LET FREEDOM RING

Mississippi Freedom Summer 1964

NEW YORK STATE SOCIAL STUDIES CORE CURRICULUM, GRADE 11:
UNITED STATES AND NEW YORK STATE HISTORY
UNIT 7 World In Uncertain Times: 1950–Present
III. Decade of Change: 1960s
B. Johnson and the Great Society
3. Continued Demands for Equality: Civil Rights Movement

AIM
To learn how voting and education are cornerstones to freedom.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION
Freedom Summer, Mississippi, 1964

“Mississippi has been on the defensive against inevitable social change for more than a century. The all-pervading doctrine then and now has been white supremacy (whether achieved through slavery or segregation), rationalized by a professed adherence to states rights and bolstered by religious fundamentalism . . . .”

—Professor James W. Silver, University of Mississippi, 1964

On December 13, 1865, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, marking the end of slavery. It was followed by the 14th Amendment, which made freedmen and women citizens and guaranteed them equal rights before the law. The 15th Amendment outlawed the use of race to deny voting rights. By the 1890s, the idea of equality before the law for African-Americans existed only on paper. White supremacists terrorized their victims to prevent African-Americans from voting and to enforce a rigidly segregated society in education, public facilities and housing. In addition to the sanctioned violence, states passed Jim Crow laws to enforce this new regime. The U.S. Supreme Court in a 7-2 decision in 1896 upheld these laws in Plessy v. Ferguson, which allowed the state of Louisiana to segregate railroad cars. The majority decision accepted the constitutionality of racial segregation and ignored the racism and racial inequality in American society. Disenfranchisement and lynching of African-Americans had become the norm in the South.

See the National Archives Web site http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=52 to read the Plessy v. Ferguson decision.

By the early 1960s, much had changed in the United States. Many African-Americans had moved to Northern cities, where they gained the right to vote and became an

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important voting constituency in many states. Racism had become less acceptable in society, especially in the aftermath of World War II, the Cold War and the need to win allies against Communism. Most importantly, the civil rights movement challenged the Jim Crow society of the South as well as racism in the North. Groups like the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) used litigation and non-violent civil disobedience to turn a spotlight on racism and force changes in society and the law. The landmark decision Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 overturned Plessy v. Ferguson and in 1961, the Supreme Court ruled against segregation in interstate bus and rail stations. But these decisions meant little unless the Federal Government enforced them. This occurred in limited cases, such as the 1957 integration of Little Rock High School and the 1962 integration of the University of Mississippi, where the Federal Government sent troops to enforce the law. But in other cases, the Federal Government failed to intervene and white supremacists bombed and brutally beat interracial groups of “Freedom Riders” traveling on interstate buses throughout the South in 1961.

See the NPR Fresh Air Web site to learn more about the Freedom Riders: http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5149667

In 1964, the tide began to turn as the civil rights movement continued its non-violent civil disobedience in the face of white supremacist and police violence. Nightly television news shone a spotlight on the movement and the violent responses, most notably in Birmingham, Alabama. Responding to pressure from the civil rights movement, the Kennedy Administration proposed civil rights legislation. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963, where the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream,” speech galvanized support for its passage. On June 15, 1964, Congress passed the landmark Civil Rights Act and President Lyndon Johnson signed it into law.

While Congress debated the legislation that year, SNCC and CORE formed the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) to build a movement to transform Mississippi, the most segregated and racially oppressive state in the Union. SNCC began in 1960 after four African-American students – Ezell A. Blair Jr., David Richmond, Joseph McNeil and Franklin McCain from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro — refused to leave a segregated Woolworth’s lunch counter. The sit-ins spread to college towns throughout the South. In April, Ella Baker, a veteran of the movement, gathered the student activists at Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C., where they formally organized SNCC. After organizing the Freedom Rides in 1961, SNCC began to send field organizers to Mississippi to organize African-American communities and begin voter registration drives. By 1963, they had had some success in organizing African-Americans in the rural communities in the Mississippi Delta, despite threats, violence and even murder carried out by white supremacists.

But the national media was largely not reporting SNCC’s activities, nor was the Kennedy Administration doing anything significant to protect civil rights workers. To turn a spotlight on Mississippi, COFO initiated what became known as Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964. They recruited volunteers from predominantly white colleges and universities in the North to register voters, teach students and organize communities. This was controversial among many SNCC activists, who feared that white newcomers might come to dominate their
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predominantly black grassroots organization. But the volunteers brought the national media attention that black activists in Mississippi had been unable to attract, due to an underlying racism which pervaded American culture.

VOTER REGISTRATION

One of the main goals of Freedom Summer was to register African-American voters. The Fifteenth Amendment made it illegal to prevent voting based on race, but in 1890 Mississippi had pioneered in creating laws that circumvented the Amendment and prevented African-Americans from voting. These included barriers such as literacy tests administered by white registrars and poll taxes, an extra tax the state required a person to pay if he or she wanted to vote.

Doug Smith and Sandy Leigh participate in voter registration canvassing during Freedom Summer.

REGISTERING TO VOTE

The literacy test in Mississippi, like those in many other states, required voters to read and interpret their state constitutions, a long, detailed and complex document. Whites and blacks were asked different questions. The questions below were used in the literacy tests in Louisiana. The documents shown came from workbooks used by Citizenship Schools, which taught African-American applicants how to pass the exams. Each applicant had to answer four questions to successfully register to vote, but this was only one part of the application process. An applicant had to give, under oath, information about his or her address, employment, family members and other information that would be given to the applicant’s employer, the Ku Klux Klan and other organizations. For the audacity of attempting to register to vote, applicants could lose their jobs, be thrown off their land and suffer violence used against them. White voters received much simpler exams and were encouraged to vote. Voter registration for whites often exceeded 100% because those who had died or moved away were not removed from the lists. Many of these missing “tombstone voters” voted on Election Day, usually, for the incumbent.
Mississippi Freedom Summer, 1964

Student protestors are photographed by a policeman on Freedom Day in Greenwood, Mississippi, in 1964.

1. What do you see in this photograph?

2. Who are the people in the photo?

3. What are the people doing? What is the purpose of their activity?

4. Why is the policeman taking photos of the protest?

5. If you were a protester, what would be your reaction to this?
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Mississippi Freedom Summer, 1964

State of Louisiana Literacy Test

The State of Louisiana

Literacy Test (This test is to be given to anyone who cannot prove a fifth grade education.)

Do what you are told to do in each statement, nothing more, nothing less. Be careful as one wrong answer denotes failure of the test. You have 10 minutes to complete the test.

1. Draw a line around the number or letter of this sentence.

2. Draw a line under the last word in this line.

3. Cross out the longest word in this line.

4. Draw a line around the shortest word in this line.

5. Circle the first, first letter of the alphabet in this line.

6. In the space below draw three circles, one inside (engulfed by) the other.

7. Above the letter X make a small cross.

8. Draw a line through the letter below that comes earliest in the alphabet.

   Z V S B D M K I T P H C

9. Draw a line through the two letters below that come last in the alphabet.

   Z V B D M K T P H S Y C

10. In the first circle below write the last letter of the first word beginning with “L”.

   1 2 3 4 5

11. Cross out the number necessary, when making the number below one million.

   10 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

12. Draw a line from circle 2 to circle 5 that will pass below circle 2 and above circle 4.

   1 2 3 4 5

13. In the line below cross out each number that is more than 20 but less than 30.

   31 16 48 29 53 47 22 37 98 26 20 25

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FREEDOM SUMMER, 1964

Class lecture/notes
• Based on background information, describe, explain and present board notes on the purpose of Freedom Summer, 1964.
• Explain and present board notes on the obstacle to voting faced by African-Americans.

I. Opening activity/motivation
   A. Have students complete State of Louisiana Literacy Test (c. 1950s) – students should not know what they are completing
   B. When complete, ask students if they could answer these questions. What was confusing about this test? What do you think the purpose of this test was?

II. Opening questions
    Ask students questions to elicit the centrality of voting in American democracy.
    1. How does the U.S. government interact with its citizens?
    2. What role do U.S. citizens play in the government and the formation of national policy?
    3. What makes this possible?
    4. How many amendments to the U.S. Constitution deal with voting?
    5. Why is the right to vote worth fighting for?
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THE MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC PARTY (MFDP)

Because so few black Mississippians could register to vote, the leadership of COFO organized the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Supporters of the party filled out a simplified registration form to join the MFDP. Open to all people of all races, the MFDP was an alternative to the racist and segregated Mississippi Democratic Party, which had rejected the national Democratic Party and its pro-civil rights platform. The new party registered members, organized precinct meetings and nominated a slate of delegates to attend the Democratic Party National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in August 1964, hoping to supplant the all-white racist regulars.

The MFDP arrived at the Convention represented by Joseph Rauh, a leading liberal and lawyer for the United Auto Workers, hoping they could go before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic Convention to make their case for the MFDP and have themselves seated as the official delegates from Mississippi. Fannie Lou Hamer, vice-chairman of the MFDP delegation, riveted the Credentials Committee with her testimony broadcast live on national television.

Despite signing and supporting the Civil Rights Act of 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson wanted to keep the regular Mississippi Democrats from walking out of the Convention and hurting party unity in the November election. (Johnson knew that the Mississippi delegation would not support him, but wanted to keep the support of other southern states.) When he saw the effect Hamer’s speech was having, he called an impromptu press conference to take the cameras away from her, but later that evening the television networks rebroadcast her testimony causing a huge outpouring of support for the Hamer and the MFDP. It appeared that the Credentials Committee might support the MFDP, but Johnson used all of his political power to successfully pressure the committee to reject the MFDP. At Johnson’s bidding, Hubert Humphrey, the liberal senator from Minnesota who wanted Johnson to choose him as his running mate, sent his young protégé, Walter Mondale, to negotiate a compromise. Johnson simultaneously ordered the FBI to wiretap the phone lines of Martin Luther King and the MFDP. Mondale was unable to convince the MFDP to accept a “compromise” of two at-large delegates and the creation of a commission to prevent future discrimination at the 1968 convention. Most of the SNCC and CORE activists, who had been regularly risking their lives for freedom, rejected it. Moreover, the Credentials Committee had passed the compromise before the MFDP delegates could accept it or reject it.

Johnson won the unified convention he wanted; only the Mississippi and Alabama delegations had walked out. But SNCC leaders left the convention feeling betrayed by liberals and headed on a more militant path. Two years later, SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael would lead 3,000 people in calls for “black power,” rejecting non-violence and advocating a separatist path for African-Americans.

¹ Four years later, Fannie Lou Hamer would be seated as a delegate of an integrated Mississippi Democratic Party.
BIOGRAPHY

Fannie Lou Hamer was born on a plantation in the Mississippi hill country in 1917, the last child in a family of 20 children. Mrs. Hamer’s parents, who were sharecroppers, moved to Sunflower County, Mississippi, when she was two years old. She recalled that “from two years old up until now, I’ve been in the Delta.” Due to the dire economic circumstances in which the family lived, Mrs. Hamer received only about six years of formal education. At the time of her youth, the school term was only four months a year. Also, education at that time was considered secondary to work; nevertheless she has said, “When I was a child, I loved to read. In fact, I learned to read real well when I was going to school.” Mrs. Hamer married and continued farming until the 1960s. In 1962, she learned about voting, saying, “That sounded interesting enough to me that I wanted to try it.” When the civil rights movement began in Mississippi, Mrs. Hamer became first a participant and then a leader. She joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee [SNCC] as a fieldworker in voter registration drives. As a result of this work for civil rights, Mrs. Hamer became a leading figure in the organization of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. As a member of the party, she attended the 1964 National Democratic Convention to challenge the seating of Mississippi’s Regular Democratic Party. It was during a Credentials Committee hearing at this convention that she made her famous television appearance telling of the problems she encountered trying to vote in Mississippi. She recalled that “The first vote I cast, I cast . . . for myself, because I was running for Congress.” She opposed the incumbent from her congressional district, Representative Jamie Whitten. Mrs. Hamer traveled widely on behalf of the civil rights movement. She made addresses in many major cities and colleges in the United States. Mrs. Hamer was also instrumental in forming the farming cooperative, Freedom Farms, in Sunflower County, Mississippi. Among her many endeavors, Mrs. Hamer campaigned unsuccessfully for a seat in the state senate in 1971. She passed away March 14, 1977, in the hospital at Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Her funeral was conducted in Ruleville, and she was laid to rest on March 21 at Freedom Farms Cooperative, which she helped to found.

From The University of Southern Mississippi Digital Archive
Mississippi Freedom Summer, 1964

Fannie Lou Hamer’s Testimony Before the Credentials Committee, Democratic National Convention
Atlantic City, New Jersey – August 22, 1964

To listen to the speech go to:
http://publicradio.org/tools/media/player/americanradioworks/features/sayitplain/flhamer

Mr. Chairman, and to the Credentials Committee, my name is Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, and I live at 626 East Lafayette Street, Ruleville, Mississippi, Sunflower County, the home of Senator James O. Eastland, and Senator Stennis.

It was the 31st of August in 1962 that 18 of us traveled 26 miles to the county courthouse in Indianola to try to register to become first-class citizens.

We was met in Indianola by policemen, Highway Patrolmen, and they only allowed two of us in to take the literacy test at the time. After we had taken this test and started back to Ruleville, we was held up by the City Police and the State Highway Patrolmen and carried back to Indianola where the bus driver was charged that day with driving a bus the wrong color.

After we paid the fine among us, we continued on to Ruleville, and Reverend Jeff Sunny carried me four miles in the rural area where I had worked as a timekeeper and sharecropper for 18 years. I was met there by my children, who told me that the plantation owner was angry because I had gone down to try to register.

After they told me, my husband came, and said the plantation owner was raising Cain because I had tried to register. Before he quit talking, the plantation owner came and said, “Fannie Lou, do you know — did Pap tell you what I said?”

And I said, “Yes, sir.”

He said, “Well I mean that.” He said, “If you don’t go down and withdraw your registration, you will have to leave.” Said, “Then if you go down and
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withdraw,” said, “you still might have to go because we are not ready for that in Mississippi.”

And I addressed him and told him and said, “I didn’t try to register for you. I tried to register for myself.”

I had to leave that same night.

On the 10th of September 1962, 16 bullets was fired into the home of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Tucker for me. That same night two girls were shot in Ruleville, Mississippi. Also Mr. Joe McDonald’s house was shot in.

And June the 9th, 1963, I had attended a voter registration workshop; was returning back to Mississippi. Ten of us was traveling by the Continental Trailway bus. When we got to Winona, Mississippi, which is Montgomery County, four of the people got off to use the washroom, and two of the people — to use the restaurant — two of the people wanted to use the washroom.

The four people that had gone in to use the restaurant was ordered out. During this time, I was on the bus. But when I looked through the window and saw they had rushed out, I got off of the bus to see what had happened. And one of the ladies said, “It was a State Highway Patrolman and a Chief of Police ordered us out.”

I got back on the bus and one of the persons had used the washroom got back on the bus, too.

As soon as I was seated on the bus, I saw when they began to get the five people in a highway patrolman’s car. I stepped off of the bus to see what was happening and somebody screamed from the car that the five workers was in and said, “Get that one there.” When I went to get in the car, when the man told me I was under arrest, he kicked me.

I was carried to the county jail and put in the booking room. They left some of the people in the booking room and began to place us in cells. I was placed in a cell with a young woman called Miss Ivesta Simpson. After I was placed in the cell, I began to hear sounds of licks and screams, I could hear the sounds of licks and horrible screams. And I could hear somebody say, “Can you say, ‘yes, sir,’ nigger? Can you say ‘yes, sir’?”

And they would say other horrible names.

She would say, “Yes, I can say ‘yes, sir.’”

“So, well, say it.”

She said, “I don’t know you well enough.”
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They beat her, I don’t know how long. And after a while she began to pray, and asked God to have mercy on those people.

And it wasn’t too long before three white men came to my cell. One of these men was a State Highway Patrolman and he asked me where I was from. I told him Ruleville and he said, “We are going to check this.”

They left my cell and it wasn’t too long before they came back. He said, “You are from Ruleville all right,” and he used a curse word. And he said, “We are going to make you wish you was dead.”

I was carried out of that cell into another cell where they had two Negro prisoners. The State Highway Patrolmen ordered the first Negro to take the blackjack.

The first Negro prisoner ordered me, by orders from the State Highway Patrolman, for me to lay down on a bunk bed on my face.

I laid on my face and the first Negro began to beat. I was beat by the first Negro until he was exhausted. I was holding my hands behind me at that time on my left side, because I suffered from polio when I was six years old.

After the first Negro had beat until he was exhausted, the State Highway Patrolman ordered the second Negro to take the blackjack.

The second Negro began to beat and I began to work my feet, and the State Highway Patrolman ordered the first Negro who had beat me to sit on my feet — to keep me from working my feet. I began to scream and one white man got up and began to beat me in my head and tell me to hush.

One white man — my dress had worked up high — he walked over and pulled my dress — I pulled my dress down and he pulled my dress back up.

I was in jail when Medgar Evers was murdered.

All of this is on account of we want to register, to become first-class citizens. And if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?

Thank you.
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Mississippi Freedom Summer, 1964

AIM
To learn how did Freedom Schools influenced the Civil Rights Movement.

INTRODUCTION TO FREEDOM SCHOOLS
“The Freedom Schools mean an exposure to a totally new field of learning, new attitudes about people, new attitudes about self, and about the right to be dissatisfied with the status quo. The children have had no conception that Mississippi is a part of the United States; their view of American history is history with no Negroes in it. It’s like making a cake with no butter.”

Mrs. Carolyn Reese, an African-American Detroit public school teacher and administrator of the Hattiesburg Freedom Schools.¹

A major component of Freedom Summer in 1964 were Freedom Schools – to educate African-American children in a way that would open their eyes to a world outside the narrow view imposed upon them by white supremacist Mississippi. The segregated, racist and sub-standard Mississippi school system was not only grossly underfunded, but was a closed system that discouraged dissent and questioning of the status quo.

The Freedom School curriculum ranged widely. It included African-American history, which was not taught in schools in Mississippi, American government, the current political struggle in Mississippi and the United States, the reading of James Joyce and instruction in French. Howard Zinn, in “SNCC The New Abolitionists,” described some of the activities at the schools: “[Y]oungsters struggled to understand ‘A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man’ by James Joyce. They learned about Frederick Douglass, wrote letters to the local editor about segregation, and discussed the meaning of civil disobedience. Some wrote short stories about their lives, and others wrote poems.”²

While people of all ages attended the schools, they directed their outreach to 15- and 16-year old students so that they could have an impact upon other children in the segregated schools in the autumn. During the summer of 1964, approximately 2,000 students were attending 30 schools.

The schools were housed in churches, “freedom houses,” and under trees. Most of the teachers were Freedom Summer volunteers, largely college students. Before traveling to Mississippi, the mostly white and affluent volunteers received training at the Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio. Among their number were two white men from New York City: Andrew Goodman, a volunteer and student at Queens, College/CUNY, Michael Schwerner, a Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) staff member who ran the COFO office in Meridian, Mississippi, and an African-American, James Chaney, a CORE staff member and native Mississippian. The three men left Oxford and traveled back to

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Mississippi before the other volunteers had arrived. After investigating a church bombing at Mt. Zion Church on June 21, 1964, Neshoba County Deputy Sheriff (and Klansman) Cecil Price arrested them on a speeding charge and put them in the jail. Price and fellow Klansman Sheriff Lawrence Rainey released them at night, then they were murdered by Klansmen, their car hidden and their bodies buried in an earthen dam.¹ When they were reported missing (and correctly presumed murdered), volunteers in Oxford wrote letters to their parents. Below are two examples of these letters, as edited by Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez, the coordinator of SNCC’s New York office, when she published the book “Letters from Mississippi.”²

QUESTIONS ABOUT FREEDOM SUMMER

Freedom Summer volunteers were driven by a deep sense of idealism and commitment to social justice. To provoke discussion, ask students about their own sense of responsibility to others.

You can revisit these questions after the lesson to see if students would answer these questions differently after what they have learned.

1. What does it mean to be part of a community or a nation and how does that relate to one’s responsibility? Would you go and march for someone else’s rights?
2. What would be the limits for you to get involved for the sake of others (i.e., does it have to be a relative)?

QUESTIONS ABOUT FBI POSTER

1. Why do you think it was necessary for the FBI to be involved in the investigation of the missing civil rights workers in addition to Mississippi law enforcement.
2. Civil rights activists had been murdered in Mississippi prior to the disappearance of Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman. Why do you think that their murders attracted the attention of the national media, the FBI and the U.S. Justice Department when the others had not?

QUESTIONS ABOUT BARBARA MUTNICK’S LETTER

1. What is the author’s emotional reaction to the killing of the three workers?
2. What is her analysis of generational points of view?
3. Write back to Barbara about an experience in which you put yourself in danger for something you believed in.
4. Do you believe “how important students can be in a society”? Do students have a special role to play in changing American society?

¹ President Johnson, believing the disappearance might be a hoax, wiretapped the phones of Schwerner and Goodman’s families in case they called home. Many of Mississippi’s leaders, including Price and Rainey, also argued that the disappearance was a hoax to garner media attention.
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QUESTIONS ABOUT SYLVIA WONG’S LETTER
1. Why do you think she writes the time of day?
2. What does the author mean by the “movement”?
3. Why do you think Martinez crossed out the first and third paragraphs?
4. Can you comprehend “why people die to achieve something so basic”?

BENJAMIN PERKINS
I. Opening activity
   Have a student read the poem aloud in class and then have students answer
   the questions below.
   1. What is the rugged mountain that Negroes are climbing? Where are they climbing to?
   2. Why do you think Perkins believes that “the future promises a brighter day?”
   3. What event influenced the writing of the poem? At this point the teacher can present
      MLK Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech.
   4. Benjamin Perkins was a student a Freedom School. What message does he present in
      the poem that represents the goals of the Freedoms Schools?

STUDENT ACTIVITY/HOMEWORK
Have students write their own poems about fighting against injustice in their lives.

QUESTIONS ABOUT “MCComb, U.S.A.”
1. The introduction to “McComb U.S.A.” says “The events related in the play have been
   selected from the actual happenings of the summer; the dialog is taken from the actual
   words spoken at the time.” Explain why you think the play should or should not be
   considered a primary source.
2. Why does the “Old Woman” change her mind about registering to vote after she hears
   about the deaths of the COFO workers, Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman?
3. Three themes run through this play and the civil rights movement: hope, fear and freedom.
   Find examples of each of these themes and then explain how they can exist side-by-side.
4. In this play, there are African-Americans, such as Mrs. Aylene Quin, who are challenging
   white supremacy and African-Americans like the Tom Preacher, who won’t challenge it.
   Explain why you think they have different responses to oppression.
5. Why does the “Old White Man” believe African-Americans “are taking our freedom
   away!” by integrating a restaurant? What does he mean by freedom?

HOMEWORK OR EXTENSION ASSIGNMENT (REQUIRES ACCESS TO A NEW YORK TIMES DATABASE):
The McComb Freedom School students based their play on actual events. Because The New
York Times covered events in Mississippi, it is possible to substantiate many of the events
described in the play. Using a Times search engine, students can put in the names of people,
towns mentioned in the play and the year 1964 to see if the Times reported on them. In
addition, if students cannot find an event, they can write and/or debate about whether the
play is trustworthy as a primary source. Additionally, students can brainstorm about what
other sources they could use to verify events in the play.
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The FBI published this poster a week after Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman were reported missing. Freedom Summer volunteers learned of their disappearance as they prepared to leave Oxford, Ohio, to go to Mississippi.
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Letter from Barbara Mutnick to her parents, June 23, 1964

(The editing marks were made by Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez for the book, “Letters from Mississippi”)

I cannot begin to tell you what it is like to be here. Especially now that the first crisis has arisen - the disappearance of the 3 men. Our guys in Oxford - who are CORE workers - are in the staff. The kids’ volunteers like to say now, but I’m sure you already know all this. I just want to tell you how it feels to be here — knowing about them. You feel like it couldn’t be real. No – uh-huh.

They were in Oxford only a few days before - they couldn’t already be in such danger. But then all of a sudden - the disbelief is countered by a vivid picture of reality - that it could be you. And then there’s this weird feeling of guilt because it wasn’t you - and here you are on a beautiful campus trying so hard to understand just what fear danger is anyway. Everyone expects the worst - it’s hard to have happened to the men but no one says anything. /

# Parents’ve been calling here in states of panic. I guess because of the missing men. A lot of kids are trying to be real casual & cool & funny about it, everything so they don’t worry their ‘folks. This seems silly to me – especially with you – because you’re in this with us in the sense that unlike a lot of parents – you realize the significance of this summer as much as I do. And you realize how important students can be in society – & here’s our chance finally. I was thinking that it’ll be an easier summer for me than you in a way – because at least I’ll always feel in control to a large extent in what’s going on around me. But you – I guess – will feel helpless. Anyway I don’t believe & I don’t think the people here believe that I’ll be hurt badly this summer. But there will be times – I imagine – when we’ll all be a little scared. The important thing to keep remembering is that I really want to do this – and the goals have to keep being shoved to the foreground crowding out the fears. Or at least remaining more important that them. So let’s not play little game with each other by avoiding things – & actually misrepresenting them as so many of the kids here are doing. Let’s not be alarmists. And remember that this summer is going to be my first important challenge – & I’m gonna grow-up a lot. /

Love,

Barbara
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Letter from Sylvia Wong to her father, June 24, 1964

(The editing marks were made by Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez for the book, “Letters from Mississippi”)

Dear Dad,

Happy Birthday!

I'd rather you didn't read this since she's worried enough already. Bruce got to the Columbus SNCC office from the airport with quite a lot of trouble. He tried to call SNCC but couldn't reach them. I'll explain the details another time, but a car came to the airport, with several white men in it and searched closely with their headlights. Bruce hid in a field overnight and so wasn't detected. At daylight he walked to the SNCC office—about six miles from the airport.

The mood up here is—of course, very strained with those three guys who disappeared Sunday dead, most likely. Saturday night, I ate dinner with the wife of one of them. She was telling me about all the great things she and her husband were working on. She looks younger than me. What does she do now? Give up the Movement? If Bruce and I decide to stay in the Movement after this summer, we'll never know if the other one will come home alive; I don't think I'm strong enough to live under that. What a terrible rotten life this is! I feel that the only meaningful type of work is the Movement but I don't want myself or anyone I've met to have to die. I'm so shook up that death just doesn't seem so awful anymore, though. It's no different from anyone else, if they're risking their lives, then so must I. I never knew of such violence and terrorism before Mississippi or the world.

The movement people are wonderful. Harry Jones, a Negro who was shot in the back on the road while driving through Mississippi made an instantaneous speech standing in the back of his car. He said, 'This must be a very heavy thing for you to hear, but I can't comprehend why people must die to achieve something so basic and simple as Freedom.'

I can't say don't worry, because we all know how dangerous this is. I will be as careful as I can be and not be stupid, but I do feel I must go. /S/
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Poem by Benjamin Perkins

THE NEGROES ARE CLIMBING

The Negroes are climbing the rugged mountain
With determined feet they climb on and on.
Some have reached the top of the mountain
Thousands struggle day by day....

The valley of ignorance they leave behind
The old corrupted tradition the wind has
blown away.
Slavery is buried in the sand of time....

And behold, the future promises a brighter day,
To the gulf of slavery they shall return no more.
They pave the road that they leave behind
For a new generation is on its way....

Three hundred years of humiliation and deprivation
must go.
Justice and equality are their goal.....

Benjamin Perkins
LET FREEDOM RING

Mississippi Freedom Summer, 1964

Excerpt from Martin Luther King's “I Have a Dream” speech, August 28, 1963

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, “My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.”
LET FREEDOM RING

“MC.COMB, U.S.A.” DOCUMENTING HISTORY ON THE STAGE

Freedom Schools, like all who challenged white supremacy in Mississippi, faced violence. The United States Justice Department had pleaded with the Mississippi Project not to open a school in McComb, but the organizers went ahead and 105 children attended the school over the summer. The McComb Freedom School began in the backyard of the McComb Freedom House, which had been bombed a week earlier. It later moved into a church. Students wrote a play called “McComb, U.S.A.” based on the events of that summer. The following are excerpts from the play. Students should be familiar with Freedom Summer and the Freedom Schools before reading the play and with some terms such as Tom and Tom Preacher, referring to “Uncle Tom.” The play also uses racial epithets, which students may be uncomfortable reading aloud. Teachers should use discretion on whether students should read out these words when performing the play and/or leave it to the students’ discretion.

To read the full play go to: http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/courses/ci407ss/

EXCERPTS FROM MCCOMB, U.S.A.

“A play about McComb, Mississippi, during the summer of 1964,”
“The events related in the play have been selected from the actual happenings of the summer; the dialog is taken from the actual words spoken at the time. If any license has been exercised in compiling this production it has only made slight changes to the strict chronology of events.”

“Presented in 1965 by the students of McComb Freedom School.”*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTS</th>
<th>Voice Announcer</th>
<th>Lewis Allen</th>
<th>Sheriff</th>
<th>White Man</th>
<th>Housewife</th>
<th>Fred A. Ross</th>
<th>Mechanic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Legislator</td>
<td>Negro Girl</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Worker</td>
<td>Policeman</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>White Preacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Liberal</td>
<td>Old Woman</td>
<td>Old White Man</td>
<td>Negro Woman</td>
<td>Alarmist</td>
<td>Tom Preacher</td>
<td>Young Man</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

POLICEMAN: You heard me, niggers! Move along . . . and don’t go forgetting who you-all are.

VOICE: By the first few weeks of spring, the incident list was already indicating the violent summer ahead. Shots had been fired into five Negro homes, Negro churches all over the community were the target for cross-burnings, Lewis Allen had been shot, Negro property had been burned, and already beatings and intimidations had been too numerous to list . . . .

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1 In 1961 110 McComb high school students walked out of school when police arrested four fellow students at a Greyhound bus station sit-in. Many of their younger siblings attended the Freedom School.

* From the manuscript copy of the play in the Henry Bowie Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.
## LET FREEDOM RING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YOUNG MAN:</th>
<th>There were three of us in the car when we were stopped at Summit. They forced us into the woods at gun point and then they beat us with brass knuckles on their hands for eight minutes . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VOICE:</td>
<td>Civil Rights workers still kept coming to Pike County . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YOUNG MAN:</td>
<td>We have no choice. War has been declared. To leave now would be disastrous. If we left now, we would be responsible for what would be the bloodiest reprisal against the Negro people within living memory. We have begun! We must go on!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(During the next scene the song ‘Keep your eyes on the prize’ as background.)*

(Explosion)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VOICE:</th>
<th>June 22nd. Home of Freddie Bates bombed.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Explosion)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOICE:</td>
<td>On the same day, home of Curtis Bryant, leader of the local NAACP, bombed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Explosion)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOICE:</td>
<td>June 22nd. Home of Corrine Andrews bombed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHERIFF:</td>
<td>The Sheriff, answering the accusation that his police force did not appear to be very active in tracing those responsible for the bombings, said:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOICE:</td>
<td>Those responsible for these outrages are so-called civil rights workers. These anarchists will be brought to justice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Younger Worker with Tom.*

| WORKER: | Well, the Sheriff seems to be pretty smart after all. He says he knows who done the bombings. |
| TOM: | Is that right. Mr. Sheriff, he’s a mighty ’portant man. Better not try anything when he’s around. Smart as a bird dog, that Mr. Sheriff . . . |
| WORKER: | He said the niggers been bombing their own houses – |

(Explosion)

| VOICE: | July 8th. COFO Headquarters, the Freedom House, bombed. Two workers, one white and one Negro, hurt by the blast. One of the Freedom School students wrote a poem about what had happened: |

I came not for fortune, nor for fame,  
I seek not to add glory to an unknown name;  
I did not come under the shadow of night,  
I came by day to fight for what’s right.  
I shan’t let fear, my monstrous foe,  
Conquer my soul with threat and woe.  
Here I have come and here I shall stay,  
And no amount of fear my determination can sway.  
I asked for your churches, and you turned me down,  
But I’ll do my work if I have to do it on the ground. |
LESSON VI

LET FREEDOM RING

(Group singing: “They say that Freedom’s a constant struggle.”)

OLD WOMAN: When the news came that the three boys – their names was Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Mickey Schwerner – had been beaten and shot to death over in Neshoba County, I got a strange feeling come over me. It was like fear, but somehow it was different. These three boys had died for me and I asked myself what was I doing for them. Before, when the COFO worker came to see me, I told him I was too old to vote. The day after I heard the news, I went down to the courthouse on my own to register. I still don’t know how I was able to do it . . .

VOICE: Pike County is typical of many counties in Mississippi. The 15,000 or so Negroes there represent about half of the total population. About 250 of these are registered to vote.

OLD WHITE MAN: (pointing a finger to the Negro woman who is sitting on a high stool) Look! The niggers are taking our freedom away! Just look at her! Do you realize that until this very moment, only white people have ever sat in that restaurant. Black people always went around to the back. Why don’t people do something? Why don’t they go around to the back?

NEGRO WOMAN: The COFO people said that coming in here would be Civil Rights Bill or something or other . . . something about public accommodations. Well, all I know is that I’ve waited all my life, fifty-six years, just to be able to come in here when I felt like and sit down and order a banana split. Lord! I’ve tasted freedom now!

VOICE: July 19th. Home of Nat McGee fire-bombed.

(Explosion)

VOICE: July 26th. Home of Charles Bryant, bombed and fired upon.

(Explosion)

VOICE: August 16th. Negro Supermarket in Burglundtown bombed.

WORKER: I’m sick of hearing you people tell me that you’re too old, too ill, too happy, or too scared to vote. How else are you going to change this rotten state of affairs? How else are you going to get rid of a Sheriff who is either incompetent or a criminal? If you’re not willing to do something about it, you have no right to complain. How many of you have enough guts to stand up straight and say, ‘We are sick and tired of being sick and tired?’

(SONG: “I’m on my way Ó ”)

WHITE LIBERAL: We are very respectable, very well thought of in the community. When all this fuss started I said to my husband, I said: ‘If only people would stop and think and talk, the whole things would be much nicer, don’t you think?’ Nobody knows yet, but yesterday evening I gave a little dinner party with two people from COFO as guests. Now whatever strange ideas they have, they’re really quite nice people . . . I’m going to mention it, let it drop casually, you know, at the bridge party tonight. I want to see their faces when I tell them . . . (phone rings) Hello, this is the Heffners. . . Oh, please you don’t understand . . . Oh, let me explain. (She places the phone back and then cries silently.)
**LET FREEDOM RING**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VOICE:</th>
<th>Suddenly the Heffners had trouble. Their phone rang continually with hate calls. They watched as armed men waited outside their suburban house. There were to be no more bridge parties in McComb for them. Soon afterwards, they packed up everything they had and left the state.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>(Song: “Oh Freedom”)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOM PREACHER:</strong></td>
<td>Let the church say Amen. Yes, Lord. Yes, indeed. The spirit is among us today. (Amens) I would like to personally thank our brother, Pastor Rich, the visiting minister of God, for his fine sermon this morning. (Amens, Yes, Lords, etc.) Friends, we done had ourselves some good old-fashioned religion this morning. Yes, sir. (Agreements) Now while the choir sings that fine old song “Meet Me at the River,” we’ll have the collection and I would like you to show your appreciation for Pastor Rich’s fine sermon . . . show that you ain’t ungrateful for getting some of the old Bible spirit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WORKER:</strong></td>
<td>I wonder if you’d let me say a few words just before we finish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOM PREACHER:</strong></td>
<td>Why, yes . . . , there’s no reason why we shouldn’t listen to our young visitor from the COFO workers, is there, friends? As long as it doesn’t take too long . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WORKER:</strong></td>
<td>Why, yes . . . , there’s no reason why we shouldn’t listen to our young visitor from the COFO workers, is there, friends? As long as it doesn’t take too long . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOM PREACHER:</strong></td>
<td>Thank you. I’m here, we are here, because there’s something wrong in Mississippi. We’ve had more bombings than you can count on both your hands, churches have been burned to the ground, people have been killed. What have the police done about it? Nothing! What are they or anyone else going to do about it? Nothing! And yet you can all sit here singing and saying ‘Amen’ and feeling good AS IF NOTHING HAD HAPPENED! You’re not even angry!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOM PREACHER:</strong></td>
<td>Just a minute! Just a minute! Slow down a minute, young lady! I would like to remind you that this a church of God. You can’t come in here and start telling us to get angry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WORKER:</strong></td>
<td>I’m sorry to have to argue with you, Sir. But Negroes in McComb, everybody in this congregation has every reason to be as mad as Hell —</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOM PREACHER:</strong></td>
<td>STOP! You’re cursing in a holy church of God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WORKER:</strong></td>
<td>But people ought to be very angry —</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOM PREACHER:</strong></td>
<td>Get out! Get out!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WORKER:</strong></td>
<td>How can we overcome our fear of the white folks when we’re frightened of each other —</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOM PREACHER:</strong></td>
<td>Get out! (pause). The choir will now sing and we will have our collection. And start praying.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**LET FREEDOM RING**

| **VOICE:** | One of the first people to step over the line of disapproval and stand firmly on the side of civil rights workers in McComb was Mrs. Aylene Quin. When nobody dared to say hello to them as they walked from door to door along the red dust road, Mama Quin welcomed the workers to her cafe. If they had no money, and this was often the case, they were still welcome. No civil rights worker ever walked out of Mama Quin's cafe feeling hungry. That's why they bombed her home in September. The blast nearly killed her two youngest children as they lay asleep in the front bedroom. On the same night, the bombers visited a Negro church and blew that up too. COFO held a mass protest meeting at the ruined church the following evening, and a young Freedom School Teacher stood up to speak. |
| **TEACHER:** | I’m going to speak loud and clear so you can all hear me. I especially want those cops standing at the back there with their guns and billy clubs to hear. I want them to pay particular attention, because it concerns them as much as anybody. We have been beaten in the streets. We have been bombed. We have been burned. Now, we are beginning to get up from the ground where we’re been sitting patiently for so long. You people at the back who call yourselves policeman, guardians of the peace, know this too, and you’re scared. That’s why you’re here tonight. Because you’re scared! You know that Negroes are fed up with that good-old Southern custom of injustice. You are scared that the time may have come when they would realize that they had nothing to lose. Scared that they have reached a point where they will hit back . . . . |
| **STUDENT:** | Poem: Shell of Fear
When looking in a book, I noticed the buds of cotton.
How ripe was the cotton that awaited
to pop out of its shell.
They are looking upon me, the
Negro of Mississippi, who are ripe
enough to pop out of our shell of fear.
Not like the cotton that will lie and wait
to be pulled out or not, if so be the case.
No, we will pop out,
Bloom, and grow in the sunlight of freedom. |
| **VOICE:** | Ladies and gentleman of the audience, men and women of the world, black and white people. We have reached the beginning. |