civil rights activists, the federal government still seemed to be more concerned about white Mississippi law enforcement officials than black citizens. Later in the day, the bruised and battered activists were

<sup>75</sup> Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 252–53.

<sup>76</sup> Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 48–52 (quotation on 50); Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 819–20.

<sup>77</sup> Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 253.

<sup>78</sup> Fannie Lou Hamer, "Fannie Lou Hamer Interview—Winona, Mississippi," Folder 20, Box 98, Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee Collection (MLK Center). The document is a "verbatim transcript of an interview by phone by Jack Minnis with Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer."

<sup>79</sup> Ponder, "Citizenship Education in the 'Heart of the Iceberg,'" 9–11 (quotation on 10).

released, after Andrew Young, Dorothy Cotton, and James Bevel arrived from Birmingham to post bond.<sup>80</sup>

The experience in the Winona jail marked a turning point for Ponder, strengthening her commitment to organizing efforts in the Delta. In a report to the SCLC, she reflected that Mississippi was “a study in extremes and contrasts.” In a place where “I have had some of the most satisfying and rewarding experiences of my life,” she had also seen “some of the most horrifying examples of man’s separation from God and from his own truest self.” She continued, “This is the only place I’ve heard of where a Negro can be fired from his job, evicted from his home, jailed and put in state penitentiary, shot at, *and starved* for attempting to register to vote.” However, she wrote, “I have met in Mississippi some of the most amazingly brave, selflessly dedicated freedom fighters in the social revol[ut]ion which is sweeping this country and the world.” She marveled at their ability to “maintain a ‘business as usual’ attitude in the face of experiences which would ordinarily be considered calamities of the highest order.” In another report, she highlighted the network of CEP teachers who coordinated efforts across the region, and she outlined plans “to expand the program throughout the state”: “Teachers and supervisors are going as teams into new areas . . . canvassing and recruiting for students and potential teachers.”<sup>81</sup>

Ponder’s plans coincided with a new strategy to challenge Mississippi politics. At a statewide convention in Jackson in October, organizers for the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) initiated the Freedom Ballot campaign. Rather than attempting to gain acceptance into the state’s white-dominated Democratic Party, COFO planned to mobilize black voters in support of a new political party, the Freedom Democratic Party (FDP). As the state’s white-dominated political parties geared up for the fall elections, FDP arranged to run its own statewide election. Campaign workers would fan out across the state to register voters and collect ballots for the

<sup>80</sup> After confirming reports from Winona, Young set out from Birmingham with Cotton and Bevel. When Young argued that the trip would be too dangerous for Cotton, she reminded him, “‘Those are women in jail in Winona. . . . If Mrs. Hamer’s brave enough to challenge Mississippi, I’m brave enough to help get her out.’” Young, *Easy Burden*, 253–58 (quotation on 254).

<sup>81</sup> Annell Ponder, “Mississippi Report to Annual Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference,” 1963, pp. 1–3 (first, second, and third quotations on 1; fourth quotation on 2 [emphasis in original]; fifth and sixth quotations on 3), Folder 26, Box 155, Subseries 4, Series III, SCLC Records, Pt. 4; Ponder, “Citizenship Education in the ‘Heart of the Iceberg,’” 14 (seventh and eighth quotations).

party's slate of candidates. COFO organizers believed that such a campaign would undermine claims that black citizens were not interested in the political process, expose the discriminatory policies that maintained the white Democratic Party's power in Mississippi, and challenge the federal government to act in behalf of black citizens. At the convention, delegates chose Clarksdale's Aaron Henry as their candidate for governor. Later, Tougaloo College chaplain Edwin King was asked to serve as Henry's running mate.<sup>82</sup>

The FDP campaign depended on the network of CEP teachers and students to register and mobilize potential voters. Leading up to the November election, local teachers and students contributed to the campaign, "helping to organize local drives, . . . manning ballot boxes and canvassing."<sup>83</sup> In Bolivar County, Lois Rodgers "worked dispatching ballots box and material at eighteen voting booths . . . . I assign citizenship teachers and other volunteer[r] workers to voting booth[s]." On November 4, she returned to the polling places and "picked up all ballots boxes to be taken to Jackson."<sup>84</sup> "Over 90,000 disfranchised Negroes in Mississippi . . . . [cast] ballots at private homes, pool halls, cafes, churches, fraternal meeting halls, and stores over a three-day period," Ponder wrote in the SCLC newsletter. Echoing COFO organizers' goals, she argued that the freedom vote campaign "underscore[d] the urgency and the impatience of Mississippi Negroes for 'Freedom Now' . . . . and saw some reversals in the direction of the tide of fear." Five months after her ordeal at the Winona jail, Ponder was gratified to see "policemen shake and sheriffs tremble."<sup>85</sup>

Despite these successes, the election fell short of organizers' goals, and COFO leaders developed an ambitious plan for a massive summer project to bring national attention to Mississippi in 1964. After three years of constant activity in "the home of white supremacy," organizers concluded that "much more comprehensive programs are needed to combat the terrible cultural and economic deprivation of Negro communities in Mississippi." During the summer of 1964, COFO planned to expand voter registration efforts in support of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and create a network of "Freedom

<sup>82</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 200–203.

<sup>83</sup> Annell Ponder, "90,000 Negroes Vote in Mississippi Mock Election," *Southern Christian Leadership Conference Newsletter*, 2 (November–December 1963), 10, copy in Folder 23, Box 122, Subseries 2: Newsletters, Series IX: Publications, SCLC Records, Part 3: Records of the Public Relations Department (MLK Center).

<sup>84</sup> Lois Lee Rodgers, "Report for November 1963," received December 11, 1963, Folder 2, Box 162, School Reports.

<sup>85</sup> Ponder, "90,000 Negroes Vote in Mississippi Mock Election," 10.

Schools” and community centers. Organizers believed that this comprehensive approach would offer opportunities for broad participation and generate a groundswell for change in Mississippi communities. Most important, the strategy was designed to draw federal attention to the state. During the spring of 1964, COFO staff recruited volunteers for the summer project. Intentionally echoing President John F. Kennedy’s call to public service, COFO brochures invited students from elite colleges and universities to participate in “a massive Peace Corps–type operation in Mississippi.”<sup>86</sup> In response, approximately 650 predominantly white students answered the call and volunteered.<sup>87</sup>

The Freedom Summer strategy reflected COFO’s, and specifically SNCC’s, experiences in Mississippi. For three years, SNCC organizers had worked in the trenches, building relationships with local leaders and mobilizing communities in the face of increasing harassment and intimidation. By early 1964, resources and patience were running thin. That spring, the Voter Education Project dealt a blow to the local movement. “A sizeable portion of the VEP budget had already been spent in Mississippi and the registration results were minimal,” VEP officials explained. Without federal intervention, they argued, “It does not appear to be wise for VEP to put any more of its already limited funds into Mississippi.”<sup>88</sup> Weary civil rights workers responded by designing a strategy to intentionally shine a national spotlight into the Magnolia State’s darkest corners. For this reason, COFO recruited white students from elite colleges and universities. National media outlets, and by extension the federal government, would not ignore the influx of white college students into the state. This national attention during a presidential election year would force Mississippi’s white leaders to loosen their grip on the state.<sup>89</sup>

Freedom Summer represented a significant departure for COFO strategists. In past efforts, SNCC and SCLC staff members cultivated relationships with local leaders and deployed resources in response to locally defined needs. This model was particularly important for

<sup>86</sup> Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, “Mississippi Summer Project” brochure, undated (but refers to upcoming mid-April 1964 deadline for applications), Folder 14, Box 141, Subseries 3, Series I, SCLC Records, Pt. 4.

<sup>87</sup> According to Dittmer, “Just how many volunteers worked in Mississippi is subject to conjecture, for COFO never compiled a final tally. . . . Probably no more than 650 students worked in Mississippi, and not all of these people worked all summer.” Dittmer, *Local People*, 244.

<sup>88</sup> Southern Regional Council, “Second Annual Report of the Voter Education Project of the Southern Regional Council for the Fiscal Year April 1, 1963–March 31, 1964,” March 1964, Folder 6, Box 21, Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee Collection.

<sup>89</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 206–19.

the CEP because the program's growth and development depended on effective partnerships between SCLC staff and local teachers. In contrast, COFO organizers directed all components of Freedom Summer. In its brochures aimed at Mississippi's black residents, organizers insisted, "This is your FREEDOM SUMMER. It will not work without your help." *Help*, however, was not the same as *leadership*. *Help* meant "provid[ing] housing," or "look[ing] for buildings," or "get[ting] names." In contrast to the SCLC's call for local leaders to open their homes or churches for CEP classes, COFO planners asked Delta residents to "let us know when you have meetings . . . so we can come answer questions about the FREEDOM SUMMER."<sup>90</sup> This was a COFO-led and COFO-operated project, and black Mississippians were invited to support and participate in these efforts.

The contrast between earlier efforts and Freedom Summer was most striking in the approach to education. While the CEP and the new Freedom Schools both used education as a vehicle for broader community change, Freedom Schools were "geared to high-school age children" rather than adults. According to COFO planners, during the six-week session, local black teenagers "will be given remedial instruction in basic educational skills, and exposed to cultural influences which are not normally available to them, but the main emphasis of the schools will be to implant habits of free thinking and ideas of how a free society works." Unlike the CEP's emphasis on adult leadership development, Freedom Schools aimed to "lay the groundwork for a statewide youth movement, which would coordinate projects of special interest to young people." Most striking, in contrast to the local black leaders who taught the CEP classes, in Freedom Schools white college students would prepare the next generation of black activists.<sup>91</sup>

Freedom Summer's plans for the CEP significantly reshaped the direction of the SCLC program. According to COFO organizers, CEP teachers would continue their work in newly organized, multiservice community centers, conducting classes alongside "job training programs," "classes on child care," "health programs," and "music, drama, and arts and crafts workshops." Child care would be provided free of charge for program participants.<sup>92</sup> While this format situated CEP

<sup>90</sup> Council of Federated Organizations, "Mississippi Freedom Summer" brochure, undated (but refers to activities in the summer of 1964 in future tense), Folder 14, Box 141, Subseries 3, Series I, SCLC Records, Pt. 4.

<sup>91</sup> Council of Federated Organizations, "What Is COFO? Mississippi: Structure of the Movement and Present Operations," COFO Publication #6, February–March 1964, p. 3 (quotations), Folder 11, Box 141, Subseries 3, Series I, SCLC Records, Pt. 4.

<sup>92</sup> Council of Federated Organizations, "Mississippi Freedom Summer" brochure.

classes in centralized, protected spaces, the characterization of CEP as an adult literacy program narrowed the project's goals. In the three years since Vera Mae Pigeer's first classes in the Delta, CEP teachers had consistently encouraged their students to use literacy for political empowerment, community organizing, and leadership development. During Freedom Summer, that broader vision shifted to the Freedom Schools and away from the CEP.

As Freedom Summer got underway, Annell Ponder and Lois Rodgers struggled to retain the CEP's focus and to bridge a growing gap between local CEP teachers and the short-term volunteers. In a memorandum to community center staff, Ponder and Rodgers praised the volunteers' efforts to open child care programs and Freedom Schools at many centers. However, they expressed disappointment with the limited coordination between center staff and CEP teachers. They reminded the volunteers that the initial plans called for local CEP teachers to organize classes and register residents to vote in the MFDP election. "This doesn't seem to be working out," they wrote. The supervisors theorized, "This is due, we think, to a lack of communication between the SCLC citizenship teachers and the center spokesmen." To correct the problem, Ponder and Rodgers encouraged the summer volunteers to contact CEP teachers directly and engage them in the center's activities. For the CEP supervisors, this "lack of communication" had implications beyond the summer project. In the same memorandum, Ponder and Rodgers took the center staff to task, asking, "What happens when you leave? Are you getting local people drawn into the program's management?" After three years of building a network of CEP teachers, Ponder and Rodgers reminded center volunteers that "citizenship teachers are supposed to be your bridge in this direction, too."<sup>93</sup>

These questions and suggestions pointed to the challenges in sustaining a locally driven community organizing strategy in the midst of a short-term, high-intensity strategy. In some communities, CEP teachers used Freedom Summer to reignite community discussions. From Tchula in Holmes County, CEP supervisor Willie James Burns reported that local teachers and students had expanded the CEP curriculum to incorporate discussions about Freedom Schools, building a community center, and voter registration.<sup>94</sup> In other communities,

<sup>93</sup> Annell Ponder and Lois Rodgers to community center staff, undated (but in folder labeled June–September 1964), Folder 35, Box 155, Subseries 4, Series III, SCLC Records, Pt. 4.

<sup>94</sup> Willie James Burns, "Supervisor's Evaluation Report," July 31, 1964, Folder 35, Box 163, School Reports.

the influx of volunteers pulled students and teachers in new directions. For example, from Greenwood, the center of activity during Freedom Summer, CEP supervisor Alice Blackwell reported, "Every one has been busy canvassing and organizing block captains, for voter registration drives, and attending mass meetings to hear the noted speakers. Also canvassing and picketing. Therefore we have not been teaching citizenship classes the last past weeks."<sup>95</sup>

Although structured classes dwindled during the summer, CEP teachers actively supported the MFDP ticket, organizing precinct meetings and serving as "freedom registrars." The CEP's influence in the growing political movement was demonstrated when former teachers Fannie Lou Hamer from Ruleville and Victoria J. Gray from Hattiesburg ran as MFDP candidates in U.S. House and U.S. Senate races. At the end of the summer campaign, Hamer and Gray joined fellow CEP graduate Hartman Turnbow as part of the sixty-eight-member delegation, bound for the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey.<sup>96</sup>

Meeting with national party officials and civil rights leaders, Hamer, Turnbow, and the others shared their personal stories of injustice. The MFDP challenge forced high-level negotiations between the national Democratic Party and the all-white delegation from Mississippi, ultimately ending in an unsatisfactory compromise for MFDP delegates. They returned to Mississippi, largely disenchanted with national politics. Within a year, the COFO coalition splintered as resources shrank further in the face of limited measurable success in the state and the passage of new federal legislation designed to end racial discrimination and remove barriers to voter registration.<sup>97</sup> For the SCLC, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, coupled with urban riots outside the South, signaled a new phase in the struggle for equality. By the fall of 1965, SCLC leaders charted a course that drew the organization's resources out of the Delta and north to Chicago.<sup>98</sup>

CEP teachers in the Delta also channeled their skills and talents in new directions. In Greenwood, Alice Blackwell qualified as the MFDP candidate in the 1965 mayoral race, while Pinkie Pilcher

<sup>95</sup> Alice Blackwell, "Supervisor's Evaluation Report," June 28, 1964, Folder 18, Box 162, School Reports.

<sup>96</sup> Citizenship Education Program, "Annual Report to the Field Foundation," 1963–1964, esp. pp. 12–16 (quotation on 14), Folder 3, Box 137, Subseries 2, Series I, SCLC Records, Pt. 4; Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 326–31; Dittmer, *Local People*, 285.

<sup>97</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 320–46.

<sup>98</sup> Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 332–34.

qualified to run for street commissioner. After her unsuccessful bid as an MFDP candidate in 1964, Fannie Lou Hamer redirected her energies in support of economic opportunity efforts. With other civil rights organizers, Hamer joined the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union (MFLU). Organized in Shaw in April 1965, the MFLU united sharecroppers, day laborers, domestic workers, and tractor drivers and organized strikes on Mississippi plantations, economic boycotts and selective buying campaigns, and protests in front of businesses that were slow to desegregate after the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>99</sup>

In other Delta communities, CEP teachers' priorities reflected a new federal focus on poverty in the United States. On the heels of landmark civil rights legislation, President Lyndon B. Johnson launched an "unconditional war on poverty." In contrast to New Deal programs that had offered direct aid to individuals, the Johnson administration's plans called on "local community action agencies to mobilize an area's resources in planning and implementing a coordinated attack on the causes of poverty." To achieve this objective, federal guidelines required "'maximum feasible participation' of the residents," by serving on governing councils and holding staff positions.<sup>100</sup>

For CEP teachers, their training in local leadership development and community empowerment strategies made them ideally suited for these programs. Supported with federal funds and assistance, CEP teachers participated in the War on Poverty to address unresolved civil rights concerns, such as continuing disparities between white and black Americans in terms of earning, education, housing, and health care. In Itta Bena, CEP teacher Willie Baxter spearheaded an effort to establish a Head Start program. Fellow teachers Ellis Jackson and Mary Strong served on the program's policy council and taught classes. In nearby Sidon, Ethel Gray opened a Head Start program in the same home where night riders had fired shots and deposited rattlesnakes on the doorstep when she taught CEP classes.<sup>101</sup> Through these new endeavors, local teachers transferred lessons and practices from the CEP to new federal programs.

<sup>99</sup>"State News—Mississippi," *CEP News*, 1 (September 1965), 5–6, copy in Folder 17, Box 153, Subseries 2, Series III, SCLC Records, Pt. 4; Dittmer, *Local People*, 364–65; Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 121–35.

<sup>100</sup>Michael L. Gillette, *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History* (New York, 1996), xvii (first quotation), xix (second and third quotations). For a detailed analysis of community mobilization in Bolivar County, see Rogers, *Life and Death in the Delta*, 129–42.

<sup>101</sup>Willie Baxter McGee interview. For the night riders and rattlesnakes at Ethel Gray's home, see Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 271–72.

As CEP teachers prepared for new challenges, SCLC staff members measured the program's regionwide impact. In the years preceding the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, CEP classes sparked individual transformation that sowed the seeds of collective action in the Delta and across the South. In 1965 Septima Clark added up the numbers. Between July 1961 and February 1965, 1,413 local leaders participated in training sessions at the Dorchester workshop, returning to teach 947 classes in communities across the South. Over 23,800 students had attended CEP classes during this period. According to Clark, teachers and students had combined to influence approximately 95,000 black residents to register to vote.<sup>102</sup>

CEP teachers in the Mississippi Delta knew the personal stories behind these figures. Each teacher shared stories of black men and women struggling to hold a pencil and sound out words. In the relative safety of CEP classes, teachers encouraged their friends and neighbors to become students, guiding them to master basic skills that held the promise of freedom. They stood with their students as they faced county registrars and demanded inclusion in the democratic process. They facilitated discussions where students articulated their concerns, listened to each other, and collectively developed solutions. They became first-class citizens "in the 'heart of the iceberg.'"<sup>103</sup>

CEP teachers and students played a central role in the Mississippi movement that challenged the state's power structure and raised challenging questions about the meaning of citizenship and equality in the United States. Through lessons designed to teach basic literacy skills, CEP teachers and students constructed a definition of citizenship that blended African American traditions of education and resistance with ideals of participatory democracy and equal representation. Between 1961 and 1965, this "less militant" strategy, this so-called women's work, posed a fundamentally radical challenge to Jim Crow segregation and racial discrimination. Through teaching and organization, the CEP demonstrated that first-class citizens did not merely possess rights but instead actively demanded and shaped them.

<sup>102</sup> Septima P. Clark, "Citizenship Education Proposal for 1965-1970," undated (but after February 1965), Folder 16, Box 153, Subseries 2, Series III, SCLC Records, Pt. 4.

<sup>103</sup> Ponder, "Citizenship Education in the 'Heart of the Iceberg.'" This phrase draws on SNCC activist Robert Moses's description of Mississippi. At the end of SNCC's 1961 voter registration drive in McComb, Moses called the action "'a tremor in the middle of the iceberg.'" See Carson, *In Struggle*, 50.