

Landmarks of American Democracy Historical Sites

The following sites in Mississippi and Memphis, Tennessee were visited during the NEH Landmarks of American Democracy Workshop.

In Jackson, Mississippi:

507 1/2 North Farish Street

This building served as the first office for Medgar Evers after he was appointed the first full-time Field Secretary of the NAACP in 1954. Several different civil rights groups utilized this space over time. The Medical Committee for Human Rights occupied offices in this building during the height of the 1960's Civil Rights Movement. John Dittmer points out that more than 100 physicians, nurses, and psychologists came to Mississippi to offer their services to movement workers through the efforts of the Medical Committee for Human Rights. The MCHR provided health care for thousands of impoverished African Americans in Mississippi. The Mississippi Democratic Party used this building for its offices in 1965.

The Home of Medgar Wiley Evers

The Evers home is located at 2332 Margaret Walker Alexander Drive, which was formerly Guynes Street. Medgar and his wife, Myrlie, purchased the home with a GI mortgage in 1957. Tougaloo College owns the home now, and it is operated as a museum. A number of original pieces of furniture are still in the home.

Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) Building

The COFO Building, located at 1017 John Roy Lynch Street, was the nerve center of the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project (Freedom Summer). This nondescript structure was the place where strategy was planned and decisions were made to carry on the work of the Mississippi Civil Rights campaign. The statewide phone system—the WATS line—was located in the building. Bob Moses and Dave Dennis utilized the COFO Building to host and meet with the summer volunteers and the COFO staff when they came to Jackson for varying reasons.

Pratt Memorial United Methodist Church and Parsonage

This church was established on July 9, 1897. Located at 1057 Pascagoula Street, it was the place of worship for a large segment of the African American middle class in Jackson. The Jackson Civil Rights Driving Tour notes that “Pratt Memorial was also one of Jackson’s 20 churches where nightly meetings were held to support the boycott of downtown merchants. On the day following the murder of Benjamin Brown, a group of 150, including Charles Evers, marched from Pratt Memorial to the steps of City Hall in Brown’s memory.” The pastor’s parsonage was used to select the slate of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee field secretaries who became MFDP delegates to the Democratic National Convention in 1964. The Pratt Memorial Church parsonage was the site of the pre-selection of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) delegates by the members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The SNCC staff determined which SNCC members would be delegates and alternates to the 1964 Democratic National Convention, held in Atlantic City.

The Masonic Temple

Located at 1072 John Roy Lynch Street, the Masonic Temple was the leading structure where civil rights meetings were held in the 1950s and 1960s and during the present day. Built in 1955, this building provided the largest venue for civil rights gatherings in Mississippi. The founding and nominating conventions of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party were held in the Masonic Temple. The last office of Medgar Wiley Evers is located on the second floor of the facility. The funeral service of Medgar Evers was conducted in the temple. Rev. Charles A. Jones, Dean of Religion at Campbell College, presided with Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary for the NAACP, as the principal speaker. Persons of national noteworthiness, including Ralph Bunche, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, and Dick Gregory attended the funeral.

Farish Street Baptist Church

Farish Street Baptist Church, located at 619 North Farish Street, was the venue for frequent mass meetings in the 1960s. This black, middle-class-led church was a favorite meeting place for movement activities. Rev. S. Leon Whitney was the dynamic pastor of the church during the direct action era in the 1960s.

The Medgar Evers Statue

This public and visible symbol of Medgar Wiley Evers is located at 4215 Medgar Evers Boulevard. The statue was erected on the grounds of the Medgar Evers Library. Mrs. Myrtis Gregory, a close family friend of the Evers family, led the effort to get the statue erected in Jackson. T. Jay Warren, a white activist formerly of Rolling Fork, Mississippi, designed and built the image of Evers in 1991.

The Alamo Theater

This building was a major source of entertainment for African Americans during the Jim Crow Era and in the 1960s. First-run movies and world class entertainers were part of the regular and ongoing activities at the Alamo.

The Gravesites of Aaron and Noelle Henry

Aaron Henry, better known as "Doc Henry," was the long-term President of the state conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Doc Henry and his wife, Noelle, were buried in the Elmwood Cemetery located in Jackson, Mississippi. Noelle Henry was a strong supporter of the civil rights efforts of her husband. Mrs. Henry was fired from her teaching job in the Clarksdale public schools because of Aaron's civil rights activism.

In Greenwood, Mississippi:

The Elks Hall

At the urging of long-time local Greenwood activist Cleveland Jordan, the Elks Hall hosted the first two SNCC meetings led by Sam Block. After the second meeting, under pressure from the Citizens' Council and white elites, Block was not invited back and was evicted from his first residence in Greenwood, the home of local elementary school principal Mrs. E.H. McNease. Cleveland Jordan, like so many male activists in the period before the 1960s, was a veteran who

had traveled around a bit. He first tried to register to vote in 1951 and had been agitating for the vote ever since. He and his family would play a leading role in the Greenwood movement (Payne, 145, Dittmer, 129-331).

First Christian Church

First Christian Church was the first and usual location for SNCC mass meetings in 1962 and after. Sam Block recalls that the same freedom songs that allegedly led to his expulsion from the Elks Hall really struck a chord with local Greenwood residents who attended the first mass meeting in June 1962. First Christian's Reverend Aaron Johnson was a long-time Civil Rights activist, and though he credits his denomination's national financial support as a key in letting him play an active role in the Greenwood movement, his lifetime commitment to equality indicates otherwise (Payne, 146, 164, 188-91, Dittmer, 131, 150)

Wesley Chapel Methodist Church

Early on, Wesley Methodist Church welcomed civil rights work in Greenwood. The second site in Greenwood for the SNCC/COFO food delivery project during the winter of 1962-1963, it helped civil rights activists meet hundreds of local people who needed assistance after local authorities cut off food distribution to the poor in response to voter registration campaigns. After the Greenwood COFO office was burned in March 1963, Wesley Chapel agreed to serve as a temporary home to the movement and became a key location in the Greenwood and Leflore County movements. At that point, Wesley Chapel was only the second church to agree to serve as a movement site. It later became the home for the Mississippi Action for Progress (MAP), an organization linked closely to several important movement figures who competed for federal Head Start funds with a more grassroots organization, the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) (Payne, 146, 168, 342-4, Dittmer, 146, 150-2).

Friendship Baptist Church

The Friendship Baptist Church served as the new permanent headquarters for COFO's Greenwood and Leflore Country projects after the previous offices were burned in the March 1963 fire. The Baptist churches were slower to join the movement in general; the move into Friendship marked a turning point. A ratcheting up of activity in voter registration and direct action led 31 Greenwood and Leflore County ministers to sign a pledge indicating their "100 percent" endorsement of the Freedom Movement. Reverend Aaron Johnson thought Baptist ministers were under more pressure from whites than some other denominations because they lacked a national structure to give financial support when reprisals occurred as a result of civil rights activity (Payne, 170, Dittmer, 152).

Jennings Temple

Jennings Temple, Union Grove Church, and Turner's Chapel served as gathering places for the Primary Election Freedom Vote held August 6, 1963. The decision of the Greenwood city government not to arrest black voters in the primary led to a large turnout. Many black Mississippians voted in the primary, with more than 400 and 700 ballots coming from Greenwood alone. So many blacks flooded the polls that dozens were turned away. Even though the Leflore County Democratic Party rejected every black voter's ballot as invalid, the success of the primary campaign helped to inspire work on the November Freedom Vote, in which more than 83,000 blacks, and a few whites, participated (Payne, 292, Dittmer, 200).

Leflore County Courthouse

The Leflore County Courthouse was the site of much activity. All voter registration attempts eventually ended up here, and it was also the site of several protests and skirmishes with the police. More than a few beatings and arrests occurred on the grounds and in the vicinity of the Courthouse. Given the goals of the movement and the importance of the Courthouse as a symbol of political power to both the black and white communities, the significance of the site is undeniable.

In Ruleville, Mississippi:

Home of Fannie Lou Hamer

The last home that Mrs. Hamer lived in is located on what is now Fannie Lou Hamer Drive. One of her daughters, Jackie, lives in the one-story brick home. Mrs. Hamer received hundreds of people at that address before she died in 1977. In the words of Dr. L.C. Dorsey, people “came to get clothes, food, money – everything,” from Mrs. Hamer while she lived in this house. (Mills, 303).

The Gravesites of Fannie Lou Hamer and Perry “Pap” Hamer

Fannie Lou and Perry “Pap” Hamer are buried in the Fannie Lou Hamer Memorial Park. The park is part of the property where the Fannie Lou Hamer Multi-Purpose Complex is located.

Mrs. Hamer’s First Home in Ruleville

“Mr. Chairman, and 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.” Mrs. Hamer often cited her Ruleville address after she was evicted from the Marlow Plantation. The original home site is a vacant lot with a large pecan tree on the property. The property is now owned by the Williams Chapel Baptist Church.

Williams Chapel Baptist Church

This was Fannie Lou Hamer’s home church. Established in 1922, Williams Chapel played a leading role in the Delta’s Civil Rights Movement. Mrs. Hamer was attending a mass meeting at Williams Chapel when she got inspired to attempt to register to vote for the first time. According to scholar Charles Payne, Mrs. Hamer indicated that after being inspired by the civil rights workers at that mass meeting in 1962, she could just see herself “votin’ people outta office that I know was wrong.”

Marlow Plantation

Mrs. Hamer left the Marlow Plantation after the owner, W.D. Marlow, objected to Mrs. Hamer attempting to register to vote. She moved in with Mr. and Mrs. Tucker in Ruleville. On September 10, sixteen shots were fired into the home of the Tuckers in an attempt to kill Mrs. Hamer. Mrs. Tucker was also one of the founders of Williams Chapel.

In Clarksdale, Mississippi:

Fourth Street Drug Store

This currently vacant lot on Martin Luther King Drive and Fourth Street was owned and operated by Dr. Aaron Henry, a certified pharmacist. Because of his active involvement and leadership in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement, this drug store was bombed by the Ku Klux Klan. Dr. Henry would describe this later as “the gathering place and the hub for political and civil rights planning for three decades” (Henry and Curry 69). The drug store was where President Kennedy’s Justice Department representatives (John Doar and Robert Owens) met with black community leaders (104). After the murders of civil rights activists Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Mickey Schwerner, large posters of their faces were displayed in the drug store as a reminder and a memorial (138c). The drug store burned down in 1993.

Haven United Methodist Church

Located on the corner of Yazoo and Martin Luther King Drive, this was the church of Aaron and Noell Henry and of Aaron Henry’s parents. When the first meeting of the NAACP chapter in Clarksdale was organized here, over 200 people gathered to become charter members (Henry and Curry 73). Until Dr. Henry’s death, all NAACP meetings were held at this church. In 1962, Dr. Martin Luther King addressed over 1,000 people at Haven Church, encouraging them to maintain a boycott of white Clarksdale businesses (Dittmer 122). During the voter registration drives of the early 1960s, many people who registered lost their jobs, were evicted from their homes, were denied credit, and were physically intimidated. The basement of Haven United Methodist Church served as the distribution center for food and clothing that had been nationally solicited, sent to the north, and smuggled into the Delta (Henry and Curry, 132-133).

Dr. Aaron Henry’s Campaign Headquarters and NAACP Office

Still standing on the corner of Martin Luther King Drive and Harrison Street, this was a location for politically organizing when Dr. Henry became state president of the NAACP in 1959. From this site he helped direct the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the Council of Federated Organizations. In later years, this would serve as the headquarters for his campaigns and constituency representation in the Mississippi State Legislature from 1979-1986.

Chapel Hill Church

This church was originally founded in 1907, and after a fire was rebuilt in 1948. Originally located at the intersection of Lyon and Carolina Avenues, the congregation now has a modern structure located on Page Street. During the summer of 1964, this building was one of the few structures that opened its doors to the young organizers and provided them a place to meet and hold voter registration drives and rallies.

Dr. Aaron Henry’s Home

Aaron Henry is described by John Dittmer in the following manner: “In the 1950s Henry had been one of the ‘young Turks’ challenging both Mississippi segregationists and NAACP leaders who advocated a cautious approach to racial advancement. In his first speech after being elected state NAACP president in 1960, the Clarksdale pharmacist called for a new militancy: ‘Our actions will probably result in many of us being guests in the jails of the state. We will make these jails Temples of Freedom.’ Until the summer of 1964, Henry was the most ecumenical of the Mississippi activists, working with and requesting help from all national civil rights

groups” (Dittmer 121). Throughout the latter part of his life, Dr. Henry and his family resided in what is still a private residence on 636 Page Street. Because of his leadership in the NAACP and his work with the MFDP and COFO, the Klan firebombed Henry’s home in an attempt to silence his voice. These attacks were not successful. One such firebombing occurred on Easter weekend of 1963 when Congressman Charles Diggs of Michigan was a guest (138b).

In Memphis, Tennessee:

The National Civil Rights Museum

Housed at the very site where the movement’s most prominent leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, the NCRM is the hallmark location to illustrate the continuous struggle for freedom and democracy for everyone in America. The NCRM provides a wonderful context for learning about the experiences of African Americans, and encourages in-depth examination of Civil Rights Movement milestones through its exhibits, lectures and interactive components.

Clayborn Temple

The first protest march for the striking sanitation workers was organized and initiated at Clayborn Temple (erected in 1891). Most recently, the church’s importance as a landmark location was confirmed when the city government allocated significant funds to assist with the rehabilitation of the church structure.

Mason Temple

Mason Temple (built in 1940-1945) is where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his famous “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech on the evening of April 3, 1968. It would be his last public appearance before his assassination the next day. Both Clayborn and Mason Temples symbolize more than simply places of worship; they were the places of organizing, strategizing and empowerment for all supporters of the black sanitation workers.

Zion Christian Cemetery

Zion Christian Cemetery is a forgotten landmark that represents the transition from slavery to freedom and independence for black Memphians. The cemetery is the resting place for several generations of blacks who laid the foundation for tangible change in political and social mores in the city; approximately 22,000 former slaves and free(wo)men were buried here between 1870 and 1922. Since the 1930s, the cemetery had passed through a series of owners and in was in a terrible state of disrepair when the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church inherited it in the 1980s. Recently, local individuals, churches and corporate volunteers have invested their time and resources to help restore this precious site; out-of-town groups have also traveled to Memphis to contribute to the clean-up efforts.

Elmwood Cemetery

Elmwood Cemetery was established on August 28, 1852. Buried in this cemetery are Memphis pioneer families; 14 Confederate generals; victims of the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1878; Governors Isham G. Harris and James C. Jones; U.S. Senators Kenneth D. McKellar, Thomas B. Turley, and Stephen Adams, who succeeded Jefferson Davis in the Senate; E.H. Crump, prominent political leader for decades, along with 21 other mayors of Memphis; and Robert Church, the South’s first black millionaire. Other prominent African Americans buried at

Elmwood include blues singer and mother of Beale Street, Ma Rainey; A.W. Willis, Jr., a civil rights activist who in 1964 became the first black elected to the Tennessee Legislature since 1887. Willis was also the attorney of record for James Meredith's attempt to desegregate the University of Mississippi.

Office of the Tri-State Defender

The *Tri-State Defender* newspaper has been the primary media voice for African-Americans in the mid-south since its founding in 1951. Located a stone's throw from the NCRM, the *Defender* immediately became the "eyes and ears" for the black communities in west Tennessee, northern Mississippi and eastern Arkansas. At a time when civil rights initiatives were unfolding throughout the region, this critical resource helped to galvanize and strengthen racial justice seekers to carry on with their missions.

Beale Street Baptist Church

This church is one of the oldest African American congregations in Memphis. The praise meetings were led by white ministers prior to 1864, when African American pastor Morris Henderson was ordained and became the leader. In 1871, the cornerstone was laid for the present building, and the congregation raised money for the edifice over the next 22 years. Henderson served as the church's pastor until his death in 1877. In the process, he was instrumental in establishing Sabbath schools and Zion Cemetery. Henderson's successor, Taylor Nightingale, co-owned *The Free Speech and Headlight* with Ida B. Wells, and published the newspaper in the basement of the church.

W.C. (William Christopher) Handy's House

The Handy House is located at 352 Beale Street. Originally the house was located at 659 Jennette Place. Handy lived here when he wrote classics such as "Yellow Dog Blues" and "Beale Street Blues." The house is currently the headquarters for the Blues Foundation. Recognized as "The Father of the Blues," At the first jazz concert at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1924, half of the performance was devoted to Handy's music. Handy also conducted a concert of black music at Carnegie Hall in 1928.

Works Cited

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