

25 YEARS

## AMERICAN EXPERIENCE Presents *Freedom Summer*

Premieres Tuesday, June 24, 2014  
9:00-11:00 p.m. ET on PBS



In the hot and deadly summer of 1964, the nation could not turn away from Mississippi. Over ten memorable weeks known as Freedom Summer, more than 700 student volunteers joined with organizers and local African Americans in a historic effort to shatter the foundations of white supremacy in one of the nation's most segregated states. Working together, they canvassed for voter registration, created Freedom Schools and established the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party with the goal of challenging the segregationist state Democratic Party at the national convention in Atlantic City. Freedom Summer was marked by sustained and deadly violence, including the notorious murders of three civil rights workers, countless beatings, the burning of 35 churches and the bombing of 70 homes and community centers.

Directed by acclaimed filmmaker Stanley Nelson (*Freedom Riders*, *The Murder of Emmett Till*), *Freedom Summer* highlights an overlooked but essential element of the civil rights movement: the patient and long-term efforts by outside activists and local citizens in Mississippi to organize communities and register black voters — even in the face of intimidation, physical violence and death. “The Freedom Summer story reminds us that

the movement that ended segregation was far more complex than most of us know,” says AMERICAN EXPERIENCE Executive Producer Mark Samels. *Freedom Summer* premieres on AMERICAN EXPERIENCE on Tuesday, June 24, 2014, 9:00-11:00 p.m. ET on PBS ([check local listings](#)).

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“I’m going down to Mississippi  
I’m going down a Southern road  
And if you never see me again  
Remember that I had to go.”

EXCLUSIVE CORPORATE FUNDING FOR AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IS PROVIDED BY LIBERTY MUTUAL INSURANCE. MAJOR FUNDING PROVIDED BY THE ALFRED P. SLOAN FOUNDATION. MAJOR FUNDING FOR FREEDOM SUMMER PROVIDED BY THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES, EXPLORING THE HUMAN ENDEAVOR. ADDITIONAL FUNDING PROVIDED BY THE ARTHUR VINING DAVIS FOUNDATIONS, DEDICATED TO STRENGTHENING AMERICA'S FUTURE THROUGH EDUCATION; THE YAWKEY FOUNDATIONS; THE DOCUMENTARY INVESTMENT GROUP; ROBERT & MARJE KARGMAN AND THE BRIAN A. MCCARTHY FOUNDATION; AND BY THE CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING AND PUBLIC TELEVISION VIEWERS. AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IS PRODUCED FOR PBS BY WGBH BOSTON.

In 1964, less than seven percent of Mississippi's African Americans were registered to vote, compared to between 50 and 70 percent in other southern states. In many rural counties, African Americans made up the majority of the population and the segregationist white establishment was prepared to use any means necessary to keep them away from the polls and out of elected office. As Mississippian William Winter recalls, "A lot of white people thought that African Americans in the South would literally take over and white people would have to move, would have to get out of the state."

For years, local civil rights workers had tried unsuccessfully to increase voter registration amongst African Americans. Those who wished to vote had to face the local registrar, an all-powerful white functionary who would often publish their names in the paper and pass the word on to their employers and bankers. And if loss of jobs and the threat of violence wasn't enough to dissuade them, the complex and arcane testing policies were certain to keep them off the rolls.

In 1964, a new plan hatched by Bob Moses, a local secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was implemented. For 10 weeks that summer, white students from the North would join activists on the ground for a massive effort that would do what had been impossible so far: force the media and the country to take notice of the shocking violence and massive injustice taking place in Mississippi.

Word of the coming influx spread and Mississippi officials geared up for the newcomers by bolstering police forces, passing new ordinances and purchasing additional riot gear and weaponry. Meanwhile, Mississippi Summer Project (later known as Freedom Summer) students gathered at Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio to meet with SNCC leaders for training. After the first week, the volunteers learned that three members of their group who had left early to investigate a church burning — Mickey Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney — were missing in Mississippi. As the days passed and the young men were not heard from, people began to fear the worst — that they'd been murdered.

Undaunted, the Freedom Summer volunteers went down to Mississippi, fanning out across the state, embedding themselves with local families, and setting up Freedom Schools where children were taught African American history and culture — subjects forbidden in their regular public schools.

On August 4, 1964, the bodies of the three missing men were finally found, buried beneath an earthen dam. Despite the brutal murders, volunteers and locals were more committed to their cause than ever. Attention was focused on signing people up for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which planned to unseat the all-white Mississippi delegation at the upcoming Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. Delegates included Fannie Lou Hamer, a former sharecropper and SNCC field secretary who had emerged as an authentic and passionate spokeswoman. At the convention, Hamer's speech moved the crowd, but proved no match for the Johnson machine, which feared that the upheaval would threaten the president's candidacy.

As activist Charles McLaurin remarks in the film, "I felt really bad that we had not unseated the Mississippi delegation. But Fannie Lou and I came home with the feeling that our mission had not ended. We were coming home to continue to fight for the right to vote. We were charged because we had stuff back here to do." A year later, Congress finally passed the Voting Rights Act.

The events of Freedom Summer have long been overshadowed by larger-scale public events of the civil rights movement such as the response to the Birmingham church bombing, the Selma to Montgomery marches and the March on Washington. *Freedom Summer*, told by the brave people who lived it, restores their story to its rightful place in America's history. Says filmmaker Stanley Nelson, "Nearly 50 years later,

we are seeing challenges and rollbacks to the protections that were put into place following Freedom Summer. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 solidified the importance of the basic civil rights that organizers, volunteers and Mississippians were fighting for, and so I think it is incredibly valuable to watch and learn about that summer. It's still relevant today.”

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### **About the Participants, in Alphabetical Order**

**Julian Bond** was the communications director for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); he is Chairman Emeritus of the NAACP and a Distinguished Visiting Professor at American University.

**Taylor Branch** is an author and historian best known for his trilogy on the civil rights era, *America in the King Years*.

**Susan Brownmiller** was a Freedom Summer volunteer who went on to become a prominent feminist journalist, author and activist.

**Charlie Cobb** was a field secretary for SNCC in the Mississippi Delta and a major architect of the Freedom School program.

**Peggy Jean Connor** was a civil rights activist from Mississippi who served as executive secretary of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP).

**Dave Dennis** was field secretary for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in Mississippi and Louisiana. In 1962, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), an umbrella group for the civil rights organizations operating in Mississippi (NAACP, SNCC, SCLC and CORE), appointed Dennis and Bob Moses as co-directors for their voter registration efforts. Dennis was the co-director of Freedom Summer and delivered a eulogy at James Chaney's funeral.

**John Dittmer** is a historian and author of *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*.

**Ivanhoe Donaldson** was a SNCC organizer during Freedom Summer.

**Linda Wetmore Halpern** was a Freedom Summer volunteer.

**Anthony Harris** attended a Freedom School as a young boy in Mississippi.

**Daisy Harris** was a native Mississippian who opened up her home to Freedom Summer volunteers.

**Chris Hexter** was a Freedom Summer volunteer from St. Louis, Missouri.

**Eleanor Holmes Norton** was a civil rights activist and Freedom Summer volunteer; she is currently a United States Congresswoman representing the District of Columbia.

**Roscoe Jones**, a native Mississippian, attended a Freedom School in Meridian.

**Reverend Ed King**, a United Methodist pastor, was active in the civil rights movement in Mississippi and was one of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegates.

**Karin Kunstler Goldman** was a Freedom Summer volunteer from New York.

**Sherwin Markman** was a special assistant to LBJ until 1968 and a 1964 Democratic Convention delegate. He is the author of a novel, *The Election*, and the editor of *Lyndon Johnson Remembered: An Intimate Portrait of a President*.

**Charles McLaurin** is a Mississippi civil rights activist and organizer.

**Patti Miller** was a Freedom Summer volunteer from Iowa.

**Bob Moses** was a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and director of SNCC's Mississippi Project. In 1962, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), an umbrella group for the civil rights organizations then operating in Mississippi (NAACP, SNCC, SCLC and CORE), appointed Moses and Dave Dennis as co-directors for their voter registration efforts. He was co-director of Freedom Summer.

**Jan Nave Barnes** was "Miss Mississippi" in 1964; her family was forced to leave the state after associating with white Freedom Summer volunteers.

**Larry Rubin** was a field secretary for SNCC.

**William Scarborough** was a member of the segregationist Citizens' Council, and is currently Professor Emeritus, History at University of Southern Mississippi.

**Rita Schwerner** (now Rita Bender) was a Freedom Summer organizer; her husband, CORE staff organizer Mickey Schwerner, was one of the three men who were killed.

**Pete Seeger** (May 3, 1919–January 27, 2014) was a folk singer who performed for the volunteers in Mississippi.

**Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons** was a volunteer who ran the Freedom Summer Laurel project.

**Tracy Sugarman** (1921-2013) was a civil rights activist and artist who chronicled the events of Freedom Summer.

**Hollis Watkins** was a Freedom Summer organizer and Mississippi native.

**Bruce Watson** is the author of *Freedom Summer: The Savage Season of 1964 That Made Mississippi Burn and Made America a Democracy*.

**Chris Williams** was a Freedom Summer volunteer from Vermont.

**William Winter** was the State Treasurer of Mississippi in 1964 and later became governor.

**Dorothy Zellner** was a Freedom Summer organizer from New York.

## About the Filmmakers

Written, Produced and Directed by	Stanley Nelson
Produced by	Cyndee Readdean
Edited by	Aljernon Tunsil
Assistant Editor	Natasha Mottola
Line Producer	Stacey Holman
Archival Producer	Christine Fall
Director of Photography	Antonio Rossi
Composer	Tom Phillips

A Firelight Films Production for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is a production of WGBH Boston

Senior Producer	Sharon Grimberg
Executive Producer	Mark Samels

**Stanley Nelson (Producer/Director/Writer)** is an award-winning documentary filmmaker, MacArthur “genius” Fellow and member of the Academy of Motion Picture Art & Sciences. Nelson is the director of 12 documentary features, including *Freedom Riders*, *Jonestown: The Life and Death of People’s Temple* and *The Murder of Emmett Till*. He is also co-founder and executive director of Firelight Media, which provides technical education and professional support to emerging documentarians. With seven of his films having premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and multiple industry awards to his credit, Nelson is acknowledged as one of the premiere documentary filmmakers working today. Nelson is currently in production on *The Black Panthers: Seize the Time*, which is the first in a series of three films Nelson will direct as part of a new multi-platform PBS series entitled *America Revisited*.

**Mark Samels (Executive Producer)** was named executive producer of AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, PBS’ flagship history series, in 2003. Under Samels’ leadership, the series has been honored with nearly every industry award, including the Peabody, Primetime Emmys, the duPont-Columbia Journalism Award, Writers Guild Awards, Oscar nominations and Sundance Film Festival Audience and Grand Jury Awards. Prior to joining WGBH, Samels worked as an independent documentary filmmaker, an executive producer for several U.S. public television stations and as a producer for the first co-production between Japanese and American television. A native of Wisconsin, he is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

## **About AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**

Television's most-watched history series, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2013. The series has been hailed as "peerless" (*The Wall Street Journal*), "the most consistently enriching program on television" (*Chicago Tribune*) and "a beacon of intelligence and purpose" (*Houston Chronicle*). On air and online, the series brings to life the incredible characters and epic stories that have shaped America's past and present. Acclaimed by viewers and critics alike, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE documentaries have been honored with every major broadcast award, including 30 Emmy Awards, four duPont-Columbia Awards, and 16 George Foster Peabody Awards, one most recently for the series represented by *Freedom Riders*, *Triangle Fire* and *Stonewall Uprising*.

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