

Fannie Lou Hamer Tries to Register to Vote

Creator: Fannie Lou Hamer

Date: 1972

Source type: Oral History

Introduction: Fannie Lou Hamer, a Mississippi **tenant farmer**, was a leader of the African-American voting rights movement in Mississippi. She was repeatedly jailed and beaten by white authorities because of her voting rights activities. In this oral history, she describes what happened to her in 1962 when she tried to register to vote.



Well, I didn't know anything about voting; I didn't know anything about **registering to vote**. One night I went to the church. **They had a mass meeting**. And I went to the church, and they talked about how it was our right, that we could register and vote. They were talking about we could vote out people that we didn't want in office, we thought that wasn't right, that we could vote them out. That sounded interesting enough to me that I wanted to try

it. I had never heard, until 1962, that black people could register and vote.

Well, when I first tried to register it was in Indianola on the thirty-first of August in 1962. When we got there—there was eighteen of us went that day—there were people there with guns and just a lot of strange-looking people to us. We went on in the **circuit clerk's** office, and he asked us what did we want; and we told him what we wanted. We wanted to try to register. He told us that all of us would have to get out of there except two. So I was one of the two persons that remained inside, to try to register, [with] another young man named Mr. Ernest Davis. We stayed in to take the **literacy test**. So the **registrar** gave me the sixteenth section of the Constitution of Mississippi. He pointed it out in the book and told me to look at it and then copy it down just like I saw it in the book: Put a period where a period was supposed to be, a comma and all of that. After I copied it down he told me right below that to give a real reasonable interpretation then, interpret what I had read. That was impossible. I had tried to give it, but I didn't even know what it meant, much less to interpret it.

Well, when we got back I went on out to where I had been staying for eighteen years, and the **landowner** had talked to my husband and told him I had to leave the place. The **landowner** said, "Well, I mean that, you'll have to go down and withdraw your registration, or you'll have to leave this place." I answered the only way I could and told him that I didn't go down there to register for him; I went down there to register for myself. This seemed like it made him madder when I told him that.

Document Source: Fannie Lou Hamer to Neil McMillen, "An Oral History with Fannie Lou Hamer," interview, 14 April 1972 and 25 January 1973, McCain Library and Archive, University of Southern Mississippi, *Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive*

Image Source: Library of Congress

U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Report on Voting in Mississippi

Creator: U.S. Commission on Civil Rights

Date: 1965

Published in: Voting in Mississippi

Source type: Government report

Introduction: The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights was created by Congress in 1957 to investigate cases where civil rights and voting rights were being denied to American citizens and report its findings to the President and Congress. This report details the ways that African Americans in Mississippi were prevented from registering to vote in 1965.



The low income and **economic dependence** of most **Negroes** in Mississippi has given rise to widespread fears that registration or voting will result in **reprisals**. These fears are

intensified because Negroes in rural counties who attempt to register cannot hope to remain **anonymous**. Any doubt that applicants will be identified has been removed by the legal requirement that their names be published in local newspapers and by practices such as the photographing of Negro applicants by public officials. In this climate a single incident of reprisal may be **sufficient** to **deter** many potential **registrants**. Thus, many **Negroes** believe with Aaron Henry that:

For many people an attempt to register would result in their not having any money to buy milk for the baby, no money to buy food for the family, and no money to pay the rent for the roof over their heads.

Fears of **economic reprisal** are not **confined** to **Negroes** with the lowest incomes. In some areas of Mississippi Negro teachers want to register and vote but fail to do so because they fear they will lose their jobs. The intimidation of Negro teachers is particularly significant because in the absence of any large group of Negro lawyers, doctors, accountants, or technicians in Mississippi, teachers account for a **disproportionately** large segment of the group which most often provides community leadership.

Image Source: Wisconsin Historical Society

Intimidation of Black Voters in Mississippi

Creator: Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

Date: 1964

Published in: A chronology of violence and intimidation in Mississippi since 1961

Source type: Pamphlet (Adapted)

Introduction: Facing fierce opposition from local whites, local activists who led voter registration efforts or tried to register to vote often experienced physical danger, arrest, and the loss of jobs. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) kept a record of such incidents of **harassment**. In 1963, members of **SNCC** testified before the U.S. House of Representatives in support of a federal law to guarantee voting rights for all and submitted their record of intimidation as evidence.



September 25 [1961], Liberty, Amite County: Herbert Lee, a Negro who had been active in voter registration, was shot and killed by white State representative E. H. Hurst in downtown Liberty. No **prosecution** was undertaken, the authorities explaining that the representative had shot in self-defense.

April 1962, Lucedale, George County Mrs. Ernestine Denham Talbert, who lives in George County but teaches in Green County, was notified by the Green County School Board that her **teaching contract** would not be renewed. Mrs. Talbert had tried in January to register to vote but had been refused.

September 3, 1962, Ruleville, Sunflower County: Lenard Davis, 49, **sanitation department** worker, was told by Mayor Charles M. Durrough “We’re going to let you go. Your wife’s been attending that school.” He referred to a registration school conducted by **SNCC** workers in Ruleville.

February 28, Greenwood, Leflore County: Three **registration workers** were attacked with gunfire on U.S. Highway 82 just outside Greenwood. The shots were fired from a 1962 white Buick. The car in which the workers were riding was **punctured** by 11 bullets. One worker, James Travis of **SNCC**, was wounded in the neck and shoulder.

March 4, Clarksdale, Coahoma County: The show windows in the Fourth Street drugstore were smashed, as they have been several times in the past. The **proprietor** of the store, Aaron Henry, found the damage when he returned from speaking at a mass meeting in Leflore County in connection with the **voter registration drive** there.

March 27, 1963, Greenwood, Leflore County: James Forman, **executive secretary** of **SNCC**, Bob Moses, and about 10 other registration workers were arrested and taken from a group **en route** to the courthouse to register after the police **dispersed** a group of more than 100 Negroes with the use of police dogs.

May 8, 1963, Mileston, Holmes County: White men threw **Molotov cocktail** fire bombs into the rural home of Hartman Turnbow, the first Negro to apply for registration as a voter in Holmes County during a voter registration drive there. Turnbow, field secretary Bob Moses and 3 other registration workers were arrested shortly afterward by Holmes County authorities on “suspicion of **arson**.”

Image Source: University of Southern Mississippi McCain Library and Archives

Adapted: The text has been shortened and edited for spelling and capitalization. Rarely used words have been replaced with synonyms. Overly complex sentences have been simplified for readability.

Applying Voter Registration Laws Unequally

Creator: Burke Marshall

Date: 1962

Published in: Law and Contemporary Problems

Source type: Article (Adapted)

Introduction: This report was written by the [Assistant U.S. Attorney General](#) of the United States in 1962 as part of the federal government's attempt to enforce voting rights for all Americans. It describes the ways that local government officials in the South, including Mississippi, enforced voting registration laws in ways that allowed whites but prevented African Americans from registering to vote. These laws included the requirement that all voters be able to copy and interpret a passage from the state constitution.



One case arose in Terrell County, Georgia, where only fifty-three of 4,057 Negroes over 18 were **registered** in 1958. Negro school teachers had been denied registration [because] of their failure to pass the **oral reading test**. One of the teachers mispronounced the word 'equity.' A Negro applicant with one year of college was rejected on the ground that he could not write **legibly**. In fact, by [speaking] unreasonably fast, the **registrar** made it impossible for the applicant to [write down] the passage accurately. Negroes were required to read and write more lengthy and difficult constitutional [sections], the procedures resulted in easier tests for white applicants, and a higher **literacy level** was required of Negroes.

The Alabama case arose in Macon County where Negro applicants, including many with college degrees, had been denied registration on the ground that they had made "errors" in filling out their applications. White applicants, including at least one **illiterate** and others with little or no education, were assisted in filling out their applications and were **registered**.

In counties in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana the application forms themselves have been used as a test. Again and again, well educated Negroes, who [wrote down] all the [information] called for, have been denied registration because they made **trivial** errors on the form. Because the states have not issued [required] answers, even to the registrars, **eminently** qualified Negroes are **compelled** to play a humiliating, **futile** game with registrars who set their own standards and who often refuse to [tell] unsuccessful applicants where they [made a mistake]. **Conversely**, white applicants usually get all the help they need, from each other and from the registrars to fill out the form. Moreover, white applicants whose forms contain errors for which Negroes are rejected are almost **invariably registered** if the basic information requested by the form appears on it in some **comprehensible** way.

Image Source: Mississippi Department of Archives and History

Adapted: The text has been shortened and edited for spelling and capitalization. Rarely used words have been replaced with synonyms. Overly complex sentences have been simplified for readability.