

Expanding the SCOPE:  
Voter Registration and Local Civil Rights Movements in the Summer of 1965

By  
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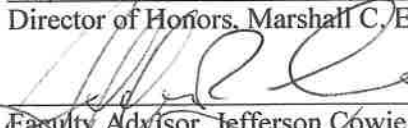
Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Department of History of Vanderbilt University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For Honors in History


April 2024

Nashville, Tennessee

On the basis of this thesis defended by the candidate on 25 April 2024  
we, the undersigned, recommend that the candidate be awarded Highest Honors  
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## Acknowledgement

Writing this thesis would not have been possible without the support, comments, and advice of numerous History Department faculty members, friends, and family. I would first like to say a specific thank you to my advisor Dr. Jefferson Cowie. I thank him for introducing me to SCOPE and for his continued investment of time and energy into both my thesis and my intellectual development as a student. I am immensely grateful for how he pushed me to think imaginatively and do the hard work of history. I would also like to thank Dr. Joel Harrington for his early support as our junior seminar professor. Formulating a good project was half the battle and his early insight was essential to completing this project. Next, I am extremely grateful for Dr. Marshall Eakin and the many drafts, edits, and revisions he read. Our weekly seminar meetings kept this project on track and helped me synthesize and clarify my argument. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Dennis Dickerson for taking the time to share his expertise with me and for helping me see a broader vision of the Civil Rights Movement. I am very fortunate and privileged to have been able to work with such a phenomenal group of historians over the past year and a half.

Thank you also to the Vanderbilt History Department both for connecting undergraduate students such as myself with opportunities to work closely with amazing faculty and for providing funding for this project that enabled me to view the Southern Christian Leadership Conference papers at Emory University's special collections. Doing the hands-on work of archival research brought history to life and was a highlight of my time at Vanderbilt. Vanderbilt's History Department is truly second to none.

I would also like to thank Vanderbilt's Central Library and the Resource Sharing Services (RSS) Department. My thanks to the RSS Department are twofold. First, I am thankful to them for locating niche materials that drastically improved the nuance and quality of this thesis. They worked efficiently and made this depth of research possible. Second, I am thankful to them for being the best supervisors and professional mentors I could have ever asked for over these last three years. I will miss the department dearly.

Finally, I want to thank my family and friends for reminding me to appreciate the present as well. An extra-large thank you goes to my mom for her constant support. She is my first call for everything and my lifelong inspiration. Thank you to my dad and brother as well for many laughs and reminding me to take breaks and go outside. More thanks go to my grandpa, Dewey Long, for believing in me as a scholar and supporting me in every way. I am very grateful to have many wonderful friends who listened to me talk about this project and am thankful for the adventures we fit into our busy schedules. I also appreciate the support and comments that my fellow honors students gave at every point in this process. My final thanks go to my sweet pets Rusty, Cooper, Scribbles, and Scooter for their love and cuddles. They weren't much help on writing or editing but they made holiday breaks a whole lot sweeter.

This thesis was only possible because of the village of people behind it and me. I also owe thanks to Dr. Jessica Lowe, Dr. Holly McCammon and Dr. Nicole Hemmer for being general academic inspirations. Many more people deserve recognition and I regret any omissions.

**List of Abbreviations**

AFL-CIO – American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations

COFO – Council of Federated Organizations

CORE – Congress on Racial Equality

FBI – Federal Bureau of Investigation

NAACP – National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

OEO – Office of Economic Opportunity

SCOPE – Summer Community Organization and Political Education (project)

SCLC – Southern Christian Leadership Conference

SNCC – Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

TCVL – Taliaferro County Voters League

VRA – Voting Rights Act of 1965

## Introduction

At a March 31, 1965, Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) executive leadership meeting, Hosea Williams proposed a summer voter registration project that covered dozens of counties across six Southern states.<sup>1</sup> As the SCLC's Director of Voter Registration and Political Education, Williams' project was called Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) and sent hundreds of white college students into the South for ten weeks to work with local Black leaders on voter registration and education.<sup>2</sup> Williams had been planning a student summer project since the fall of 1964 but did not formally solidify and propose his idea for SCOPE until late March. At the meeting, Williams was looking for SCLC president, Martin Luther King Jr.'s, approval so he could formally initiate recruitment drives. King agreed to have Williams direct the SCOPE project and committed nearly half a million dollars of SCLC funds to the effort. King's decision was in part predicated on his confidence that a historic voting rights bill, the Voting Rights Act (VRA), would pass before the volunteers went South in June.<sup>3</sup> Thinking the volunteers would have the protection and support of federal registrars, Williams and King wanted white students to spend ten weeks from June to August helping enforce federal legislation for Black voting rights. Despite their hopes, by late May, it was evident to King that the VRA was not going to pass in time, eliciting fears about having to

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<sup>1</sup> Rolundus Rice, *Hosea Williams: A Lifetime of Defiance and Protest* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2021), 142.

<sup>2</sup> David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1986), 426; In this thesis the term "Black" is capitalized while the term "white" remains lower case. This was an intentional choice to follow the style of multiple prominent Black intellectuals including Dorothy Roberts and Loretta Ross as well as adopt recent style conventions. Since the summer of 2020, multiple prominent news agencies and style guides adopted the capitalization of Black including the Associated Press, *The New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. Black publications including *The Chicago Defender* and *Ebony* have capitalized Black for years. For more information see *The Diversity Style Guide*: <https://www.diversitystyleguide.com/glossary/black-2/>.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years 1965-1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 225.

restructure the project or send the white volunteers into the dangerous world of Southern Black freedom struggles.<sup>4</sup> To the project's misfortune, the VRA did not pass until much later in the summer, on August 6. King's fears about thrusting inexperienced and vulnerable volunteers into dangerous circumstances came true as the over 300 volunteers confronted the deeply entrenched racial discrimination of the Jim Crow South.

The SCOPE project provides a composite image of the smaller and frequently rural local Black freedom struggles happening in 1965. Volunteers spread across nearly 50 Southern counties to register Black voters. Each county's experience with SCOPE was defined by its own local dynamics, precluding the possibility of writing a single narrative of the project. To better understand the range of experiences, this thesis focuses on SCOPE projects in Wilcox County, Alabama and Taliaferro ("Tolliver") County, Georgia. These counties serve as a study in contrast. Both Wilcox and Taliaferro were small, rural counties in the South with majority-Black populations under 20,000 in the 1960s. Despite their similar size and relative obscurity, they had differing experiences with SCOPE due in part to their varied histories of Black civil rights activism, Black voter registration statistics, and ability to mold SCLC objectives to local organizing methods. While Wilcox, located close to Selma, had a history of Black activism, Taliaferro had less public civil rights demonstrating and organizing prior to the spring of 1965. Wilcox's zero registered Black voters sat in sharp contrast to the over 70% of eligible Black voters who were registered in Taliaferro. In both counties, SCOPE volunteers entered communities that were still firmly within the grip of the Jim Crow system's brutal racism. The summer of 1965 gave volunteers a personal perspective on the resilience and work of local Black

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<sup>4</sup> Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 225.

leaders. Comparing Wilcox and Taliaferro reveals how SCOPE's methods and practices played out over the backdrop of contrasting county-specific dynamics.

While the SCLC was focused on voter registration through SCOPE, local leaders were focused on their own county's issues. Prior to SCOPE, both counties had some form of preexisting local Black leadership in the form of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapters, SCLC field staff, or residents eager to mobilize for their civil rights. At the beginning of SCOPE, Williams prohibited volunteers from participating in demonstration campaigns, but as racial tensions flared in Wilcox and other counties, local leaders wanted to mobilize.<sup>5</sup> The SCLC's refusal to allow Wilcox SCOPE participants to protest (until their late July repeal of the demonstration policy) revealed a tension between the national organization's objectives and local movement priorities. The story of Taliaferro juxtaposes this tension as the county embraced demonstration campaigns much earlier in the summer under the leadership of local activists. While Wilcox did not have major protests during the summer, Taliaferro evolved into daily demonstrations by October. The two counties' divergence on demonstrations reveals how SCLC's directives sometimes conflicted with and undermined local objectives.

What ultimately becomes clear by comparing the counties is that SCLC directives and county-level SCOPE projects' adherence to them proved decisive in both creating and enabling the long-term sustenance of local movements for Black civil and human rights. Where the national organization's goals and methods could be synthesized with their local counterparts, indigenous movements were aided by outside help. Conversely, when SCLC's own priorities clashed with local leaders, progress was usually either hindered or delayed. The SCOPE

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<sup>5</sup> Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 263-4.

volunteers often played a central, though not usually conscious role, in negotiating the dialectical relationship between the national and local civil rights movements. When local leaders held the reins, SCOPE volunteers aided the local movement's longevity.

This thesis identifies three critical gaps in the existing historiography around SCOPE and the Civil Rights Movement. First, the SCOPE project's voter registration and education efforts in the summer and fall of 1965 are largely underexamined or incorrectly framed in the historical literature on the Civil Rights Movement, Black voting rights, and the SCLC. Even when SCOPE is mentioned, it is often maligned as a project defined by controversy. David Garrow's 1986 Pulitzer Prize winning biography of King, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* and Taylor Branch's 2006 *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years 1965-68* contextualize SCOPE within SCLC's expansion into the North, the organization's financial decisions, and existing interpersonal conflicts within the SCLC executive staff. By labeling these the "King years," Branch asserts his primary interest in leadership-centric narratives of the movement. Garrow and Branch both focus on SCOPE with respect to Williams' conflict with James Bevel, SCLC's director of Direct Action and Non-Violent Education, with Branch referring to the two as "bitter antagonists."<sup>6</sup> By centering their discussions of SCOPE on senior-level budget and ideological disagreements, Garrow and Branch diminish the project to a point of contention between disagreeing leaders. This focus erases perspectives from local Black leaders who were on the ground managing the project's day-to-day operations and unfairly reduces the geographically and strategically expansive SCOPE project to disrepute.

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<sup>6</sup> Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 196.



Adam Fairclough's 1987 examination of the SCLC in *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King Jr.* echoes this leadership-centric focus when discussing SCOPE. While Fairclough names specific SCOPE counties, the structure and purpose of *To Redeem the Soul of America* focuses intently on SCLC's leaders and organizational presence. Fairclough mentions SCOPE, but his analysis is primarily interested in SCLC leadership and contains similar omissions as Garrow and Branch. Fairclough's claims of SCOPE mismanagement and failure are based on the judgments of other SCLC executive staff who Fairclough acknowledges were competing with Williams over limited financial resources and for control over the direction of SCLC. Fairclough also frames SCOPE within the context of brewing hostilities between the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and SCLC field staff and workers. While important to understanding tensions within the movement and the interplay between the local and national organizations, Fairclough's portrayal of this interaction is based on assessments from SNCC organizers and leaders and may not represent how average people understood SCLC, SNCC, SCOPE, or any other part of the movement. Fairclough's narrative still neglects to understand how average people, who were not involved in movement governance, experienced the SCOPE project. Discussions of internal and external leadership battles are necessarily inadequate to explain SCOPE's impact on rural Southern counties as they fail to acknowledge the indispensable local leaders that truly ran SCOPE.

Historian Rolundus Rice's 2021 biography, *Hosea Williams: A Lifetime of Defiance and Protest*, falls into the same traps of leadership-centric focus as Garrow, similarly highlighting criticisms of SCOPE's budget and interpersonal disagreements among SCLC executive staff. Rice goes further than Garrow and Fairclough by describing in greater detail the violent backlash

volunteers and field staff faced from white people, but his narrative remains divorced from the grassroots. While Rice admits that “accusations that the initiative was a failure are difficult to prove,” he nevertheless contends that Williams’ mismanagement hurt the project.<sup>7</sup> By highlighting the handful of misdeeds from SCOPE volunteers (for which he blames Williams’ screening process), Rice unfairly reduces the project to a narrative of inefficient leadership.

The stories of SCOPE should not be told from a national perspective. By focusing on King, Williams, and SCLC executive staff, Garrow, Branch, Fairclough and Rice’s narratives of SCOPE apply a top-down approach that understands developments through national figures’ perspectives. While not omitting SCOPE from the historical record, this leadership-centric view minimizes SCOPE to a project defined by scandal. This thesis instead shows the substantive role that SCOPE played in the lives of local people and the growth of local movements, by centering voices from people within the project. While the volunteers’ outsider status carried both privileges and unique vulnerabilities, their presence in rural Southern counties forced attention onto the severe and entrenched racism of the Jim Crow South and generated energy for local movements.

The second historiographical question this thesis addresses is about where the heart of the Civil Rights Movement lies. In their 1998 book, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968*, historians Stephen F. Lawson and Charles Payne debate whether to take “the view from the nation” or “the view from the trenches” to understand and define the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>8</sup> Lawson argues in favor of the top-down “view from the nation” saying that the “federal government played an indispensable role in shaping the fortunes of the civil rights

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<sup>7</sup> Rice, *Hosea Williams*, 147.

<sup>8</sup> Steven F. Lawson and Charles Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998), 3, 99.

revolution.”<sup>9</sup> Lawson points to federal and judicial intervention in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the CORE Freedom Rides, and major legislation such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 VRA to demonstrate how government leaders and decisions shaped and determined the movement’s success. For Payne, the movement is “not a history that can be comprehended in terms of a couple of dominant figures or any one form of politics, and it is not at all clear that it can be well understood in terms of ‘civil rights.’”<sup>10</sup> Payne elevates less popularly known leaders including Ella Baker, Fred Shuttlesworth, and Septima Clark to highlight the important role that women played and the necessity of acknowledging leaders at every level of influence. For Payne, moving away from focusing on charismatic leaders helps avoid the pitfalls of letting great man narratives distort and glamorize our understanding of the past and lull us into complacency about the work that remains.

Historians’ tendency to privilege top-down analyses of the SCOPE project mirrors these larger debates about how to understand the Civil Rights Movement more broadly. The interaction among SCLC, white college volunteers, and local Black leaders and residents is a revealing microcosm of the debate among historians of the Civil Rights Movement over whether to view the movement from the standpoint of large national moments or as the sum of local grassroots parts. Though frequently dichotomized, as Payne and Lawson’s book reflects, this thesis uses the SCOPE project to argue that the movement was defined by the *interaction* between national and local forces. Neither existed independent of the other and the progression of civil rights was made possible by the volley between local and national actors and movements. Federal intervention could be decisive, but it was inherently temporary. Local organizing animated the Black freedom struggle and the energy produced eventually forced the federal

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<sup>9</sup> Lawson and Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Lawson and Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*, 108.

government's hand. When federal actors left, local leaders worked to highlight gaps in implementation. This back-and-forth between the local and national civil rights movements was at the heart of the fight to turn rights into realities.

Centering Wilcox and Taliaferro implicitly embraces Charles Payne's "view from the trenches" approach by highlighting local civil rights movements. This thesis focuses on how average people, in small rural counties experienced the Black freedom struggle, but local history is not unique to this thesis. Robert Norrell's *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* and Hasan Jeffries' *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*, provide county-specific perspectives on the Civil Rights Movements in Tuskegee and Lowndes County, Alabama. Jefferson Cowie's Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Freedom's Dominion: A Saga of White Resistance to Federal Power* is a local history of Barbour County, Alabama and includes a chapter on SCOPE. Norrell's and Jeffries' local narratives illuminate long histories of Black civil rights organizing that pre and post-dated the conventional movement timeline of 1954-1968. In *Reaping the Whirlwind*, Norrell argues that "each community now has a story to tell about the movement, and only when many of those stories are told will the South's great social upheaval be well understood."<sup>11</sup> This thesis helps answer Norrell's call for local perspectives by focusing closely on Wilcox County, Alabama and Taliaferro County, Georgia.

While this thesis follows the local history methodology, its comparative structure differentiates it from Norrell, Jeffries, and Cowie. This thesis is centrally about SCOPE and the interaction between national and local actors in the pursuit of ensuring Black civil rights. Just as SCOPE would not be served by one encompassing national narrative, one county could not speak for the project. The comparative model of juxtaposing Wilcox and Taliaferro allows a

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Norrell, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998.

synthesis between these two options by closely examining community-level dynamics while showing how conditions varied. The local history methodology allows a closer look at the grassroots of the Civil Rights movement while adding the comparative structure ensures that one county's experience does not speak for a geographically expansive project. This shows how the Civil Rights Movement operated as a negotiation between national and local movements by showing how the movement was a sum of smaller, distinct Black freedom struggles.

The final historiographical debate this thesis addresses is how to periodize and spatially define the Civil Rights Movement. Fundamental tension exists between historians who take the "Long Civil Rights Movement" view and those who oppose it. "Long Civil Rights" advocates, such as historian Jacquelyn Hall, argue that the accepted view of the Civil Rights Movement as taking place from 1954 to 1968 inappropriately frames earlier Black activism and later Black Power ideology as a distinct movement. Hall asserts that the traditional Southern focus in defining the movement understates the extremity and presence of racial segregation in the North and West. In her article, "Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," Hall points to the interconnection among labor, women, and Black organizing efforts in the 1930s and the enduring fight to desegregate American schools well into the 1980s to argue for an expanded temporal definition of the Civil Rights Movement. Hall also describes the system of "racial capitalism" that dominated the economic structure across the nation in order to reframe the fight for civil rights in a national context rather than a specifically Southern problem.<sup>12</sup>

Hall's long Civil Rights Movement theory is rejected by some historians who argue that the broad framework for defining the movement drains it of its distinct character. Historians Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang argue that the long Civil Rights Movement theory

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<sup>12</sup> Jacquelyn Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1243, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3660172>.

“collapses periodization schemas, erases conceptual differences between waves of the BLM [Black Liberation Movement], and blurs regional distinctions in the African American experience.”<sup>13</sup> As a result, Cha-Jua and Lang say that the temporally and spatially expanded aspects of Hall’s long approach take on an “undead status” that “makes its home everywhere and nowhere.”<sup>14</sup> Thus the long view diminishes the movement’s specific energy and ignores ideological divergences in favor of emphasizing interrelatedness. The outcome of these methods, Cha-Jua and Lang say, is the production of a long movement narrative that is “a largely ahistorical and placeless chronicle with questionable interpretive insight.”<sup>15</sup>

The SCOPE project, and its insight into dozens of counties’ specific dynamics, reveals issues with Cha-Jua and Lang’s argument. The definitional clarity that Cha-Jua and Lang’s criticism offers comes at the price of necessary flexibility to account for local deviations from a prescribed national timeline. Many counties, including Wilcox and Taliaferro, lagged over a decade behind when national developments notionally secured equal rights for Black people, revealing the pitfalls of defining movements by national legislative wins. The distance between national and local movements shows that Cha-Jua and Lang’s analytical framing of the Civil Rights Movement is structurally complicated by local perspectives of the movement that demonstrate both early precedents for civil rights activism and the continuing struggle into the 1970s that was still fundamentally about integration and voting rights.

As SCOPE shows, local civil rights movements operated on distinct timelines that rarely fit squarely into national developments. For Wilcox and Taliaferro, the mid 1960s were the

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<sup>13</sup> Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies,” *The Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (2007): 265, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20064183>.

<sup>14</sup> Cha-Jua and Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire,” 265.

<sup>15</sup> Cha-Jua and Lang, “The ‘Long Movement’ as Vampire,” 266.

genesis of a robust, and organized social movement for Black rights. Black students in Taliaferro were only permitted to attend formerly exclusively white schools starting in the fall of 1965 because of social unrest that started earlier in the year. Schools in Wilcox were not desegregated until the early 1970s and Black officials did not win local office until the election of 1978. Temporally constrained definitions of the Civil Rights Movement would put these basic integration victories deep into the years of Black Power in a supposedly different phase of the movement. The flexibility of Hall's periodization is therefore its primary strength. When temporally defining the movement, it is important to interrogate whether historiographical definitions truly reflect people's lived experiences. In reality, periodization varied widely based on each county and the divergences between the long movement and its critics are a reproduction of arguments about whether to define the movement nationally or locally.

The differences between Wilcox and Taliaferro counties' SCOPE projects demonstrates that the influence of national versus local developments varied by county. In Wilcox, volunteers struggled to reach registration goals because voters preferred to wait for the VRA to pass, revealing the importance of national developments on local involvement. In Taliaferro, civil rights organizing found the most success when it focused on school integration because Black residents were animated over the firing of six Black educators. The county had a sustained direct action campaign on school desegregation that stretched into the fall of 1965, showing how local issues invigorated people in ways that national developments, such as voting rights gains, did not.

National narratives of the Civil Rights Movement frequently diminish the nuances of how the fight for racial justice developed in small rural counties throughout the South that did not have national media attention. The leadership-centric focus of SCOPE and some Civil Rights

Movement literature obscures how the project developed on the ground and implicitly defines success in terms of SCLC's organizational objectives as opposed to county-specific needs. Looking at Wilcox and Taliaferro illustrates just two examples of how the movement developed outside of the purview of national media scrutiny and reveals the ways that local people and outside allies negotiated and fought for civil rights. Centering these perspectives reveals the indispensable role local leaders and everyday people played in translating national developments in civil rights law into lived realities of racial justice. The SCOPE project's presence in fifty counties in six Southern states meant that volunteers encountered differing local conditions. The realities of how voter registration went that summer, the extent to which there were tensions between local leaders and SCOPE volunteers, and the long-term impact of SCOPE's presence differed substantially across counties. While looking at two counties falls short of providing a holistic story of SCOPE, the purpose of the selections is to show a range of SCOPE experiences to highlight specifically that no single narrative would be sufficient.

Straddling passage of the VRA, spread out across six states, and bringing together white non-Southern college students and Southern Black leaders, the SCOPE project sits at the intersection of debates among historians about who and what made the Civil Rights Movement and where. By taking a county-level approach and focusing on SCOPE, this thesis offers an unheard perspective on the interaction between the national Civil Rights Movement and local civil rights movements. At times SCLC's objectives ran counter to those of local leaders such as in Wilcox. In counties such as Taliaferro, issues outside of voter registration animated local people. Despite existing depictions of mismanagement, SCOPE was a significant attempt at increasing Black voter registration and evolved to encompass a range of issues over the course of the summer. The diverse experiences and lasting outcomes of SCOPE counties demonstrate the



weakness of singular definitions of success in analyzing social movements and individual projects within them. Evaluating SCOPE only by the number of voters registered ignores the profound interpersonal impact on both volunteers and local people and the growth of sustained direct action campaigns on issues outside of voting that lasted through the fall.

Two themes that remain insufficiently developed in the existing historiography on the Civil Rights Movement, but that were central to SCOPE, are the processes and value of interracial coalitions and the absolute importance of Black women in local freedom struggles. The SCOPE project sent white students into the South to work with Black leaders and residents. Often unfamiliar with the South and particularly alien to the realities of Black rural Southern life, the volunteers were obvious outsiders. Navigating their unfamiliarity with Black Southern customs and the reality that their presence provoked racist violence, the challenges of interracial coalition work were prevalent and material for the volunteers and Black locals who affiliated with them. In negotiating these challenges, Black women of all ages emerged as the crucial links between the volunteers and local people.<sup>16</sup> Older Black women, as well as Black female teenagers, were indispensable community figures; their endorsement and hospitality gave volunteers community legitimacy that made their canvassing and organizing work possible. This legitimizing role is particularly pronounced in the chapter on Wilcox County, Alabama as Black

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<sup>16</sup> While few women held senior leadership positions in SCLC, they were indispensable to SCOPE on the county level. Sociologist Belinda Robnett in “African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership, and Micromobilization,” identifies an “intermediate layer of leadership” that was crucial to the Civil Rights Movement and disproportionately occupied by women. Robnett rejects the tendency to categorize movement participants “as leaders or followers” and instead illustrates how women were frequently “bridge leaders” in the movement. Black women connected national leadership with local constituencies, while existing in a middle-ground between formal leadership and general movement participant. Robnett’s findings are both an informative lens for understanding SCOPE and could be expanded on by including SCOPE in the discussion. Beyond being bridge leaders, the gatekeeping role that Black women sometimes played also comes through in examining SCOPE. Opening their homes, encouraging other people to trust volunteers, and giving volunteers information about how to find and motivate people gave the inexperienced outsiders legitimacy in counties where Black residents had good reason to be skeptical of white people’s intentions and honesty – particularly white people they did not know.

women such as Ethel Brooks were essential local leaders. The role of Black women was less central to the existing sources for Taliaferro County, Georgia's SCOPE project, but volunteers' interactions with Black female teenagers still buttresses the view of Black women's centrality that is clear in Wilcox.

While SCOPE has largely been lost among narratives of the larger national successes of the summer of 1965, the project altered the racial dynamics and civic participation of Black people in counties that existed outside of national attention. It also reveals how local and national events fed off of, shaped, and depended on one another. While the federal government played an important interventionary role sending registrars to Wilcox and handing down court rulings for school integration in Taliaferro, local people and movements both helped guide the federal government's hand and fully harness its power. Even after Black voter registration was achieved, local people had to continue the fight to create not just systems where Black people *could* vote but where they *would* vote. With the VRA on the horizon by the project's start, SCOPE and its lasting impact on local Black freedom struggles was part of a larger trend toward moving advocacy focus from civil rights *enactment* to civil rights *enforcement*. Where the project synthesized the local and national arms of the Civil Rights Movement, it contributed in important ways to the actualization of Black citizenship rights.

## Chapter 1: “You Came Here to Die Didn’t You?”: Before the Ten Weeks

### The Birth of SCOPE



Hosea Williams (standing with his arms in the air) pictured leading a SCOPE workshop in the summer of 1965.<sup>17</sup>

Years before SCOPE, King called Hosea Williams, his “wild man” and his “Castro.”<sup>18</sup>

The self-proclaimed “thug” of SCLC, Williams got his start in civil rights work organizing for the NAACP in Savannah, Georgia.<sup>19</sup> He joined the SCLC staff as the Director of Voter Registration in 1962 after King personally raised the money for his salary. Just two years into his

<sup>17</sup> Bob Fitch, “Hosea Williams leads SCOPE volunteer workshop at Freedom House,” M1994\_SCLC\_008, Stanford University Libraries Department of Special Collections and University Archives, <https://purl.stanford.edu/nj565hf1408>.

<sup>18</sup> “Williams, Hosea,” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, accessed December 5, 2023, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/williams-hosea>.

<sup>19</sup> “Williams, Hosea,” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute.

position at SCLC, Williams received the organization's "Man of the Year" award.<sup>20</sup> Known as a firebrand in the movement, Williams pushed civil rights forward through his work in St. Augustine, Florida and with John Lewis of SNCC in Selma, Alabama. In the spring of 1965, Williams took on one of his largest projects to date – SCOPE. Overseeing a \$500,000 budget and over a thousand volunteers, staff, and local workers, the project tested Williams' leadership at a critical juncture in the movement.

The summer of 1965 was a period of expansion, conflict, and legislative success for the Civil Rights Movement. King's national civil rights organization, the SCLC, was in the early stages of taking its work north in the fight for racial equality. While SCLC had focused predominantly on the unique dynamics of Southern racial discrimination, in 1965, King and his aides debated using Chicago as a new organizing base.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, 1965 was a year of intense direct-action campaigns and legislation around the issue of Black voting rights. In particular, the Selma to Montgomery marches in March and the subsequent August passage of the VRA were an encouraging display of the potential for nonviolent movements to spur legislative change. In the midst of these major advances sat the SCOPE project. Bringing roughly 300 white college students into over four dozen Southern communities, SCOPE attempted to translate national advancements in civil right into local realities.

Earlier in the year, the Selma to Montgomery march attracted national media attention and galvanized congressional and presidential support for a bill to eliminate racial discrimination in voting. SCLC Executive Director of Voter Registration and Political Education and head of the SCOPE project, Hosea Williams, was a crucial leader in the marches alongside SNCC chairman John Lewis. In the early afternoon of March 7, Williams and Lewis led a crowd of

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<sup>20</sup> "Williams, Hosea," The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute.

<sup>21</sup> Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 240.

protesters from Brown Chapel AME Church to the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The bridge's namesake, Pettus, was a Confederate general and the former Grand Dragon of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan.<sup>22</sup> At the end of the bridge stood "150 troopers, sheriff's deputies, and possemen" waiting for Williams, Lewis, and the protesters.<sup>23</sup> When the marchers refused to disperse, Sheriff Jim Clark, unleashed his nightstick and club-carrying men on the crowd who tear gassed and beat protesters. Dozens of people, including Lewis, were injured, earning the confrontation the name "Bloody Sunday." Filmed by journalists and aired by national media outlets, the video footage of Bloody Sunday showed state-sanctioned Southern racial violence in its raw form to millions of Americans, including many Northern white people who were more removed from these brutal displays. President Lyndon Johnson was particularly moved by the images of Bloody Sunday and the related murders of a Boston minister named James Reeb and volunteer Viola Liuzzo by local white people.

On March 15, 1965, Johnson gave a special address to Congress, declaring the events in Selma "a turning point in man's unending search for freedom."<sup>24</sup> Recognizing the arbitrary power of local election officials to deny registration through literacy tests and their use for racially discriminatory purposes, Johnson declared his intent to send draft legislation to Congress that would standardize voting rights. The bill would also provide federal intervention in cases where local and state officials refused to comply with laws prohibiting discrimination. Most profound in Johnson's speech was his adoption of Civil Rights Movement rhetoric in his pledge that "we shall overcome."<sup>25</sup> Using this "signature phrase" of the Black freedom struggle stunned

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<sup>22</sup> Errin Whack, "Who Was Edmund Pettus?" Smithsonian Magazine, March 7, 2015, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/who-was-edmund-pettus-180954501/>.

<sup>23</sup> Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, "Special Message to the Congress: The American Promise," The American President Project, accessed September 17, 2023, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/special-message-the-congress-the-american-promise>.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, "Special Message to the Congress: The American Promise."

some members in the chamber, including Senator Richard Russell who later called the Southern president “a turncoat if there ever was one.”<sup>26</sup> Across town, “a tear rolled down King’s cheek,” as he watched the president invoke the movement’s language before the nation and promise long awaited federal protection.<sup>27</sup>

In the wake of Johnson’s endorsement, the final march from Selma to Montgomery was successful. With the protection of federalized Alabama guardsmen, hundreds (and toward the end thousands) of marchers completed their 54-mile journey on March 25, 1965, at the steps of the Alabama state capitol in Montgomery.<sup>28</sup> King described the arduous but symbolic prominence of the march with a borrowed quote from Sister Pollard, a 70-year-old Black Montgomery resident, “our feet are tired, but our souls are rested.”<sup>29</sup> King also used the platform to acknowledge President Johnson’s speech, calling it “an address that will live in history as one of the most passionate pleas for human rights ever made by a president of our nation.”<sup>30</sup> Tracing the development of Jim Crow as a tool to oppress both Black poor white people and calling on all people to “march on ballot boxes until the Wallace’s of our nation tremble away in silence,” King paired a cautious warning about the long road ahead with an impassioned optimism about the momentum of change that came from committing to nonviolent direct action.<sup>31</sup>

Following the march’s success, SCLC executive staff had different visions for how best to harness the energy it generated. James Bevel, without prior approval, publicly announced a commercial boycott of the state of Alabama if Governor George Wallace (the “Wallace”

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<sup>26</sup> Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 114.

<sup>27</sup> Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 115.

<sup>28</sup> “Selma to Montgomery March,” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, accessed September 17, 2023, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/selma-montgomery-march>.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Luther King, “Our God Is Marching On!,” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, accessed September 17, 2023, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/our-god-marching>.

<sup>30</sup> King, “Our God Is Marching On!”

<sup>31</sup> King, “Our God Is Marching On!”

referenced in King's speech above) refused to act on SCLC's policy proposals. This left King "[feeling] obliged to endorse the boycott on *Meet the Press*" despite his disagreement with its tenets and the overwhelmingly negative reaction it received.<sup>32</sup> Within the executive board, Andrew Young reiterated the merits of taking a Northern strategy while Bayard Rustin "stressed a gradual approach to preserve the movement's hard-won coalition," fearing that a statewide boycott would "alienate supporters in the North, including the press."<sup>33</sup>

Amid this internal conflict, at a March 31 SCLC executive board meeting, Hosea Williams offered his own proposal for SCLC's next steps by presenting his plans for the Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) project.<sup>34</sup> Williams envisioned the SCOPE project recruiting five hundred people "from academic communities of America to work for 10 weeks [that] summer in 75 blackbelt rural counties and six (6) urban counties."<sup>35</sup> The project's goals were threefold: voter registration, community organization, and Williams' "pet project" and "first love," political education.<sup>36</sup> By including political education, Williams brought SCOPE in concert with the SCLC's existing Citizenship Education Program, headed by Dorothy Cotton and Septima Clark.<sup>37</sup> James Bevel of the executive staff objected to the SCOPE project saying it was an unoriginal derivation of the Council of Federated Organization's (COFO) 1964 Freedom Summer project that send hundreds of white college students to

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<sup>32</sup> Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 193.

<sup>33</sup> Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 196.

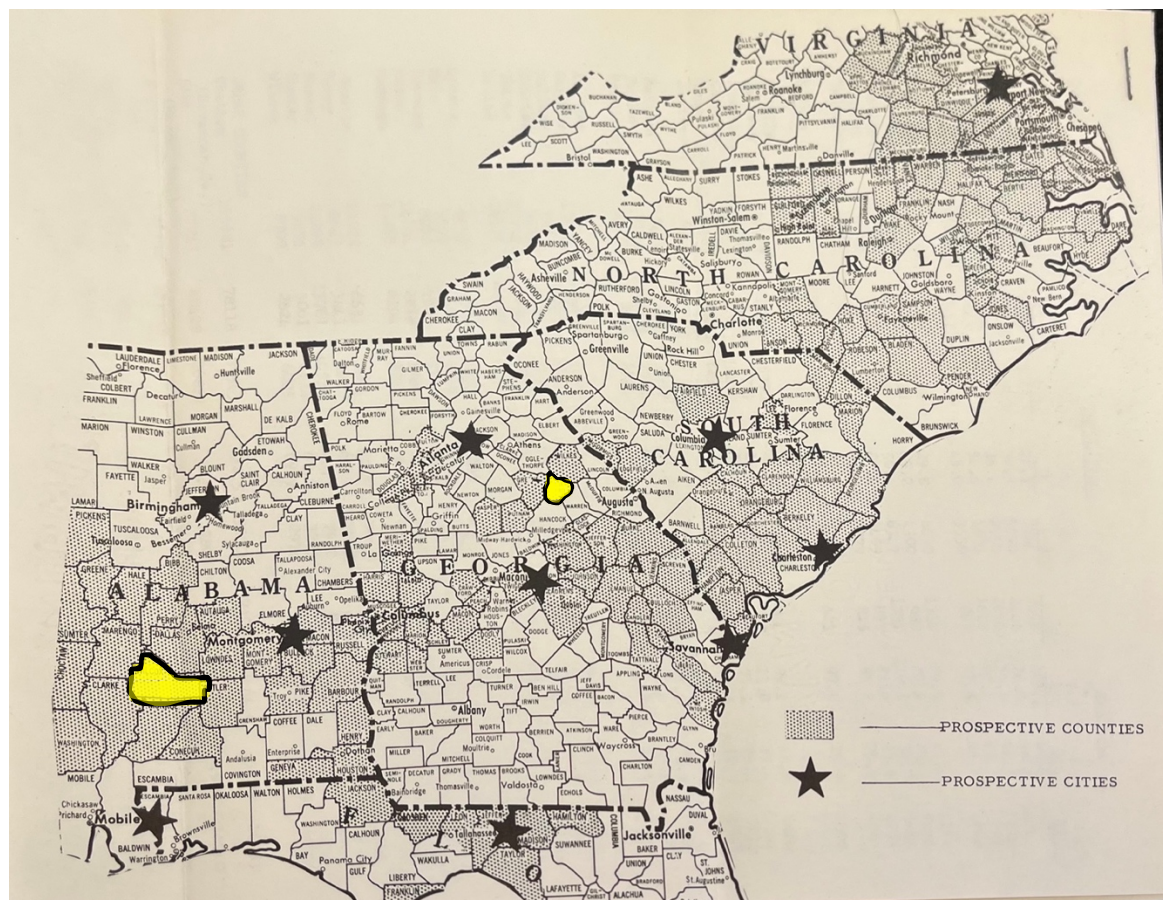
<sup>34</sup> Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 196.

<sup>35</sup> "Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) project, 1965," Subseries 4.1, Box: 199, Folder: 5. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library. Document titled "SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE POLITICAL EDUCATION AND VOTER REGISTRATION DEPARTMENT Summer Community Organization and Political Education Project," 1.

<sup>36</sup> "Oral history interview with Hosea Williams, African-American, male, SCOPE director of summer project, 0337 (sides 1 and 2), Atlanta, Georgia. 0337." KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, California, Tape 0337, <https://purl.stanford.edu/zn429dv9370>, 2.

<sup>37</sup> Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, 416.

Mississippi the previous summer.<sup>38</sup> King and the board nevertheless approved Williams' proposal leaving just two and half months to organize, recruit, and prepare before the volunteers arrived for orientation.



**Prospective SCOPE counties from before the project was finalized. Wilcox County, Alabama and Taliaferro County, Georgia are highlighted and outlined. While some shaded counties did not receive SCOPE teams and some unshaded counties did, the map shows Williams' vision for the project's reach.<sup>39</sup>**

While Williams received approval for the SCOPE project at the late May executive staff meeting, he had been planning the project for months. At the November 1964, SCLC executive staff meeting, Williams was asked to submit by November 30 a proposed budget and program

<sup>38</sup> Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 196.

<sup>39</sup> Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) Program, 1965, 12, Box: 621, Folder: 18. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, untitled map.



for the Department of Voter Registration and Political Education's work in the first six months of 1965.<sup>40</sup> In his draft proposal he wrote about plans for a "Student Summer Project" that would send field workers and staff, "along with 500 volunteers" to work in 75 counties he identified as "most in need of Voter Registration and Political Education" assistance.<sup>41</sup> Williams used 24 criteria for selecting counties including the percentage of the Black voting-age population that was already registered, whether SCLC had a local affiliate chapter or contacts, the outcome of previous voter registration drives in the county, and the "degree of hostility in the local white community to negro enfranchisement."<sup>42</sup> By the time SCOPE was approved, he had expanded his list to 120 rural and ten urban counties.<sup>43</sup> SCOPE volunteers would register local Black residents during the day and hold political education classes at night.<sup>44</sup>

## Planning

In January of 1965, Williams contacted a number of university chaplains and academics, with his tentative plans for a summer project for students. Letters sent to college administrators, reverends, and professors around the country announced that SCLC's Department of Voter Registration and Political Education was "giving College communities the privilege of adopting

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<sup>40</sup> Proposed budget and program, 1965, 12, Box: 621, Folder: 9. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, page 2 of proposed Jan-June budget.

<sup>41</sup> Proposed budget and program, 1965, 12, Box: 621, Folder: 9. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083, page 8 and 4 of proposed Jan-June budget.

<sup>42</sup> Proposed budget and program, 1965, 12, Box: 621, Folder: 9. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083, page 5 of proposed Jan-June budget.

<sup>43</sup> "Hosea Williams and Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program objectives and public relations, Records of the Voter Registration and Political Education Project," Folder: 001569-022-0677, Jan 01, 1954 - Dec 31, 1970, Series IV, Records of the Voter Registration and Political Education Project, 1963-1968, Subseries 2, Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program (SCOPE), 1965, Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954-1970, Part 4: Records of the Program Department, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001569-022-0677&accountid=14816>, 25.

<sup>44</sup> Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) project, 1965, Subseries 4.1, Box: 199, Folder: 5. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, page 1 of Purpose document.

southern black-belt counties” that summer.<sup>45</sup> In these preliminary letters, Williams planned for a three-day orientation session in Atlanta, followed by a three-day orientation in their assigned counties and three weeks of field work.<sup>46</sup> By the time final arrangements were made for SCOPE in early summer, the orientation session was six days long and the volunteers were expected to work for ten weeks.

In February and March, SCOPE planning fell behind as SCLC staff and Williams in particular shifted their attention to the developing campaign in Selma. Williams’ leadership in the first attempted Selma to Montgomery march and the next few weeks spent organizing, waiting out federal injunctions, and then finally making it to Montgomery, commanded his full attention. Due to this diversion, Williams’ staff officially started dedicated recruitment efforts on April 10 and road teams of two to four people departed Atlanta on April 17.<sup>47</sup> With the first day of orientation set for June 14, Williams and the Department of Voter Registration and Political Education staff had to recruit their desired five hundred volunteers in under three months.

Road teams were assigned to different regions of the United States, “stationary teams” were located in “New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles,” and local contacts

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<sup>45</sup> “Correspondence, Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program student volunteer recruitment, requests for academic support for Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program, U.S. historians who marched on Montgomery, Alabama, and white southern students’ support for Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program, Records of the Voter Registration and Political Education Project,” Jan 01, 1954-Dec 31, 1970, Series IV, Records of the Voter Registration and Political Education Project, 1963-1968, Subseries 2, Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program (SCOPE), 1965, Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954-1970, Part 4: Records of the Program Department, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001569-021-0422&accountid=14816>.

<sup>46</sup> “Correspondence, Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program student volunteer recruitment, requests for academic support for Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program, U.S. historians who marched on Montgomery, Alabama, and white southern students’ support for Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program, Records of the Voter Registration and Political Education Project,” Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954-1970, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001569-021-0422&accountid=14816>, 6.

<sup>47</sup> Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) Program, 1965, 12, Box: 621, Folder: 18. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, document titled “Recruiting.”

provided support where possible.<sup>48</sup> An SCLC report indicated that over the course of the four-week recruitment drive, stationery and road teams contacted roughly 140 colleges. Fifty-eight schools established chapters, ten schools displayed “strong potential,” and over 500 individuals applied to the project.<sup>49</sup> While the orientation attendance (roughly 300 students) points to these numbers being inflated, Williams’ staff were nevertheless able to mobilize an impressive number of students from around the nation in a short amount of time.

In the crunch to recruit volunteers, Williams also called on University of Chicago historian Walter Johnson to use his academic network to spread the word about SCOPE. In April, Johnson and Williams corresponded a number of times to coordinate details for the orientation session and to aid recruitment. On April 20, Johnson sent a letter to over forty fellow historians who had been at the March 25 demonstration in Montgomery, Alabama: asking if any could attend the SCOPE orientation session; requesting input on building a recommended reading list for the students; and inquiring whether they would help recruit undergraduate and graduate students on their campuses to join the project.<sup>50</sup> Among the historians contacted were C. Vann Woodward of Yale University and John Hope Franklin of the University of Chicago, both of whom gave speeches at the orientation session later in June.

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<sup>48</sup> Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) Program, 1965, 12, Box: 621, Folder: 18. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, document titled “Recruiting.”

<sup>49</sup> Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) Program, 1965, 12, Box: 621, Folder: 18. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, document titled “Recruiting.”

<sup>50</sup> “Correspondence, Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program student volunteer recruitment, requests for academic support for Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program, U.S. historians who marched on Montgomery, Alabama, and white southern students’ support for Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program, Records of the Voter Registration and Political Education Project,” Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954-1970, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001569-021-0422&accountid=14816>, page 25.

While SCLC staff and Walter Johnson brought SCOPE to many of the schools that eventually established chapters, the campus chapters themselves assumed most of the burden for recruiting students. Individual campus chapters were responsible for prescreening applicants before they received final approval from SCLC. SCOPE “procedure” documents instructed university chapters to “elect or appoint a chairman, director, program director, secretary and treasurer” from the students in the project and to set up “recruiting, screening, fund raising, [and] publicity” committees.<sup>51</sup> Students were told to hold a meeting on campus that would explain the SCOPE project, include “an informed speaker or lecturer in Southern voter registration,” and screen a “citizenship film” in order to drive engagement.<sup>52</sup> Most importantly, the screening committee was responsible for preliminary decisions about students’ acceptance or rejection from the program.

SCLC instructions emphasized that age, experience, and training should not be significant factors in the committee’s membership decisions. Instead, screening committees should focus on their “character, sincerity and be able to determine the applicants motive to some degree.”<sup>53</sup> While SCLC’s guidelines acknowledged that recruiting volunteers with a range of skills, experience, and education was necessary in order to build a holistic movement, its desire to ensure the moral rectitude of volunteers reflected the fact that the volunteers were publicly representing SCLC in their work that summer. This implicated SCLC’s reputation in any misstep or bad hire. SCLC sought to avoid the controversies and pejorative labels such as

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<sup>51</sup> Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) project, 1965, Subseries 4.1, Box: 199, Folder: 5, Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, “PURPOSE OF SCLC’S...” document.

<sup>52</sup> Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) project, 1965, Subseries 4.1, Box: 199, Folder: 5, Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, “PURPOSE OF SCLC’S...” document page 2

<sup>53</sup> Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) project, 1965, Subseries 4.1, Box: 199, Folder: 5, Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, “PURPOSE OF SCLC’S...” document page 3.

‘beatnik’ that opponents to the movement used to undermine student activism and the Civil Rights Movement.

### **Volunteer Demographics**

Whether to use white students in direct action and organizing campaigns had been a point of contention within civil rights organizations for at least two years before SCOPE. The debate was especially apparent in the early planning phase of COFO’s 1964 Freedom Summer project. Freedom Summer, as SCOPE did the year after, recruited hundreds of white college students from around the nation to spend their summer working for Black voter registration, political education, and community organization in the South.

In early debates, COFO (primarily led by SNCC and CORE leaders though notionally including SCLC and NAACP as well) leaders were divided over whether relying on white students was a strategic advantage or if it opened the project to unnecessary vulnerabilities. Charlie Cobb, a SNCC organizer who had worked in Mississippi for two years, opposed the use of white students on the grounds that they were “an uncontrollable force.”<sup>54</sup> SNCC field secretary Ivanhoe Donaldson concurred, arguing that white students would seek out leadership positions in county organizing campaigns that should go to local Black people, undermining the project’s central goal of encouraging the growth of indigenous leadership and movements.<sup>55</sup> But other leaders including Fannie Lou Hamer, Lawrence Guyot, and Bob Moses argued that white students brought the nation’s attention with them when they came to the South, providing

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<sup>54</sup> “Council of Federated Organizations—Records (Z:Accessions, M79-423),” Freedom Summer Digital Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society (2013), <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/29501>, 4.

<sup>55</sup> “Ivanhoe Donaldson,” SNCC Digital Gateway, September 22, 2021, <https://snccdigital.org/people/ivanhoe-donaldson/>.

national media attention to the problems Black Southerners faced and the urgent need for civil rights legislation.<sup>56</sup> Opponents to using white students were outvoted and Freedom Summer adopted the strategy.

Internal SCLC executive board disagreements over SCOPE were far less focused on ideological debates about whether to use white students than COFO had been. According to Willie Bolden, a SCLC field worker from Savannah, Georgia that helped lead SCOPE in Taliaferro County, Georgia, Williams included white volunteers because he believed that Black people would listen to them. In Bolden's experience, Black people "were a little skeptical about going downtown" with him and other Black organizers but would acquiesce when white volunteers from other parts of the country showed up at their doorstep.<sup>57</sup> Bolden and other SCLC staff "found out from the few whites who were working with" SCLC that their presence could be a motivating force.<sup>58</sup> This led Williams to design SCOPE with primarily white student volunteers. Amidst the organization's tensions over geographic expansion into the North and ideological expansion to include opposition to the Vietnam War and poverty, Williams was the brains and leader of the SCOPE operation.

Williams' decision to use white students was also reflective of his and SCLC's belief, at the time, in the necessity of allies to the Civil Rights Movement. In an interview with a student from Stanford University's KZSU student radio station at the end of the summer of 1965, Williams said he felt that SCOPE was "another step on that ladder when Johnson talk[s] about the grand alliance" between Black people and their allies in winning civil rights advancements.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> "SNCC Debates Freedom Summer," SNCC Digital Gateway, September 24, 2021, <https://snccdigital.org/events/sncc-debates-freedom-summer/>.

<sup>57</sup> Bob Short, "Interview with Willie Bolden, October 7, 2009" Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies, University of Georgia, <https://ohms.libs.uga.edu/viewer.php?cachefile=russell/RBRL220ROGP-088.xml>.

<sup>58</sup> Bob Short, "Interview with Willie Bolden, October 7, 2009."

<sup>59</sup> "Oral history interview with Hosea Williams," KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), page 3.

Williams' belief that he and SCLC were fighting for human rights, as opposed to merely civil rights, meant that all people were implicated and responsible for fighting for its success, including white students. Drawing on Abraham Lincoln's famous pronouncement that "this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free," Williams emphasized that the burden for securing full citizenship rights for Black people fell equally on white people, too.<sup>60</sup>

Despite this, Williams acknowledged the potential pitfalls of including white non-Southerners in the project such as difficulty integrating volunteers into predominantly Black rural communities, concerns about the personal character of volunteers including communist sympathies, and young people's propensity for partying, drinking, and sexual relationships. In the same interview with Stanford's KZSU student radio station representative, Williams referred to his reservations about whether using white students was the best approach as his "one great fear" for the project.<sup>61</sup> Williams recognized the difficulties COFO faced the summer before and noted that he "had a problem on [his] hands trying to have a summer program of Northerners, Westerners, Easterners, bringing them to a completely new environment."<sup>62</sup> In Williams' view, the project could minimize these issues if they could maintain an "image to the nation that parents wouldn't mind their daughters returning next summer, fathers wouldn't mind their sons."<sup>63</sup> This meant upholding moral standards for the volunteers throughout the summer. This desire for respectability and Williams' belief in the essential role that outside perceptions of the character of the volunteers played in the project's success was a catalyst for the decision to have campus SCOPE chapters screen applicants themselves. By calling on student leaders, chaplains,

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<sup>60</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "House Divided Speech," National Parks Service, accessed September 18, 2023, [https://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/housedivided.htm#:~:text=%22A%20house%20divided%20against%20itself,thing%2C%20or%20all%20the%20other](https://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/housedivided.htm#:~:text=%22A%20house%20divided%20against%20itself,thing%2C%20or%20all%20the%20other;); "Oral history interview with Hosea Williams," KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), page 4.

<sup>61</sup> "Oral history interview with Hosea Williams," KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), page 2.

<sup>62</sup> "Oral history interview with Hosea Williams," KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), page 2.

<sup>63</sup> "Oral history interview with Hosea Williams," KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), page 2.

and university faculty to screen the applicants, SCLC strategically endowed people with closer perspective on the character of applicants with admission discretion to help eliminate potential liabilities.

Despite Williams' confidence in the project's screening process and his post-project belief that SCOPE assembled "the finest group of volunteers of non-Southerners that has ever been assembled by the civil rights organizations, the civil rights movement," he had reservations about any thorough inquiry into the character of SCOPE volunteers.<sup>64</sup> In May, three University of Wisconsin sociologists, N. J. Demerath III, Gerald Marwell and Michael Aiken, reached out to the SCLC with a proposal to study the background and character of SCOPE volunteers through administering questionnaires with the hope of understanding white student activism in the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>65</sup> Williams and his staff repeatedly pushed off making a concrete decision about whether to permit the project, partially because of their preoccupation with recruiting and planning the project and partially because opinions differed on whether it was wise.

The summer before, the same Wisconsin sociologists submitted a similar inquiry to COFO to study Freedom Summer but were rejected due to fears from COFO leaders that the results could hold potentially problematic information about the volunteers (such as communist ties) and worries that the study could be "unnerving" to volunteers.<sup>66</sup> Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken decided to try again in 1965 with SCOPE because they thought SCLC's "more stable...relations with the white intellectual community" and increasing visibility of white

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<sup>64</sup> "Oral history interview with Hosea Williams," KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), page 3.

<sup>65</sup> N. J. Demerath, Gerald Marwell, and Michael T. Aiken, *Dynamics of Idealism: White Activists in a Black Movement* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, Inc., Publishers, 1971), 8.

<sup>66</sup> Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken, *Dynamics of Idealism*, 4.



students in the movement helped their legitimacy and decreased the potential for explosive consequences.<sup>67</sup>

While SCLC staff debated the consequences of the study, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, under the leadership of J. Edgar Hoover, initiated its own inquiry into the SCOPE volunteers. In April, Hoover ordered “FBI offices to scour future SCOPE workers for subversive backgrounds” because he saw SCOPE as an opportunity to associate King with subversive groups such as the communist party and to build out his “counterintelligence” on the SCLC leader.<sup>68</sup> Despite this, the FBI’s general conclusion in a June 9<sup>th</sup> report was that no “subversive affiliation” was found among the student volunteers.<sup>69</sup> The initiation and persistence of the FBI inquiry heightened the importance of maintaining a clean image for SCOPE.

It was this same information the FBI was looking to find that Williams and others worried could come out as a result of the Wisconsin sociologists’ study. In a press conference later in July, Ralph Abernathy told reporters that SCLC would “check with FBI men” about whether any of the volunteers had a “Communist background.”<sup>70</sup> Abernathy told the press, “We don’t want anything that is pink, much less anything that is red.”<sup>71</sup> This vehement anti-communist public image was a result of national pressures on the SCLC. The organization’s national stature subjected it to national scrutiny, forcing the SCLC to adhere to certain pressures from the federal government and public opinion to keep high-level allies.

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<sup>67</sup> Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken, *Dynamics of Idealism*, 7.

<sup>68</sup> “Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI),” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, accessed September 17, 2023, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/federal-bureau-investigation-fbi#:~:text=Hoover%20responded%20to%20King's%20criticisms,King%20Rebuts%20Hoover%E2%80%9D;Branch,AtCanaan'sEdge>, 199.

<sup>69</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Southern Christian Leadership Conference Part 06 of 14,” page 595.

<sup>70</sup> Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 249.

<sup>71</sup> Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 249.

In their attempt to get approval to study SCOPE, Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken ran into hesitation from SCLC staff who worried about the fall out and questioned the study's usefulness. The study was eventually approved by King on the second day of the volunteer orientation, on the condition that SCLC had "final authorization on any publication."<sup>72</sup> Agreeing to the study was a gamble for SCLC. Not only did the sociologists' findings hold the potential to invite public scrutiny and undermine the project's success should it reveal communist affiliations or other controversial identities, but it also put Williams' screening framework to the test. With SCLC taking a proactive approach to maintaining the image of their volunteers and by extension the organization, the study threatened to unravel a crucial dynamic of the project.

The final published study, *Dynamics of Idealism: White Activists in a Black Movement*, did no such unraveling. The study included questionnaire responses from 223 white volunteers for an overall response rate of 80%.<sup>73</sup> The data showed SCOPE was roughly equally split by gender and the bulk of the volunteers came from Middle Atlantic states, the Midwest, or the Far West.<sup>74</sup> Similar to other white activists in the Civil Rights Movement, the volunteers came from predominantly upper-middle-class families.<sup>75</sup> In spite of the essential role played by university religious leaders in recruiting for the project and the explicitly religious character of SCLC, the most common religious affiliation among the volunteers was no affiliation at all.<sup>76</sup> Less a result of doctrinal or spiritual differences, the volunteer's lack of religiosity largely came from disagreements with the institutional practices of churches, a view that mirrored their disaffection

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<sup>72</sup> Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken, *Dynamics of Idealism*, 14, 17.

<sup>73</sup> Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken, *Dynamics of Idealism*, 24, 17.

<sup>74</sup> Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken, *Dynamics of Idealism*, 25.

<sup>75</sup> Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken, *Dynamics of Idealism*, 27.

<sup>76</sup> Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken, *Dynamics of Idealism*, 29.

with societal structures more broadly. Just one in four attended church services weekly, illustrating an important divergence between SCLC and the majority of the volunteers.<sup>77</sup>

Most notably, the students' interests matched the expanding scope of issues SCLC was working on outside of civil rights. Most volunteers shared King's view on urban poverty and opposition to US involvement in the Vietnam War. While a national *Newsweek* poll indicated that roughly 25% of college students supported the United States pushing for negotiations in Vietnam, 60% of the SCOPE students did.<sup>78</sup> This interest in adjacent issues also manifested in poverty and federal social safety net programs. Compared with 30% of the students nationwide, 71% of SCOPE volunteers favored devoting a "large proportion of the federal budget...to poverty, medical care, education" and similar issues.<sup>79</sup> While the volunteers stepped forward to join a civil rights project that summer, it was by no means the only, or even in some volunteers' case, the primary social issue on their mind. SCOPE workers were not significantly more likely than their peers to support civil rights or federal intervention in the South to ensure racial equality.<sup>80</sup> Thus, Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken concluded that "many volunteers were motivated to join the project as much by a concern over nonracial issues as by a commitment to civil rights per se."<sup>81</sup> Instead, the sociologists believed that "the civil rights movement offered a structural political identity to those with broad-ranging political concerns."<sup>82</sup> SCOPE and SCLC thus emerge not as a first choice among the volunteers but as an opportunity to act against their growing discontent with American society through an influential national organization.

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<sup>77</sup> Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken, *Dynamics of Idealism*, 30.

<sup>78</sup> Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken, *Dynamics of Idealism*, 25.

<sup>79</sup> Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken, *Dynamics of Idealism*, 34.

<sup>80</sup> Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken, *Dynamics of Idealism*, 34.

<sup>81</sup> Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken, *Dynamics of Idealism*, 35.

<sup>82</sup> Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken, *Dynamics of Idealism*, 36.

Apart from religious affiliation and related social interests, there were a number of characteristics which Williams expected of his volunteers that *Dynamics of Idealism* later confirmed. The first was the volunteers' relative inexperience with the South. Almost half (45%) had never been to the South with only seven percent having lived in the South for more than ten years.<sup>83</sup> This also meant very few (<20%) had ever engaged in Southern civil rights activism.<sup>84</sup> Despite their clear support for racial equality, the volunteers had little prior contact with Black people as 46% had never been a guest in a Black person's home or hosted one themselves and 26% indicated never having "attended a small social gathering" that included Black people.<sup>85</sup> This was the sort of serious inexperience that became important in the volunteers' work that summer as they navigated local customs and norms in majority-Black rural Southern counties.

To prepare the group for their entrance into the unknown world of rural Southern Black communities, Williams held a mandatory six-day orientation session in Atlanta that brought together the nation's preeminent historical and legal scholars, labor representatives, civil rights leaders, and government officials. While Williams originally advertised a three-day orientation when he reached out to university officials in January, by the time his staff were fully concentrated on SCOPE in April and May, they doubled the program to six days.<sup>86</sup> Even with the longer orientation, there were elements of life in the South and in Black communities and homes that the volunteers had to learn on their own.

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<sup>83</sup> Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken, *Dynamics of Idealism*, 50.

<sup>84</sup> Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken, *Dynamics of Idealism*, 50.

<sup>85</sup> Demerath, Marwell, and Aiken, *Dynamics of Idealism*, 50.

<sup>86</sup> "Correspondence, Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program student volunteer recruitment, requests for academic support for Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program, U.S. historians who marched on Montgomery, Alabama, and white southern students' support for Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program, Records of the Voter Registration and Political Education Project," Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954-1970 <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001569-021-0422&accountid=14816>, pages 2-8.

## Orientation

Just as recruitment was delayed by the Selma campaign, so was orientation planning. One month before the orientation, Williams received a letter from University of Chicago professor Walter Johnson saying he had received interest from 20 professors to assist with the academic section of the orientation but noted they would likely back out if he and Williams could not nail down an official schedule soon.<sup>87</sup> In order to put together the orientation in time, Williams appointed Bayard Rustin, the Executive Director of the A. Philip Randolph Institute and a close adviser to King, Orientation Program Director.<sup>88</sup>

Rustin was a natural choice to help lead the orientation because of his vocal advocacy for coalition-based organizing. Earlier that year in February, Rustin published a seven-page piece in *Commentary*, a monthly magazine published by the American Jewish Committee, called “From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement.” In the article, Rustin argued in favor of political coalition building, saying that the Civil Rights Movement had passed the phase of sit-ins and demonstrations and was advancing toward tackling systemic issues such as poverty, housing, and education. Rustin was adamant that the political viability and sustained success of the movement depended on working with allies, specifically in forming voting blocs. “Coalitions are inescapable,” wrote Rustin, “however tentative they may be.”<sup>89</sup> Further

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<sup>87</sup> “Correspondence, Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program student volunteer recruitment, requests for academic support for Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program, U.S. historians who marched on Montgomery, Alabama, and white southern students’ support for Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program, Records of the Voter Registration and Political Education Project,” Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954-1970, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001569-021-0422&accountid=14816>, page 13.

<sup>88</sup> SCOPE press kit, 1965, Subseries 6.2, Box: 359, Folder: 3. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

<sup>89</sup> Bayard Rustin, “From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement,” *Commentary Magazine*, February 1965, No. 2 Vol. 39, University of Pittsburgh Digital Collections, American Left Ephemera Collection, series I. African Americans and the Left, Box 1, Folder 122, page 5.

illustrating his stance, Rustin told a spring SCLC board meeting that “no social movement has ever been successful in this country which did not involve as an ally the hard-core white middle classes.”<sup>90</sup> His involvement in the SCOPE orientation becomes clear against this backdrop of ideological commitment to building diverse coalitions in the fight for political change. The SCOPE project’s recruitment of hundreds of white college students was a manifestation of Rustin’s vision.

Rustin’s previous movement experience was heavily focused on expanding civil rights advocacy into the realm of economic issues. The result of this emphasis on economic justice was the significant presence of organized labor at the orientation. Rustin’s Associate Director for the orientation was Norman Hill of the Industrial Union Department of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO).<sup>91</sup> For years, labor champions had been major allies to the Civil Rights Movement. Rustin was a key organizer of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom where King delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech. The president of the United Auto Workers (UAW), Walter Reuther, gave a speech at the march and the UAW was a financial sponsor.<sup>92</sup> Rustin also headed the A. Philip Randolph Institute which brought together Black trade unionists to fight for economic justice and civil rights.

With the help of Rustin, Hill, and academics such as Johnson, Williams successfully brought together the nation’s brightest academic minds, most influential labor leaders, and key decision makers in the sphere of civil rights for the orientation. In the days leading up to the orientation, volunteers departed their homes for Atlanta, Georgia. Some volunteers such as

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<sup>90</sup> Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 196.

<sup>91</sup> SCOPE press kit, 1965, Subseries 6.2, Box: 359, Folder: 3. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

<sup>92</sup> “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, accessed April 14, 2024, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>.

University of California, Berkeley student Sherie Labedis and three fellow volunteers, drove across the country to make the June 14 start date. On their multiple-day drives, trading off driving shifts and halting briefly at rest stops, the gravity of the summer ahead began to sink in for many of the volunteers. Labedis recalled realizing that she was now “an adult agent for social change, not just a teenager on a dangerous lark.”<sup>93</sup> With a disapproving family anxiously awaiting her return back at home, Labedis felt the “guilt for hurting [her] family stalk” her on the drive.<sup>94</sup>

Dartmouth student Peter Buck wrote about a similar unease developing on his ride down. Almost two weeks before he left for Atlanta, Buck’s friend, Chuck, gave him a copy of *Letters from Mississippi*, a recently published collection of letters that white Freedom Summer volunteers had sent to their family and friends the previous summer.<sup>95</sup> The collection highlighted the violence, resistance, and difficulties the volunteers faced including the murders of three workers. As Chuck had been one of Buck’s biggest supporters when he decided to join SCOPE, the present was likely an attempt to prepare Buck rather than to dissuade him. Despite this, Buck wrote in his journal on June 12, “The further South the bus got the more nervous I began to get...I realized I was finally in the south where the likes of me were not really loved.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Sherie Holbrook Labedis, *You Came Here to Die, Didn't You: Registering Black Voters One Soul at a Time, South Carolina, 1965* (Roseville, California: Smokey Hill Books, 2011), 3. This is Sherie Labedis’ memoir constructed based on her letters and diary from the summer of 1965 about her time as a SCOPE volunteer in Berkeley County, South Carolina.

<sup>94</sup> Labedis, *You Came Here to Die, Didn't You*, 3.

<sup>95</sup> Peter Buck, “Transcript: Journal of a SCOPE Volunteer Peter Buck Summer, 1965,” Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, accessed September 17, 2023, <https://www.crmvet.org/nars/buck65.htm>.

<sup>96</sup> Peter Buck, “Transcript: Journal of a SCOPE Volunteer Peter Buck Summer, 1965.”



**SCOPE volunteers sitting for their orientation at Morris Brown College in Atlanta, GA.<sup>97</sup>**

While volunteers trickled into Atlanta over the course of a few days, the first official program began at 10 a.m. on Monday, June 14 with a plenary session delivered by Ralph Abernathy, Vice President, and Treasurer of SCLC, titled “History of SCLC.”<sup>98</sup> Earlier that morning, while waiting outside of the Morris Brown College building where the first sessions were set to take place, Sherie Labedis was asked by a Black teenager, “You came here to die, didn’t you?”<sup>99</sup> The comment caught Labedis off guard and when she attempted to ignore the question, the teenager went further saying, “If you didn’t come here to die, it’s time you [get] back into that car and head back to New York, Chicago or wherever you came from.”<sup>100</sup> Having

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<sup>97</sup> “SCLC/SCOPE orientation at Morris Brown College in Atlanta,” Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://www.crmvet.org/images/imgscope.htm>.

<sup>98</sup> SCOPE press kit, 1965, Subseries 6.2, Box: 359, Folder: 3. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

<sup>99</sup> Labedis, *You Came Here to Die, Didn't You*, 1.

<sup>100</sup> Labedis, *You Came Here to Die, Didn't You*, 1.



expected “to be applauded upon arrival,” the stark reality that Black people would not always view white volunteers as heroes came as a shock.<sup>101</sup>

Abernathy, a Baptist minister, started the orientation session with a powerful speech connecting the work of SCOPE to biblical stories of righteousness. In a reference to Matthew 5:13-16 where Jesus commends his disciples for both embodying and inspiring righteousness and Godly goodness in the world, Abernathy told the students, “Ye are the salt of the earth.”<sup>102</sup> “I stand here not on the mountain this morning, but I stand here in the gymnasium of Morris Brown College and I know now how Jesus felt when I look into those faces... For if America is to be saved, and we must save America, it will only be saved by men and women like you.”<sup>103</sup> Though the specific context of Abernathy’s biblical references may have been lost on some of the areligious volunteers, the underlying meaning of Abernathy’s speech was clear. Connecting the volunteers to Jesus’ own disciples made SCOPE about much more than voter registration or political education night classes. The volunteers were on a mission to “save America” and in Abernathy’s eyes, signified that they had the moral and personal courage needed to succeed.<sup>104</sup>

Day two focused primarily on lessons about nonviolence. The day’s lineup featured some of SCLC’s brightest including Andrew Young, James Bevel, and James Lawson. Young connected nonviolence to the practice of love saying, “If you can love anybody, you can love everybody.”<sup>105</sup> Young perceived a widespread inability to love as “one of the fundamental

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<sup>101</sup> Labedis, *You Came Here to Die, Didn't You*, 1.

<sup>102</sup> Interpretation of Matthew 5:13-16: <https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-5/matthew-513-16/#:~:text=They%20are%20to%20live%20in,people%20can%20see%20God's%20goodness>; Abernathy Quote see: “SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation, speakers include: Ralph Abernathy, Hosea Williams and Martin Luther King, 0079, 0084, 0085, 0086, 0087, 0088, 0089, 0090, 0091, 0092, 0093, 0095, 0096, 0097, 0098, 0099, 0100, 0101, 0432, 0433, 0434, 0435, 0436, 0437. 0079, 0084,” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, California, Tape 0079, <https://purl.stanford.edu/mb907wy4563>, transcript page 7.

<sup>103</sup> “SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), transcript page 7-8.

<sup>104</sup> “SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), transcript page 9.

<sup>105</sup> “SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), transcript page 20.

problems of western civilization” and offered that violence will always lose when faced with love.<sup>106</sup> Bevel took a different approach to understanding the social, moral, and strategic necessity of nonviolence. In Bevel’s view, violence was a distraction from the real goal: communication. Acknowledging the practical reality that there are situations where one cannot defend oneself in time, Bevel argued that focusing on reciprocating violence left one “bogged down.”<sup>107</sup> Instead, one should use the opportunity to try to talk with the aggressor. At best you might find common ground and even if not, you exercised a powerful moral opposition to the violence of your attacker.

Lawson gave his “The Meaning and Relevance of Nonviolence” to the volunteers that morning. A veteran organizer of the Nashville student movement in 1960, Lawson had practiced Gandhian nonviolence since he travelled to India in 1952.<sup>108</sup> To the SCOPE group, Lawson offered a theory of nonviolence that defined it as “the tenacity [to insist] upon one’s own existence and one’s own life.”<sup>109</sup> Nonviolence arose from the interdependence of human existence. Bound together by our mutual humanity, Lawson argued that “every man is me. Even my enemy... To hate my enemy is self-hatred. To fear him is to reject myself. To allow him to get away with evil is to destroy him in his humanity.”<sup>110</sup>

While Young argued from a place of love, Bevel a sense of practicality and strategy, and Lawson from a belief in the connection among all people, all three perspectives demanded unequivocal adherence to nonviolence from the volunteers. Nonviolence’s centrality in the orientation speeches revealed its core place in SCLC’s vision of social change. Young, Bevel,

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<sup>106</sup> “SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), transcript page 21.

<sup>107</sup> “SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), transcript page 23.

<sup>108</sup> “Lawson, James M.,” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, accessed September 18, 2023, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/lawson-james-m>.

<sup>109</sup> “SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), transcript page 29.

<sup>110</sup> “SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), transcript page 30.

and Lawson's speeches emphasized for the volunteers that nonviolence was not merely a belief but an action and way of living. Nonviolence was not something you did, but something you were. Prohibited from demonstrating early in the summer, many SCOPE volunteers did not get the opportunity to live nonviolence in practice until late in the summer. The dislocation, shock, and anxiety volunteers felt in the face of violence signaled that many were still in the early stages of understanding what it meant to actually live nonviolently.

King's address to the volunteers highlighted the specific importance of students in the Black freedom struggle. Though scheduled to speak on Monday night, other commitments pushed King's talk back to Tuesday night. In his characteristically enrapturing oratory style, King recounted the history of the Black and student communities coming together in a moral alliance to fight the nation's injustices. King argued that "the tactic of non-violent, direct action, which was the Negro's unique weapon, fitted perfectly in the hand of the new student generation. From that time on, in every detachment of Negroes, there were students, Negro and white, filling the jails and filling the meeting halls and filling the streets and filling the registrar's offices until finally an electrified nation realized that abroad in the land were new negroes and new students."<sup>111</sup> Further, King called the volunteers the "generation of confrontation" to signify their important place in the development and successes of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>112</sup>

One of the most important parts of King's appearance came from the Q&A session he held after his talk. A student rose to ask King when he thought the Voting Rights Act (VRA) would pass in the House of Representatives. The Senate had already passed the bill by a vote of 77-19 but Representative Howard Smith (VA-08), Chair of the House Rules Committee, had

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<sup>111</sup> "SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation" KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), transcript page 74.

<sup>112</sup> "SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation" KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), transcript page 77.

been sitting on the bill in the hopes to delay, if not kill, the bill entirely.<sup>113</sup> King, having met with Vice President Hubert Humphrey on May 20 to discuss his concerns over how a delay in passing the bill would impact SCOPE, confidently informed the crowd that Smith had “agreed under pressure for it to come out of Committee on the 21<sup>st</sup> of June” and that the House would vote “just a day or so after that.”<sup>114</sup> While King and Williams were relying on swift passage of the VRA to provide SCOPE volunteers with federal backing, the bill did not pass the House until July 9 and only became law on August 6, just three weeks before volunteers returned home.

Wednesday’s speeches moved the volunteers from theoretical perspectives on nonviolence to the practical experience of organizing local communities. The day’s evening session offered some of the most hands-on advice the volunteers received all week. Randolph Blackwell started the evening session saying that while others could give the academic perspective on organization, he was there to discuss it “in a very practical sense.”<sup>115</sup> Blackwell provided the nervous volunteers a measure of comfort by saying “that the persons who have not the slightest idea of what they are going to do when they get into the counties where they are assigned, are in the best shape. You have no business knowing at this point...exactly what you're going to do when you get to your assignment.”<sup>116</sup> Blackwell assured them they were entering communities that anticipated their arrival and that they would not bear the burden of community organization alone. Assumptions about what made local leadership strong or what drew people to the movement would sour the project’s success. Similarly, trying to change local people’s values was futile for such a short project. Blackwell instead urged flexibility, acceptance of where local

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<sup>113</sup> Julian Zelizer, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 218.

<sup>114</sup> Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 224-5; “SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), transcript page 82.

<sup>115</sup> “SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), transcript page 46.

<sup>116</sup> “SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), transcript page 46.

people were in their engagement with the Civil Rights Movement, and restraint from confronting the local white community in their assigned county. The core message of Blackwell's speech was both that inexperience did not have to be a disadvantage and that local leadership had absolute primacy over decision making for the direction each county went.

Andrew Marisette and Jimmy Webb, both SCLC field staff workers for the Department of Voter Registration and Political Education, offered practical advice to the volunteers as fellow young people in the movement. In addition to echoing previous discussions about the necessity of building up local leadership, Webb urged volunteers to remember the impact their individual actions had on SCLC's organizational reputation and emphasized the necessity of meeting local people where they were. Despite preparing separate speeches, both Marisette and Webb devoted part of their allocated five minutes to emphasizing the need to recruit young Black males during the ten weeks. In both of their previous organizing experience, they witnessed a significant disparity in participation by gender. Marisette put the ratio at 85% women to 15% men saying, "I hate to say this, but the girls do run the movement."<sup>117</sup> Webb urged volunteers to use local young men's romantic interest in involved young women to pull them into the movement.<sup>118</sup> For a six-day orientation schedule that featured just two named women (Septima Clark led a 10:30 p.m. "Songfest" and Dorothy Cotton was a commentator on a panel), Marisette and Webb's observation illuminated a sharp, gendered contrast between those platformed with senior roles in SCLC and the foot soldiers who made the movement a reality in local communities. Throughout the summer, volunteers saw this dynamic close up, as they lived in Black women's houses, ate their food, and relied on their community connections to establish relationships and build trust.

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<sup>117</sup> "SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation" KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), transcript page 56.

<sup>118</sup> "SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation" KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), transcript page 69.

Between Blackwell, Marisette, and Webb, the interaction between local and national civil rights movements was at the center of the orientation training discussion. Speakers emphasized the need for flexibility and adaptation to local conditions. These speeches were not lofty ideological declarations but practical, experience-based observations about how to produce social change in rural Black Belt counties. They also forecasted a central tension of SCOPE projects by urging volunteers to show deference to local leaders. Many volunteers ran into trouble that summer when trying to uphold this advice. At times, orders from the project's head Hosea Williams, ran counter to this emphasis on local control. By prohibiting demonstrations and protests by SCOPE, SCLC's organizational goals at times chafed against local movement strategies and goals. The actual negotiation between the local and national elements of the SCOPE project did not play out until volunteers arrived and started working in small groups assigned to specific counties.

Thursday's schedule featured multiple AFL-CIO representatives including the Civil Rights Department's Director, Donald Slaiman, and Southern Director, Al Kehrer, as well as Norman Hill. Cleveland Robinson, the Secretary-Treasurer of District 65 of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union joined the AFL-CIO representatives to lead workshops on how to address the labor issues in the South.<sup>119</sup> Later in the day, LeRoy Clark of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund led a plenary session on Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which banned discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, and national origin in employment.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> SCOPE press kit, 1965, Subseries 6.2, Box: 359, Folder: 3. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library.

<sup>120</sup> SCOPE press kit, 1965, Subseries 6.2, Box: 359, Folder: 3. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library; "Protections against Discrimination and Other Prohibited Practices," Federal Trade Commission, accessed September 18, 2023, <https://www.ftc.gov/policy-notice/no-fear-act/protections-against-discrimination>.

The presence of labor interests confused reporters at the conference about what the volunteers' responsibilities would be during the ten weeks. At a press conference during the orientation, a reporter asked whether the SCOPE volunteers would be involved in any unionization efforts or labor strikes to which King clarified that while volunteers may be asked for assistance with labor organizing issues should they be pertinent to the local communities' needs, their focus would remain on voter registration, political education, and community organization.<sup>121</sup> In this way, the breadth of the orientation's program, while an almost unmatched collaboration of exceptionally influential voices on a range of issues, was not always clearly indicative of what was expected of the volunteers. Rather, at times it reflected SCLC's own growing umbrella of domestic policy issues.

Highlights of the last two days included speeches from Dr. John Morsell, the Assistant Executive Director of the NAACP, and final preparations, but no speech spoke more candidly about the potential violence and hostility the volunteers would face than Charles Morgan's, the Southern Director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Morgan warned that the volunteers were "entering in a lonely place" where they were "like corn in a court where judges are chickens."<sup>122</sup> The Southern struggle for civil rights was "not a struggle for law and order. [It was] a struggle of the law against the order, a very harsh, old order and very new law."<sup>123</sup> In an interview with a student representative of Stanford University's KZSU radio station, an Amherst student specifically noted that Morgan's speech had scared a number of the volunteers but said it was needed.<sup>124</sup> The student said they sensed many of the volunteers were confident they would

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<sup>121</sup> "SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation," KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), transcript page 93.

<sup>122</sup> "SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation" KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), page 139.

<sup>123</sup> "SCOPE (SCLC) Orientation" KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), 139.

<sup>124</sup> Summer Conference on Community Organizing and Political Education Project (SCOPE), interviews with orientation attendees in Atlanta, 1965 (original: open reel tape), Subseries 19.2, Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, 38:35.

not get hurt that summer. “Whether it is sheer stupidity or absolute bravery I don’t know but I think there is a romanticism to Alabama that Mississippi had last summer,” observed the volunteer.<sup>125</sup> Morgan’s specific focus on the racial animus from white segregationists in Alabama helped deconstruct this “romanticism” and convey the real potential for fatalities.

With nearly a week of academic, strategic, and planning sessions behind them, the volunteers left Atlanta throughout the day on June 19 to spread out across dozens of Southern counties in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and Alabama. Mixed feelings of nervousness, excitement, fear, and anticipation washed over the volunteers. For some, the orientation was their first meaningful interaction with Black people. For others, the sessions challenged them to see the connection between civil rights and labor issues, foreign policy, and poverty in ways they had not before. Despite their varied backgrounds, ideologies, and experiences, all of the volunteers were embarking on what became a transformational summer in their lives.

Entering new counties, meeting new people, and doing the groundwork of local civil rights movements, the volunteers got a perspective on the movement that most white liberals (especially outside the South) never did. The summer ahead shattered some volunteers’ preconceived notions of how the Civil Rights Movement worked and demystified race relations in the American South. Witnessing violence, intimidation, success, and Black agency, the summer frustrated some, galvanized some, and did both to others. Volunteers sometimes struggled to trust local leaders’ vision and in many cases were at the center of tensions between local and national movement priorities. Their presence often provoked violent backlash from

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<sup>125</sup> Summer Conference on Community Organizing and Political Education Project (SCOPE), interviews with orientation attendees in Atlanta, 1965 (original: open reel tape), Subseries 19.2, Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, 43:40-43:52.

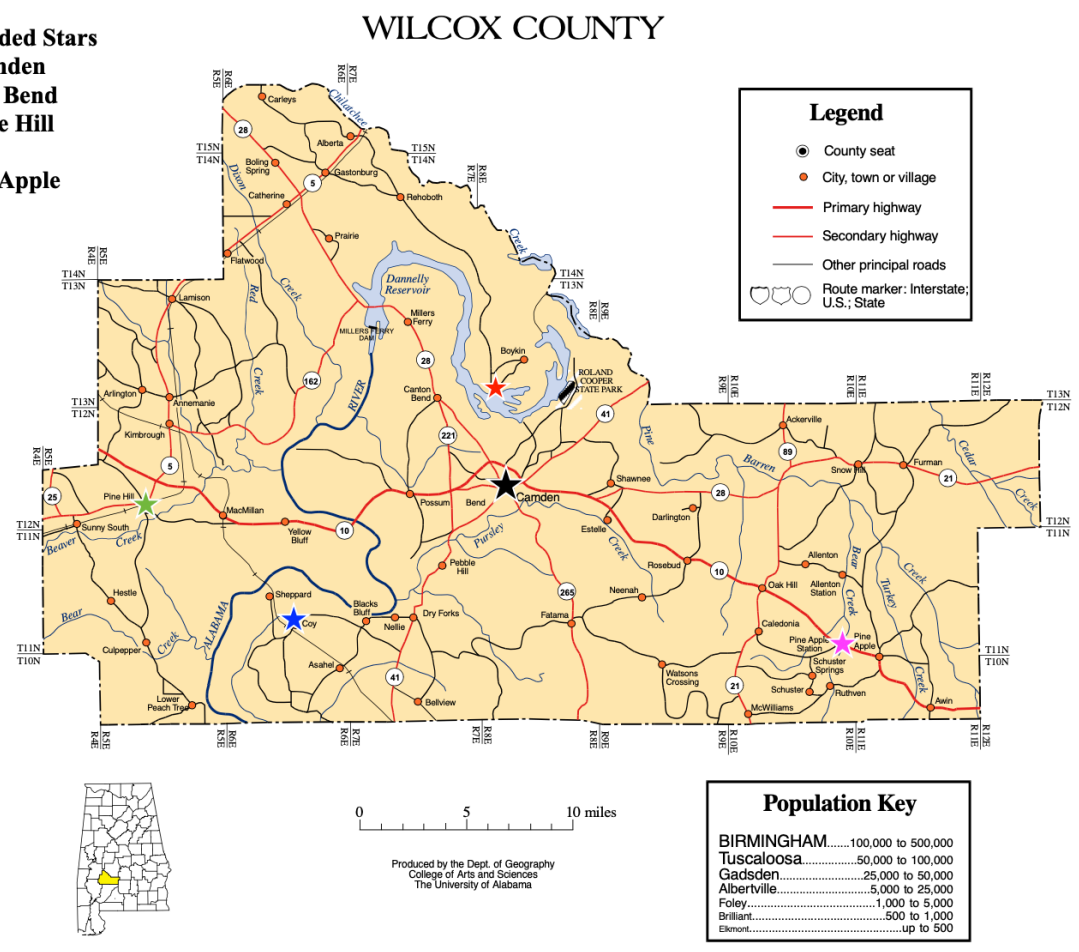


local white people and endangered local allies. SCOPE volunteers were neither universally changemakers nor entirely detrimental to local objectives. Instead, the SCOPE project provides a perspective on the dynamic interplay between local civil rights movements and national organizations and legal developments in 1965. SCOPE illustrates the varied progress in Southern counties and demonstrates the primacy of local actors. SCOPE county projects succeeded in so far as they bolstered local movements.

The SCOPE project both relied on and helped enact change from the federal government that was instrumental in actualizing citizenship rights for many Black Americans. Spinning off into school integration in addition to the project's focus on voting, SCOPE projects amplified local issues and voices to create change while navigating competing goals and tactics between the national SCLC and the local goals of residents and leaders. SCOPE was a coming-together of the local and national arms of the broader Civil Rights Movement that summer. Using outsider white students, SCOPE infused local Southern civil rights movements with a national character as the volunteers' academic and hometown communities eagerly awaited updates from the South. The summer also revealed the pitfalls of depending on federal intervention and the decisive role of local actors. Predicated on early passage of the VRA, SCOPE projects were left without federal backup until the final weeks of the project. The summer challenged volunteers and local leaders to create a symbiotic synthesis between competing goals and strategies of mobilization in the fight for Black citizenship rights.

# Map of Wilcox County, Alabama

**Key for Added Stars**  
**Black:** Camden  
**Red:** Gee's Bend  
**Green:** Pine Hill  
**Blue:** Coy  
**Pink:** Pine Apple



Stars have been added to denote areas of particular relevance to SCOPE.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>126</sup> “Wilcox County,” Department of Geography at The University of Alabama, <https://alabamamaps.ua.edu/contemporarymaps/alabama/counties/wilcox.html>.

## Chapter 2: “Bad Wilcox”: Voter Registration and White Resistance in Alabama

### Boots and Bullets

A rain of bullets welcomed the SCOPE volunteers to Wilcox County, Alabama on their first night. After driving for hours, crowded together in large vans, over a dozen SCOPE volunteers stopped to sleep at Antioch Baptist Church. While some volunteers got back on the road the next morning to fan out across Alabama, Wilcox County was a handful of volunteers’ final destination for the summer including nineteen-year-old Joyce Brians. She spent her first night crouched on a pew in the chapel with fellow volunteers as SCLC staff kept watch. The sound of the ground crunching underneath Ku Klux Klansmen boots kept the volunteers awake into the early hours. Here was the brutality and danger that SCLC leaders had warned them about at orientation. For SCOPE volunteers such as Brians who had little experience with Southern racism, the display was shocking. Bob Block, a white college student who had been working with SCLC in Wilcox County since his entry into the Civil Rights Movement at the Selma to Montgomery march, ensured Brians that the bullets were more for intimidation than a legitimate attempt on their lives. Squeezed on the same pew as Brians, Block looked at her in the dark chapel and said, “Welcome to Wilcox county.”<sup>127</sup>

While Brians had been exposed to political activism as a child, SCOPE was her entrance into the Civil Rights Movement. Originally from Penngrove, California and born to a Quaker family, Brians went to her first protest when she was seven. Her aunt Ruth was politically active and took her to multiple peace protests as a child.<sup>128</sup> Watching the footage of Bloody Sunday and Martin Luther King Jr.’s impassioned speech following the brutality motivated Brians to engage

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<sup>127</sup> Maria Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2014), 7. A few years after SCOPE, Joyce Brians changed her name to Maria Gitin. *This Bright Light of Ours* is her memoir.

<sup>128</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 9, 10.

directly and fully in the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>129</sup> King's March 8 speech was Brians' first-time seeing King on television and his powerful oratory gripped her immediately. At the time, she felt as though "he pointed his finger directly" at her and called her to action.<sup>130</sup>



**Joyce Brians, 1965.**<sup>131</sup>

In the following weeks, Brians rushed to join the Friends of SNCC chapter at San Francisco State. Through these SNCC connections, Brians learned about the SCOPE project and eagerly joined.<sup>132</sup> A little over two months later, Brians got in a van with other SCOPE volunteers from San Francisco and made the three-day-straight drive to Atlanta for orientation. At the SCOPE orientation, Brians was assigned to Wilcox County, Alabama. Unlike some

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<sup>129</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 8.

<sup>130</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 8.

<sup>131</sup> Maria Gitin, "Happy 4<sup>th</sup> of July: 1965" Wilcox County Freedom Fighters: Civil rights and voting rights in Wilcox County, Alabama in 1965, <https://thislittlelight1965.com/2015/07/01/happy-4th-of-july-1965/>.

<sup>132</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 22.

county projects where one university's SCOPE chapter sent all or a majority of volunteers in a county, Briens was the only San Francisco State student she knew involved in SCOPE. In the van that departed Atlanta on Saturday June 19, Briens met many of the people for the first time that she relied on for security and support that summer.

Briens' experience with SCOPE put her at the intersection between the local civil rights movement in Wilcox County and the national Civil Rights Movement as defined by major legislative victories such as the VRA and the role of organizations such as SCLC and SNCC. As a representative of SCLC, Briens was acutely aware of the organization's desire to stay away from protests and focus on voter registration work. At the same time, she and the other volunteers were told at the Atlanta orientation to do what local leaders told them that summer. She was sent South to work not just with but at the discretion of local people. Not long into the summer, local desires to protest exposed the underlying tension between SCLC and local objectives. Briens and the other Wilcox SCOPE volunteers navigated violent attacks from local white people, battled the grueling conditions of living on subsistence in the Alabama summer, and attempted to earn the trust and acceptance of local people all while balancing their simultaneous and sometimes competing allegiances to SCLC and the Wilcox Black freedom struggle.

### **Why Wilcox?**

Hosea Williams included Wilcox County in SCOPE because of its dismal Black voter registration statistics. Using voter registration numbers, Williams prioritized counties with the greatest need for assistance by identifying those with the lowest Black voter registration. Relying on 1960 census data, Williams broke down voter registration statistics in each prospective county

by the number of eligible voters, number of registered voters, and the percentage registered. Williams split all three categories by race.<sup>133</sup> In Wilcox county, Williams identified 2,974 white registered voters despite the county's white voting age population being 2,624 – putting white registration at 113%.<sup>134</sup> In contrast, just eight of the county's 6,085 eligible Black voters were registered according to Williams – a dismal 0.09%.<sup>135</sup> Newspapers and government statistics identified zero registered Black voters. This stark disparity and the willingness of local white election officials to maintain a statistically impossibly high rate of white registration through keeping deceased white people on the records made Wilcox a prime candidate for SCOPE.

In addition to Black residents being denied the right to vote, Wilcox had an established civil rights activism base that appealed to Williams in selecting the county for SCOPE. In April 1935, the NAACP had intervened in a property dispute in Wilcox on behalf of a Black resident named Milo Fairly to coordinate outside payment of debts on his house.<sup>136</sup> Twenty years later, the NAACP was the target of Alabama officials' legislative proposals. A bill for Wilcox County sought to eliminate the NAACP by imposing a "\$200 license fee, a \$50 license fee for each solicitor and an additional \$5 for each members signed up" for any organization soliciting in the county.<sup>137</sup> Alabama Governor Jim Folsom vetoed the bill, but the state legislature voted to

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<sup>133</sup> Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) Program, 1965, 12, Box: 621, Folder: 18. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, untitled document with voting statistics.

<sup>134</sup> Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) Program, 1965, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, untitled document with voting statistics.

<sup>135</sup> Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) Program, 1965, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, untitled document with voting statistics; Some reports from the time say that no Black people had voted in Wilcox since Reconstruction. For the sake of showing Williams' reasoning, I include his figure. Whether eight or zero, the vast majority of Black residents in Wilcox were excluded from voting.

<sup>136</sup> "Mobile, Alabama branch operations, March-April 1935," Mar 01, 1935 - Apr 01, 1935, Papers of the NAACP, Part 12: Selected Branch Files, 1913-1939, Series A: The South, Group I, Series G, Branch File, Folder 001423-003-0646, *NAACP Papers: Branch Department, Branch Files, and Youth Department Files*, Library of Congress, 2014, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001423-003-0646&accountid=14816>, 24.

<sup>137</sup> Homer Bigart, "Folsom Fights White Supremacy Measures," *The Washington Post*, September 21, 1955, <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/folsom-fights-white-supremacy-measures/docview/148581400/se-2>.

override the executive action.<sup>138</sup> At the time, the NAACP had “no one in Wilcox County” working on the ground, but the move by state legislators to make an NAACP presence unbearably expensive indicates their intention to stifle Black residents’ willingness to publicly fight for civil rights.<sup>139</sup>

Despite deliberate repression of movement organizing, a majority-Black enclave and former plantation within Wilcox County, called Gee’s Bend, became a center for Black activism by the 1960s. Gee’s Bend sits along a long bend in the Alabama River, directly across from Camden, the county seat of Wilcox. Three years before SCOPE, in 1962, white Wilcox officials cut off ferry service to Gee’s Bend in response to increasing activism around Black voting rights.<sup>140</sup> Unable to quell the protests by Gee’s Bend residents, officials shut down the ferry. While they publicly attributed the closure to the ferry’s declining quality, local Black residents were convinced it was to prevent residents from entering Camden to protest. Without the ferry, Gee’s Bend residents had to drive nearly an hour around the bend to cross the river and make it to Camden. At the time, Gee’s Bend had no hospital, doctors, or job opportunities and few Gee’s Bend residents owned cars.<sup>141</sup> The fight to revive the ferry was a battle for sustenance and against isolation for the enclave’s residents.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> “Southeast Regional Office reports, 1955,” Jan 01, 1955 - Dec 01, 1955, Papers of the NAACP, Part 25: Branch Department Files, Series A: Regional Files and Special Reports, 1941-1955, Group II, Series C, Branch Department Files, Regional Offices, Folder 001489-005-0438, *NAACP Papers: Branch Department, Branch Files, and Youth Department Files*, Library of Congress, 2014, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001489-005-0438&accountid=14816>, 77.

<sup>139</sup>“Southeast Regional Office reports, 1955,” *NAACP Papers: Branch Department, Branch Files, and Youth Department Files*, 77.

<sup>140</sup>Joel Bernstein, *The Ferry: A Civil Rights Story*, Vimeo (Retro Report - PBS, 2015), <https://vimeo.com/121596874>.

<sup>141</sup> Bernstein, *The Ferry*.

<sup>142</sup> The ferry between Gee’s Bend and Camden was not restored until 2006. Hollis Curl, the owner of a local newspaper and, for most of his life, an ardent segregationist, played a crucial in lobbying efforts to get the ferry back. In this latter part of his life, Curl said he realized how wrong he had been to support segregation and helped the charge to restore the ferry in an attempt to right the errors of his past. The new ferry was a major upgrade from the wooden plank of the 1960s but the lasting effects of Gee’s Bend’s exclusion from civic, political, and economic life in Wilcox are still felt today through widespread poverty. See: Clyde Haberman, “Martin Luther King’s Call for

In 1965, King visited Gee's Bend and encouraged the residents to go down to Camden and register to vote. On that rainy night in February, King addressed the crowd saying, "I come over here to Gee's Bend to tell you: you are somebody."<sup>143</sup> Reminding the crowd that they were "as good as any white person," King sought to inspire and invigorate the community that had been cut off from life in Camden. The removal of the ferry made the 600—yard width of the Alabama River a near insurmountable barrier to civic and economic citizenship for the people of Gee's Bend.<sup>144</sup>

Located roughly 40 miles from Selma, many Black Wilcox youth entered civil rights activism through demonstrating there as opposed to back in Wilcox. In January of 1965, Reverend Daniel Harrell and local leader Ethel Brooks recruited youth from Camden Academy, an all-Black school in Wilcox, to join a children's rally for Black voting rights in Selma.<sup>145</sup> In March of the same year, Brooks drove students to attend what later became known as the "Bloody Sunday" march.<sup>146</sup> Energized by engagement in Selma demonstrations, the students organized their own school walk-outs in the following months which "attracted both seasoned and novice civil rights workers from Selma and beyond" including Reverend Harrell and the other SCOPE project leader, Major Johns.<sup>147</sup> While Wilcox's own civil rights movement was constrained by severe repression, many Wilcox residents got experience in neighboring counties that they brought back to Wilcox. Previously contained to the county's corner of Alabama,

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Voting Rights Inspired Isolated Hamlet," *The New York Times*, March 9, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/09/us/gees-bend-alabama-martin-luther-king-voting-rights-1965.html#:~:text=Dr.,that%20would%20last%20for%20decades.&text=To%20find%20Gee's%20Bend%20on,35%20miles%20to%20the%20southwest>.

<sup>143</sup> Haberman, "Martin Luther King's Call for Voting Rights Inspired Isolated Hamlet."

<sup>144</sup> Haberman, "Martin Luther King's Call for Voting Rights Inspired Isolated Hamlet."

<sup>145</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 52.

<sup>146</sup> Maria Gitin, "Story from Wilcox County, AL," Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, 2010, [https://www.crmvet.org/nars/stor/s\\_maria.htm](https://www.crmvet.org/nars/stor/s_maria.htm).

<sup>147</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 53.



SCOPE's June arrival marked the first time a truly outsider and predominantly white group of civil rights organizers entered the county.



**Reverend Harrell outside of Antioch Baptist Church<sup>148</sup>**

In February of 1965, talks began about establishing a biracial committee in Wilcox to discuss and mediate the county's race relations. Leaders in both the Black and white communities expressed support for the measure but held only two meetings before the committee felt apart.<sup>149</sup> The main issue in front of the committee was the character witness rule for voting. Wilcox voting rules required people registering to vote to provide a statement by a registered voter that vouched for their character and confirmed their residency. This rule deliberately prevented Black voters from registration because their historic and continued exclusion made it

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<sup>148</sup> "Civil Rights Movement Photographs: SCOPE Project 1965," Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, [https://www.crmvet.org/images/imgscope.htm#scope\\_al](https://www.crmvet.org/images/imgscope.htm#scope_al).

<sup>149</sup> David M. Gordon, "Attempts in Camden Stalled by Conflicts," *The Southern Courier*, July 30, 1965. <http://www.southerncourier.org/archives.html> (accessed October 23, 2023).

difficult to find a Black registered voter who could vouch for others. White people never vouched for Black voters looking to register. Despite initial agreement from the white members of the biracial committee to eliminate the voucher requirement, it stayed in place. This caused the Black committee members and community to lose “faith in the sincerity of the whites.”<sup>150</sup>

While the white representatives on the biracial committee failed to uphold their voucher requirement agreement, the United States Court of Appeals Fifth Circuit delivered a massive victory for Black voters in Wilcox in their April 21 decision in *United States v. Logue*. By examining voter registration data from Wilcox County, the court found that 29 out of 29 Black residents who attempted to register between January 1, 1959, to October 17, 1963, were rejected. Most were rejected because they failed to fulfill the voucher requirement.<sup>151</sup> In the same period, 97% of white applicants were successfully registered. Some white applicants admitted they had no knowledge of the voucher requirement or had only marginal familiarity with the person who signed on behalf of their character.<sup>152</sup> On 88% of white applications, a county official or employee signed the character voucher.<sup>153</sup>

Using this evidence of racial discrimination, the Fifth Circuit placed a temporary injunction on the county’s use of the voucher requirement. In its opinion, the Fifth Circuit declared that there was “substantial uncontradicted evidence in the record that the registration officials applied the supporting witness requirement in a discriminatory fashion.”<sup>154</sup> Going further, the decision argued that “the voucher requirement, imposing as it does a heavier burden

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<sup>150</sup> David M. Gordon, “Attempts in Camden Stalled by Conflicts.”

<sup>151</sup> *United States v. Arthur Logue*, 344 F.2d 290, 1965 U.S. App. LEXIS 5832 (United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit April 21, 1965), <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/api/document?collection=cases&id=urn:contentItem:3S4X-0PM0-0039-Y47H-00000-00&context=1516831>.

<sup>152</sup> *United States v. Logue*, 344 F. 2d 290.

<sup>153</sup> *United States v. Logue*, 344 F. 2d 290.

<sup>154</sup> *United States v. Logue*, 344 F. 2d 290.

on Negro than white applications, is inherently discriminatory as applied in a county such as Wilcox.”<sup>155</sup> This language tacitly invited a larger legal challenge to voucher requirements as a whole.<sup>156</sup> Though poll taxes and literacy tests remained on the books until the passage of the VRA later in the summer, the injunction against the voucher requirement was a temporary victory for Black residents in Wilcox.

When the SCOPE volunteers arrived in June, they entered a county with a long history of effective and determined Black leadership and civil rights demonstrations. Inexperienced and new to the South, the volunteers relied on the guidance and advice of local leaders such as Thomas Threadgill and Ethel Brooks, and SCLC field staff including Major Johns and Reverend Harrell who had been in Wilcox for months. The volunteers slowly learned the specific dynamics, people, and methods of the Wilcox Black freedom struggle through each interaction they had that summer. While the Atlanta orientation gave them a sense of national developments and the applications of federal law, it did not prepare them for the unique circumstances they encountered in Wilcox. The simultaneous fear, violence, courage and defiance that defined daily life for Black residents was something the white volunteers could only learn through experience. Violence became a reality through their experiences hiding from Klan bullets. Abuses of power by local law enforcement became clear in their witness to Black voters’ rejection and their own wrongful arrests.

### **Project Start / Resistance from White Community**

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<sup>155</sup> United States v. Logue, 344 F. 2d 290.

<sup>156</sup> United States v. Logue, 344 F. 2d 290.

In the early weeks of the project, Brians felt as though Wilcox was “a ticking time bomb that could blow up at any moment.”<sup>157</sup> Upon their arrival, Reverend Harrell, the SCLC SCOPE field director in Wilcox, described to the volunteers the harsh segregation and near total disenfranchisement of Black citizens that characterized Wilcox’s race relations. In the five years since the census data Williams used to track voter registration statistics, Black registration in Wilcox grew from eight people to 49, keeping the fraction of registered Black voters below 1% of those eligible.<sup>158</sup> Despite the tiny growth in registration, no Black residents had voted in roughly 80 years due to persistent intimidation and threats from local white people.

The volunteers spent their first night in Antioch Baptist Church because the local Black resident who previously agreed to host them was convinced against it during a surprise visit from the county Sheriff, Lummie Jenkins, earlier in the day.<sup>159</sup> Jenkins, in his 25<sup>th</sup> year of being sheriff, was an enduring symbol of the intractable racism in the white Wilcox power structure. Jenkins was vocal about his family’s roots in Wilcox espousing pride in his great grandfather’s homestead deed signed by President Andrew Jackson and his family’s slave-owning past in the county.<sup>160</sup> Rather than shameful moments of displacing Indigenous people and enslaving Black people, Jenkins spun these facts as proof of his claim to Wilcox and therefore power as sheriff. Throughout the summer, Jenkins remained an ardent opponent of the SCOPE volunteers and their local allies.

The morning of June 20, Brians got ready in the church bathroom for her first full day in Wilcox and stepped into the scorching Alabama heat to welcome Antioch parishioners to the

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<sup>157</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 74.

<sup>158</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 52.

<sup>159</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 57.

<sup>160</sup> Gene Roberts, “A Remarkable Thing Is Happening in Wilcox County, Ala.: A year ago it had no Negro voter. Today a 30-year-old Negro is running for sheriff—and could win,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 1966, 249, <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/remarkable-thing-is-happening-wilcox-county-ala/docview/117110225/se-2?accountid=14816>.

Sunday morning service.<sup>161</sup> In a letter home to her family, Brians said that when she tried to convince congregation members at the service to canvas for voters with her, the children told her their parents would not register because “they just don’t care anymore.”<sup>162</sup> With years of unsuccessful voter registration drives, some Wilcox residents questioned whether registration was worth it given the severe, unrelenting deprivation of Black citizenship rights and the violent enforcement of strict segregation. This early note from Brians both underestimated the determination of Black residents to overcome the white power structure and the level of threat they faced.

That same night, the Wilcox SCOPE project held its first mass meeting at a church in Coy, Alabama.<sup>163</sup> The meeting featured hour-long speeches from Reverend Harrell and Major Johns about the importance of voting. Brians wrote home that “the people really responded” and that she found hope in “these people who live in the midst of hatred and degradation.”<sup>164</sup> While she went to bed anxious about where the volunteers would find stable housing in the community and exhausted from the sleepless night before, Brians had a sense of optimism about the summer ahead.

Within the first week, tensions flared, and local law enforcement officials leveled threats against those in Wilcox who refused to banish the SCOPE workers. In the short time that the volunteers had been in the county, Bob & Mae’s Kwik Sandwich Shop became “the favorite eating place for civil rights workers” due in part to its close proximity to the county’s SCOPE headquarters.<sup>165</sup> Owned and operated by a Black husband and wife, the Reynolds’, the shop

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<sup>161</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 58.

<sup>162</sup> Maria Gitin, “Letter From Movement Boot Camp,” Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://www.crmvet.org/nars/gitin.htm>.

<sup>163</sup> Gitin, “Letter From Movement Boot Camp.”

<sup>164</sup> Gitin, “Letter From Movement Boot Camp.”

<sup>165</sup> David M. Gordon, “Threats Don’t Stop Camden Pair From Serving Whites in Café,” *The Southern Courier*, July 23, 1965. <http://www.southerncourier.org/archives.html> (accessed October 23, 2023).

served patrons of both races. On Sunday June 27, Sheriff Jenkins visited the Reynolds' shop and advised them that it would be "smart" to refuse the white SCOPE workers service moving forward.<sup>166</sup> Sheriff Jenkins told Mr. Reynolds about an "angry mob" that would come destroy the establishment if he did not comply.<sup>167</sup>

Despite the Sheriff's veiled threat, the Reynolds' remained steadfast in their commitment to integration in their sandwich shop. The day after the Sheriff's visit, the Reynolds closed the shop and met with the SCOPE workers. They urged them "to slow down a little" to "avoid causing any trouble by coming there in large groups."<sup>168</sup> The shop reopened the next day, with an assurance from the SCOPE volunteers that they would let the situation calm down by avoiding the café.<sup>169</sup> The shop continued to serve SCOPE workers when they came for the rest of the summer and Sheriff Jenkins never came back. In July, Mr. Reynolds told *The Southern Courier* he "would rather have given the shop to the workers and let them run it than to have to close the door in their faces."<sup>170</sup> The Reynolds' small act of refusal in the face of segregationist authorities was an important subversion of the white supremacy that controlled public life in Wilcox.

On Monday, June 28, the day after the Sheriff's visit to Bob & Mae's Kwik Sandwich Shop, Camden Mayor, F.R. Albritton, raided Antioch Baptist Church with armed guards and policemen and arrested 18 people including Joyce Brians, Major Johns, and a number of other SCOPE workers.<sup>171</sup> A "small, whitewashed clapboard building with simple white and blue frosted glass windows," Antioch Baptist Church was the "rallying ground" for the Wilcox civil rights

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<sup>166</sup> John Worcester to Junius Griffin, July 6, 1965, from Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement *Civil Rights Movement Letters & Field Reports, SCLC's SCOPE Projects, 1965*, [https://www.crmvet.org/docs/6507\\_scope\\_wilcox-co.pdf](https://www.crmvet.org/docs/6507_scope_wilcox-co.pdf), 2.

<sup>167</sup> Gordon, "Threats Don't Stop Camden Pair From Serving Whites in Café."

<sup>168</sup> Gordon, "Threats Don't Stop Camden Pair From Serving Whites in Café."

<sup>169</sup> John Worcester to Junius Griffin, July 6, 1965, 2.

<sup>170</sup> Gordon, "Threats Don't Stop Camden Pair From Serving Whites in Café."

<sup>171</sup> John Worcester to Junius Griffin, July 6, 1965, 1.

movement and became a central base for SCOPE organizing and planning since the volunteers' emergency stay there that first night.<sup>172</sup> This also made the church a target for angry white locals who opposed SCOPE's presence and goals. According to a SCLC field report by Reverend John Worcester, the Director of Public Relations for SCOPE in Wilcox, the arrested people were charged with "possession and distribution of boycott materials" with bail set at \$1,000 each.<sup>173</sup>

A white male SCOPE volunteer, Mike Farley, was beaten badly by his cellmate that night. A few cells down, Brians heard Farley's screams as he pleaded for help that did not come. A second round of beatings came later in the night. Farley's yells and the sounds of the violence prompted Brians and the other women in her cell to bang on their walls and door as loud as possible to attract the attention of the guards.<sup>174</sup> The beating continued for minutes before an officer came. Brians was not sure whether the guard actually intervened.<sup>175</sup>

Brians was among the group of people released the next day on Tuesday, June 29 "due to insufficient evidence."<sup>176</sup> With a number of SCOPE volunteers back in the community, that night, five white men reportedly broke into Antioch Baptist Church and attempted to beat eight local Black youth who were staying overnight in the church. After "breaking down the inside door to the meeting hall" the intruders fired shotguns and attacked.<sup>177</sup> A bullet hole ripped through the church's exterior. Six of the youth were able to escape.<sup>178</sup> Following the beating, the two youth unable to escape the attack were checked into local hospitals and treated for serious head and chest injuries.<sup>179</sup> The attack was a reminder to the Black community of Wilcox and

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<sup>172</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 59.

<sup>173</sup> John Worcester to Junius Griffin, July 6, 1965, 1.

<sup>174</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 114.

<sup>175</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 114.

<sup>176</sup> John Worcester to Junius Griffin, July 6, 1965, 3.

<sup>177</sup> John Worcester to Junius Griffin, July 6, 1965, 2.

<sup>178</sup> John Worcester to Junius Griffin, July 6, 1965, 2.

<sup>179</sup> John Worcester to Junius Griffin, July 6, 1965, 2.

Antioch Baptist Church that collaborating with SCOPE volunteers came with violent consequences.



**Bullet hole left in Antioch Baptist Church after the June 29<sup>th</sup> attack by angry white people.<sup>180</sup>**

On July 1, Sheriff Jenkins stormed into Antioch Baptist Church demanding everyone leave the building. Jenkins marched the people into the blazing Alabama sun and padlocked the doors shut at 3:20pm.<sup>181</sup> To the media, Jenkins claimed that the church caused “too much disturbance” and claimed that a leader at the church opposed the building’s use for civil rights organizing.<sup>182</sup> Nathaniel Hill, the chairman of the Board of Deacons at Antioch Church, told John Worcester that “at no time has he or any other member of the Board asked, or signed an order, to have the church closed to SCOPE use.”<sup>183</sup> At a meeting two weeks later, the church voted unanimously to

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<sup>180</sup> “Civil Rights Movement Photographs: SCOPE Project 1965,” Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, [https://www.crmvet.org/images/imgscope.htm#scope\\_al](https://www.crmvet.org/images/imgscope.htm#scope_al).

<sup>181</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 118; John Worcester to Junius Griffin, July 6, 1965, 2.

<sup>182</sup> “Jul. 1, 1965: Alabama Sheriff Padlocks Black Church to Prevent Discussion of Civil Rights,” Equal Justice Initiative, accessed October 23, 2023, <https://calendar.eji.org/racial-injustice/jul/01>.

<sup>183</sup> John Worcester to Junius Griffin, July 6, 1965, 2.



keep its doors open to SCOPE workers and efforts for voter registration.<sup>184</sup> In response to Sheriff Jenkin's repeated abuses of the church and its congregation, Antioch Baptist Church was steadfast in its support for the movement and SCOPE.

Outside of violent confrontations, the SCOPE workers and local Black workers faced routine intimidation and threats from local white people. From circling the Camden Academy dorms where some of the SCOPE workers stayed, to loitering on the dorm's porch, segregationists made their presence and power known in ways that instilled fear in the volunteers' daily life.<sup>185</sup> When canvassing, Brians and fellow SCOPE workers deliberately avoided confrontation with white locals if possible. They were specifically instructed by SCLC to leave at the sight of known Klansmen because they were there to register people, not to take on segregationists.<sup>186</sup> For Brians, this terror was alien. She recalled thinking that "this could not be the United States. Klan members went to their jobs or worked their farms by day, terrorized movement folks by night, and went to church on Sundays."<sup>187</sup> Additional frustration arose from the fact that law enforcement encouraged the intimidation. Brians knew they "couldn't call the police because they were the very people authorizing" the "terror."<sup>188</sup>

By Friday July 2, everyone who was arrested on June 28 had been released in exchange for Reverend Harrell pleading guilty and paying all of their fines.<sup>189</sup> SCOPE volunteers went back to canvassing and organizing efforts. Brians described the experience as a "slow process of individual recruitment of new voters in an area where homes were often miles apart."<sup>190</sup> One or

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<sup>184</sup> "Jul. 1, 1965: Alabama Sheriff Padlocks Black Church to Prevent Discussion of Civil Rights," Equal Justice Initiative.

<sup>185</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 67.

<sup>186</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 72.

<sup>187</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 70.

<sup>188</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 118.

<sup>189</sup> John Worcester to Junius Griffin, July 6, 1965, 1.

<sup>190</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 70.

two SCOPE workers were paired with a local teenager to do canvassing work throughout the ten weeks.<sup>191</sup> The local youth helped acquaint SCOPE workers to the different communities within the county and introduced them to families and residents they knew.

When canvassing, SCOPE workers faced aggression from local white people. Brians worked primarily in Arlington, Coy, Boiling Springs, and Gee's Bend.<sup>192</sup> She did some canvassing in Wilson's Quarter and Sawmill Quarter but found that SCOPE workers were "arrested every time" they tried to canvas there.<sup>193</sup> Brians was chased off the road in Arlington after being spotted with another SCOPE worker, a local Black teenager named Robert Powell, and a Black girl.<sup>194</sup> A white man in a pickup truck almost ran the group over but they ducked into the ditch along the side of the road and fled on foot into the woods for protection.<sup>195</sup> It took the group over an hour to find a Black business nearby that would allow Robert Powell into the store to phone leaders back at Camden Academy.<sup>196</sup> It was clear to Brians in the letter she wrote home about the incident that the white men had scared the local people into refusing to help the SCOPE workers get back to safety.

Despite their best efforts and without VRA protections, registration grew at a slow rate. Brians felt that local people were waiting for the VRA to pass and federal registrars to be sent before attempting registration.<sup>197</sup> The fear of economic retaliation, violence, and bringing harm to family members for trying to register bred a level of resistance that SCOPE volunteers could not overcome. With the VRA on the horizon, some Black residents felt it was safer to wait it out.

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<sup>191</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 86.

<sup>192</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 59.

<sup>193</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 72.

<sup>194</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 126.

<sup>195</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 126.

<sup>196</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 126.

<sup>197</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 72.

Following 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend, Brians moved out of the Camden Academy dormitories where she often shared a bed with Bob Block, the volunteer she shared a pew with on the first night.<sup>198</sup> In a letter to her family, Brians said it was “too dangerous to be in Camden” so for the next few weeks she stayed in local families’ homes.<sup>199</sup> Developing strong personal relationships with local families strengthened her commitment to the project and inspired her to persist through difficult conditions. For Brians, Coy became a favorite canvassing section because Ethel Brooks and her family lived there.<sup>200</sup>



**Ethel Brooks**<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Brians and Block developed a romantic relationship over the summer and discussed marriage. The relationship was forbidden by SCOPE rules and local project leaders warned the pair repeatedly about the detriment the relationship could have on the community and their work. Brians and Block nevertheless resisted the orders that they stop seeing each other.

<sup>199</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 125.

<sup>200</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 98.

<sup>201</sup> “Ethel Lenora Brooks: SCLC, SCOPE field staff and Wilcox Progressive Civic League (1941-1985),” Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, <https://www.crmvet.org/mem/brookse.htm>.

Ethel Brooks was a Wilcox native who coordinated much of the SCOPE volunteers' work in the county that summer. At twenty-four, Brooks donned a "huge grin" and was in Brians' view "one of the most active, progressive, and exciting adults" in Wilcox.<sup>202</sup> As demonstrated by the orientation program, Black women were largely excluded from formal leadership positions in the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>203</sup> Like many other Black women, Brooks asserted herself as a fierce leader and community organizer despite the social restrictions that came with her gender. For SCOPE, Brooks was an essential connection between the inexperienced white volunteers and the Black communities in Wilcox. Years before the volunteers arrived, Brooks was coordinating recruitment to bolster marches in Selma and getting arrested for refusing to comply with the white supremacist power structure.

In the Pine Apple section of Wilcox, Mrs. Crawford cooked dinner for any volunteer who was at her house around dinner time. While Mrs. Crawford was the "glue" of her household, she was also a major force that kept the SCOPE workers alive and fed that summer.<sup>204</sup> Many of the workers called her "Mom Crawford" because of her support and "loving scrutiny."<sup>205</sup> In the Boiling Springs section, a small community of roughly 50 families an hour northwest of Camden, Mrs. Robinson hosted Brians when it was no longer safe to stay at Camden Academy.<sup>206</sup> In her time with the Robinson family, Mrs. Robinson kept Brians fed and clothed.

All over the county, Black women played instrumental roles in the volunteers' experience that summer. When volunteers stayed with local families, the mother of the household was

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<sup>202</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 98.

<sup>203</sup> For more information about Black women's exclusion from leadership positions but the essential role that they played in the movement through "intermediate" leadership positions see: Belinda Robnett, "African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership, and Micromobilization," *American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 6 (1996): 1662, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2782115>

<sup>204</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 91.

<sup>205</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 90.

<sup>206</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 101.

almost always responsible for feeding them and providing accommodations. While men dominated the SCLC leadership in the county, local Black women were the backbone of the volunteers' daily lives. The women's hospitality made canvassing and organizing possible because it legitimized the volunteers for local people and prevented long dangerous travel by car to and from more central locations. Without the women's constant support, on top of caring for their own children, the volunteers would have likely been forced out of the county due to the persistent Klan violence against the dorms at Camden Academy and Antioch Baptist Church. The women of Wilcox who took in SCOPE workers accepted the risk of violence the white workers' presence brought to their homes.

Despite the proximity that local housing provided, the voter registration canvassing work dragged on slowly. One reason for the stunted pace was SCOPE's explicit orders against volunteers leading demonstrations. In an early summer memo to all SCOPE chapters, Williams forbade organizing and participating in direct action protests unless chapters received approval directly from him. Williams told *The Southern Courier* that SCOPE was not a "demonstrating organization."<sup>207</sup> Rather the workers were instructed to focus on "grass roots organization."<sup>208</sup> When local NAACP and Wilcox County Progressive League leaders approached Wilcox SCOPE leaders in early July with the hopes of turning a boycott of white businesses that refused to employ Black people into a demonstration march in Camden, Williams told Reverend Harrell to focus on voter registration instead of getting involved.<sup>209</sup> This refusal undermined the local leadership's goals by placing SCLC's own theory of how best to produce social change above them.

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<sup>207</sup> Gail Falk, "SCOPE Stages Demonstrations," *The Southern Courier*, August 6, 1965. <http://www.southerncourier.org/archives.html> (accessed October 23, 2023).

<sup>208</sup> Falk, "SCOPE Stages Demonstrations."

<sup>209</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 105.

In a July 12 piece in *The Washington Post* by Paul Good, Brians described the growing tension between SCLC's focus on registration and local leaders' urge to demonstrate. "There's a lot of frustration with SCOPE. They spend too much time talking about organization and there isn't enough action" said Brians. "I mean, the people here want to demonstration [sic] against police brutality but SCOPE leaders hold them back."<sup>210</sup> Good drew a sharp contrast between COFO's Freedom Summer and SCOPE on the issue of protesting noting that SCOPE officials tended to "shy away" from getting involved in direct action campaigns.<sup>211</sup> In Good's view, the volunteers themselves yearned for the "heroism" of more pointed confrontations with civil rights opponents but were "a summer too late."<sup>212</sup>

According to Good, volunteers in the Wilcox SCOPE project disagreed over the level of interaction they were supposed to have with the local white community. To Brians, SCLC's directive was clear that volunteers should avoid confrontation with white people by any means possible.<sup>213</sup> Looking back on the experience, Brians says she "never talked to a local white person all summer except in the course of being arrested."<sup>214</sup> Brians interpreted SCLC's instructions to mean that "integration was not part of the SCOPE mission," rather volunteers should keep their intervention to voter registration and political education.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Paul Good, "600 Students Preach Rights Gospel in South: Little Harassment," *The Washington Post*, Jul 12, 1965. <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/600-students-preach-rights-gospel-south/docview/142610217/se-2>; Brians later regretted giving this quote to Good and was upset to find it was published. In *This Bright Light of Ours* she discusses how being quoted in this way taught her a lesson about how to avoid giving quotes that played into media sensationalizing of disagreements within the movement. Later in July, Randolph Blackwell called Brians personally to express his strong displeasure with the information Brians gave Paul Good (page 145). After the article, Wilcox SCOPE volunteers were told not to speak to Paul Good.

<sup>211</sup> Good, "600 Students Preach Rights Gospel in South: Little Harassment."

<sup>212</sup> Good, "600 Students Preach Rights Gospel in South: Little Harassment."

<sup>213</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours* 72.

<sup>214</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 62.

<sup>215</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 62.

In contrast, Good talked about John Williams, another white SCOPE volunteer in Wilcox from San Francisco, who concentrated his work on changing the minds of local white residents. Spending three to four hours a day talking with white people, Williams saw his role as mediator between the Black and white communities.<sup>216</sup> Since arriving in Wilcox, Williams actively pushed to revive the failed biracial committee from earlier in the year. Williams told *The Southern Courier* that despite having interest from both Black and white residents the committee continued to stall because “none of them is willing to stick his neck out” and get it off the ground.<sup>217</sup> Williams used his inroads with the local white community to find ten people willing to participate on the committee and recommended both sides pick five representatives. Despite his best efforts, the committee ran into conflict again when white members objected to two of the Black representatives on the ground that they “looked on the committee as a place to make specific demands, and not as a source of general understanding.”<sup>218</sup> White people’s willingness to make progress in Wilcox had a cap.

Good’s identification and discussion of this alleged internal conflict over methods and goals drew the ire of those quoted in the article back in Wilcox. In a letter to the editor coauthored by John Williams and Ethel Brooks, they refuted Good’s claims of a “polarity” between those who sought to pull local white people to their side and those who saw them as foes to overcome rather than integrate with.<sup>219</sup> The letter maintained that the Wilcox SCOPE project was united, and that Williams and Brooks held “the greatest respect for the work the other is engaged in for the civil rights movement in Wilcox County.”<sup>220</sup> While the letter to the editor accuses Good of seeking

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<sup>216</sup> Good, “600 Students Preach Rights Gospel in South: Little Harassment.”

<sup>217</sup> Gordon, “Attempts in Camden Stalled by Conflicts.”

<sup>218</sup> Gordon, “Attempts in Camden Stalled by Conflicts.”

<sup>219</sup> John Williams, Ethel Brooks, and John Worcester, Letter to the editor criticizing Paul Good article, July 18, 1965, in Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement *Civil Rights Movement Letters & Field Reports SCLC’s SCOPE Projects, 1965*, [https://www.crmvet.org/lets/650718\\_scope\\_wilcoxco-edlet.pdf](https://www.crmvet.org/lets/650718_scope_wilcoxco-edlet.pdf).

<sup>220</sup> Williams, Brooks, and Worcester, “Letter to the editor criticizing Paul Good article in NY Times.”

“to write an article of literary distinction rather than an article which was factually correct,” the letter’s own distinction between Brooks’ and Williams’ “respective activities” reveals a separation between the methods each person deployed in their daily work.<sup>221</sup> While SCOPE workers did one kind of work – namely voter registration and political education, local Black leaders and residents were engaged in a separate, though also important kind of action through boycotts and attempts at direct action.

The mid-July tensions in Wilcox were twofold. On the one hand, priorities differed between SCLC executives and local leaders. While local leaders pushed for demonstrations and strategic conflict, SCLC urged persistence in the grunt work of door-to-door canvassing. On the other hand, differences within the SCOPE group and between volunteers and local leaders emerged. Some volunteers grew closer to SNCC activists in the area while others focused on winning concessions from white people in Wilcox through making them feel understood. While all sides took their positions in good faith, the lack of absolute deference to local leaders contradicted one of the most central lessons of the six-day Atlanta orientation. Repeated numerous times by SCLC Executive Board members and field staff, the volunteers were to go into communities and be agents for local leaders. SCLC’s own directive against protesting and some volunteers’ own perceptions about how to create change, hindered their ability to truly embrace their role as foot soldiers in the local movement.

### **VRA Brings Changes**

Early August developments in the Voting Rights Act dramatically changed SCLC’s position on SCOPE workers engaging in coordinated direct action campaigns. Since Johnson’s

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<sup>221</sup> Williams, Brooks, and Worcester, “Letter to the editor criticizing Paul Good article in NY Times.”



unequivocal endorsement of a voting rights bill following Bloody Sunday, both the House and the Senate were in action amending and debating Johnson's March 17 proposal. Massachusetts Senator Edward "Ted" Kennedy lobbied hard for a national ban on poll taxes in all elections.<sup>222</sup> Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach opposed the measure fearing it invited constitutional challenges to the legislation that would imperil the bill as a whole.<sup>223</sup> The poll tax ban amendment ultimately failed by a vote of 49 to 45 but a "compromise provision" gave the attorney general the power to review poll tax policies in states where voters reported discrimination.<sup>224</sup> After a 24-day filibuster from the bill's opponents, the Senate passed its version of the VRA on May 25 by a vote of 77-19.<sup>225</sup>

The liberal majority in the House of Representatives pushed for a more comprehensive bill. Since House rules appointed chairmanships of committees on the basis of seniority, and since the segregationist faction of the Democratic Party enjoyed long tenures due to the near complete disenfranchisement of eligible Black voters in their districts, the bill was delayed by tricks from Southern opponents. Democratic Virginia Representative Howard Smith, Chairman of the House Rules Committee, stalled the bill by not bringing it to a vote. To break the log jam of Southern opposition, liberal Democratic Representative Emanuel Celler of New York, threatened to invoke the twenty-one-day rule.<sup>226</sup> First implemented in 1948, but eliminated in 1950, the twenty-one-day rule "permitted a committee chairman or members of a committee whose bill had been held up by the Rules Committee for twenty-one days to force the legislation out of the committee and onto the House floor."<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Julian Zelizer, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2015), 215.

<sup>223</sup> Zelizer, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, 216.

<sup>224</sup> Zelizer, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, 217.

<sup>225</sup> Zelizer, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, 217-8.

<sup>226</sup> Zelizer, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, 218.

<sup>227</sup> Zelizer, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, 171.

The reestablishment of the rule in 1965 was targeted at Representative Smith by liberals who wanted to circumvent his influence on the Rules Committee.<sup>228</sup> The huge increases in liberal representation in the chamber that resulted from the 1964 elections made this measure possible and expedited the voting rights bill. With Cellar's twenty-one-day threat on the table, Smith capitulated to moving the bill to a House floor vote.<sup>229</sup> On July 9, the House passed its version of the bill by an overwhelming majority of 333 to 85.<sup>230</sup>

Since liberals in the House used their majority to include a total poll tax ban in their version, the House and Senate bills had to be reconciled in a joint conference between the chambers. Disagreement over the bills' provisions regarding poll taxes dominated the conference's late July discussion.<sup>231</sup> Attorney General Katzenbach and President Johnson turned to King as the decisive voice in breaking the stalemate. Katzenbach offered a compromise provision that would eliminate the House's ban on poll taxes and replace it with a statement about the unconstitutionality of poll taxes and instruct the Department of Justice to initiate suits against states that still used them.<sup>232</sup> Eager to get the bill passed, King issued a statement to quell liberal objections to watering down the bill. While King shared their disappointment about the erasure of the poll tax ban, he assured legislators he was "confident that the poll tax provision of the bill – with vigorous action by the Attorney General – will operate finally to bury this iniquitous device."<sup>233</sup> On July 29, the conference committee agreed to move forward on the bill.

With VRA passage on the horizon, Hosea Williams quickly revoked his previous prohibition on organizing and participating in protest demonstrations. On Sunday, August 1<sup>st</sup>, Williams sent

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<sup>228</sup> Zelizer, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, 171.

<sup>229</sup> Zelizer, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, 218.

<sup>230</sup> Zelizer, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, 219.

<sup>231</sup> Gary May, *Bending Toward Justice: The Voting Rights Act and the Transformation of American Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 166.

<sup>232</sup> May, *Bending Toward Justice*, 167.

<sup>233</sup> May, *Bending Toward Justice*, 167.

out a memorandum to all SCOPE chapters instructing them to plan demonstrations in the week ahead. “Start mobilizing your people now,” said Williams “Get them ready for a 9 a.m. Tuesday march.”<sup>234</sup> Williams acknowledged the growing tension between SCOPE policy and local volunteers and leaders that Paul Good discussed in his piece in *The Washington Post*. “The kids were getting frustrated. They’ve been waiting and waiting for that bill to pass.”<sup>235</sup> Ultimately, Williams claimed his decision to mobilize came not from the students’ frustration but from the local leaders’.<sup>236</sup> After countless requests from local leaders in SCOPE counties to demonstrate, Williams conceded saying, “We could hold the kids off. But when we started getting demands from the local leaders, we thought it was time to change our policy.”<sup>237</sup> This revealed Williams’ consciousness about the tensions between SCLC strategy and local methods. With federal backing imminent, Williams allowed local SCOPE leaders greater agency.

Some SCOPE counties in Alabama pounced on the opportunity to demonstrate while others ignored Williams’ memo. Leaders and SCOPE workers in Etowah, Clarke, and Butler counties in Alabama quickly heeded Williams’ call and brought hundreds of people down to their respective courthouses. In other counties, they decided protesting would bring unnecessary confrontation. The leader of the Henry County SCOPE project said, “Everything’s all right here. We don’t have no need to march.”<sup>238</sup> The counties disregarding Williams’ mobilization message tended to report having more conciliatory relations with the local white community.

With VRA enactment growing closer every day, the urgency of registration waned. Brians and the other SCOPE volunteers kept canvassing but the feeling that they were no longer needed

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<sup>234</sup> Falk, “SCOPE Stages Demonstrations.”

<sup>235</sup> Falk, “SCOPE Stages Demonstrations.”

<sup>236</sup> Falk, “SCOPE Stages Demonstrations.”

<sup>237</sup> Falk, “SCOPE Stages Demonstrations.”

<sup>238</sup> Falk, “SCOPE Stages Demonstrations.”

in the same way as before the VRA was palpable. Reverend Harrell and Major Johns asked Brians and Bob Block to continue working in Wilcox past the end of the summer.<sup>239</sup> Still avoiding Klan threats regularly, Brians and Block spent their last weeks in Wilcox moving between houses and canvassing when they could.

Ultimately the pair decided to leave at the end of August, rather than stay in Wilcox and continue to help people register. Block's decision to go back to San Francisco with Brians grew out of his increasing self-consciousness about his place in the movement as a white person. Having spent much of the summer alongside SNCC activists, Block perceived a growing resentment toward white people and took it as his cue to leave Wilcox.<sup>240</sup> Brians similarly sensed a growing hostility toward white people in the movement from her SNCC colleagues in Alabama. While this tension ultimately caused Block and Brians to leave, it was in sharp contrast with the attitudes of local people. Local friends that Brians made that summer were disappointed to see her go. On their way out of town, Brians and Block went on their Wilcox goodbye tour with stops for Reverend Harrell and Ethel Brooks and letters sent to families Brians stayed with.<sup>241</sup>

The self-consciousness Block and Brians felt was created not by local conditions but by broader shifts in the national movement. In the subsequent months and years, SNCC shed its integrationist aims in favor of a more independent and separatist mission. In 1966 Stokely Carmichael replaced John Lewis as the organization's chairman and brought Black Power to SNCC. In December of 1966, a SNCC meeting at the Peg Leg Bates Resort in the Catskill Mountains of New York descended into a heated argument about the place of white members in

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<sup>239</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 148.

<sup>240</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 150.

<sup>241</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 150.

the organization. Some members of SNCC's Atlanta Project pushed vehemently for the expulsion of white members. They emphasized the importance of Black political and social organizing independent of white people's influence. One member of the Atlanta Project, Bill Ware, called white membership "the biggest obstacle" to "Black folks getting liberation."<sup>242</sup> The meeting ultimately voted to revoke white members' voting privileges within SNCC and "asked them to organize in the white community, where racism originated."<sup>243</sup>

Though Block and Brians were working with SCLC on SCOPE, organizational influence over civil rights activities in Black Belt counties was frequently overlapping and their experience that summer was influenced just as much by SNCC connections. The tensions between and increasingly divergent methods and ideologies of national civil rights organizations had real impacts on small local projects such as Wilcox. Though perceived SNCC attitudes were not the only reason that Block and Brians left in August, their own experience reflected a larger change happening in the movement. As legislative and judicial victories provided legal mandates for the destruction of Jim Crow and segregation, movement objectives shifted to other systemic issues. While SCLC was looking north to Chicago and taking on militarism and economic justice, SNCC was moving toward Black Power and greater calls for Black political autonomy. Meanwhile, people in Wilcox spent another decade fighting for basic citizenship rights such as school integration and Black voting rights. This simultaneous stretching of national organizations' priorities while local communities continued to live under strict segregation demonstrates the inherent gaps in national narratives of the movement. While national

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<sup>242</sup> "February 1966 SNCC's Atlanta Project Grows out of Julian Bond's Campaign," SNCC Digital Gateway, SNCC Legacy Project and Duke University, <https://snccdigital.org/events/snccs-atlanta-project-grows-out-of-julian-bonds-campaign/>.

<sup>243</sup> "May 1967 Dottie & Bob Zellner Present Grow Proposal," SNCC Digital Gateway, SNCC Legacy Project and Duke University, <https://snccdigital.org/events/dottie-bob-zellner-present-grow-proposal/>.

organizations largely saw basic civil rights as won, local people had to continue fighting daily for the *enforcement* of federal provisions that had been decided law for a decade in some cases.

### **Leaving Wilcox**

The work of Wilcox County that summer was grinding. Clay roads and long tracks of land between houses wore down shoes to the point that some volunteers canvassed barefoot. Sweltering heat, summer storms, and the relentless humidity drained the volunteers and made everything sticky. Stomachs grumbled as the volunteers never quite adjusted to the dietary restrictions of living on \$10 a week. In spite of this, the SCOPE project made marginal headway on voter registration. In her final letter home at the end of the summer, Brians told her family they had registered 500 people in Wilcox.<sup>244</sup> Though the eligible Black voting-age population exceeded 6,000, 500 new voters was an improvement from the county's near complete exclusion of Black voters since Reconstruction.

The SCOPE project in Wilcox faced violence, intimidation, and threats from white supremacist government officials, law enforcement officers, and local white residents. Despite its long history of protest movements for voting rights, there were few large-scale mobilization actions in Wilcox in the summer of 1965. Directives from SCLC hampered local leaders' ability to catalyze the community as local youth, church leaders, and SCOPE volunteers were brutalized. The emphasis put on deference to local leadership faltered in the face of competing interests between SCLC and the local Wilcox movement. In the midst of these tensions, Black women emerged as central figures in the project's day-to-day functioning. They fed, clothed, protected, and extended community legitimacy to volunteers whose presence often came with

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<sup>244</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 152.

violence. The decision to open their homes to volunteers and sacrifice scarce resources was decisive in making the volunteers' summer possible.

For volunteers including Brians, the summer was profoundly personally gratifying. Despite the physical tribulations of the long days on foot, the summer was one of the first times she felt like she was doing something to live out her ideals. Brians wrote that the "summer was a dream come true for a feeling of belonging."<sup>245</sup> Their acceptance by the local Black communities in Wilcox "meant everything" to her.<sup>246</sup> For Brians, the summer both fulfilled and complicated her identity. The experience of being in the heart of the Black freedom struggle was emotionally and psychologically fulfilling and SCOPE provided a structured way to enter the movement without previous experience. The violence carried out against local people because of SCOPE's presence forced Brians to question the role of privileged white people in the movement. Her own difficulty coping with the conditions flooded her with guilt and made her question her resolve. Brians left the summer unsure whether what ultimate ramifications SCOPE's presence would have on the local Black residents that could not leave at the end of the summer but "hoped and prayed" they did "more good than harm."<sup>247</sup>

### **After SCOPE**

Brians and the other SCOPE volunteers left Wilcox at a crucial time in voter registration progress. Wilcox County was one of the first places to get a federal examiner as a result of the VRA. On August 18, US Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach announced that Wilcox was one of five counties that would receive federal examiners because they "have continued to

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<sup>245</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 110.

<sup>246</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 148.

<sup>247</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 151.

discriminate and have given no substantial indication that they will comply” with the VRA.<sup>248</sup> Sections three and six of the VRA endowed the Attorney General with the power to appoint federal examiners to counties he had reason to believe were noncompliant with the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment.<sup>249</sup> Federal examiners were sent into counties primarily to register voters that qualified but were denied by local officials.



**Prospective voters waiting outside of the courthouse to register in Camden, Alabama. August 1965.<sup>250</sup>**

Wilcox receiving an examiner early was instrumental in enforcing the VRA’s prohibition on racial discrimination in voting. As of July 6, the *New York Times* reported, 280 Black people in Wilcox were registered to vote.<sup>251</sup> This figure was both a testament to the SCOPE volunteers’ ability to get some people registered and the refusal of local officials to allow any significant

<sup>248</sup> "More Vote Aides Going to South: Katzenbach Lists 5 Areas For Registration Effort," *The New York Times*, Aug 19, 1965, 17, <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/more-vote-aides-going-south/docview/116962806/se-2>.

<sup>249</sup> "Voting Rights Act (1965)," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed January 29, 2024, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/voting-rights-act>.

<sup>250</sup> "Sept 14: When the People had to Fight to Vote," Wilcox County Freedom Fights: Civil rights and voting rights in Wilcox County, Alabama in 1965, <https://thislittlelight1965.com/tag/voting-rights-2/>.

<sup>251</sup> "More Vote Aides Going to South: Katzenbach Lists 5 Areas For Registration Effort," *New York Times*.



change. With an examiner in town, Wilcox's voter rolls changed quickly and dramatically. By April of 1966, 3,600 Black residents were registered to vote, constituting a majority in the county.<sup>252</sup> The federal government thus emerged as the crucial arbiter of citizenship rights in Wilcox when it came to voting.

No matter how many barefoot miles the SCOPE volunteers walked in Wilcox, the federal examiner (with the backing of the federal government's power) was the ultimate key to ensuring Black citizenship rights. The efficacy of federal examiners made continued SCOPE voter registration obsolete in Wilcox. By early in 1966, SCLC dissolved Wilcox SCOPE and cut off staff payments to leaders including Reverend Harrell and his wife.<sup>253</sup> Despite this, Reverend Harrell stayed in Wilcox and pivoted to anti-poverty and economic improvement initiatives. Continuing to work with the SCLC, Reverend Harrell secured grants from the Office of Economic Opportunity to help create jobs and housing for local workers.<sup>254</sup> While SCOPE had ended, the need for a synthesis between local needs and federal intervention remained. With registration secure, Reverend Harrell and other leaders sought to use the breadth of civil rights legislation that Johnson's Great Society program enacted.

Despite the impact the federal examiner had on voter registration, the limits of federal power became clear in the 1966 elections. The obstinate white power structure in Wilcox did not passively accept the new voting system. With a Black voting majority, the local Civic League decided to run Black candidates for multiple local positions including sheriff, road commissioner, and tax assessor. On February 8, 1966, Walter Calhoun, a Black Army veteran,

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<sup>252</sup> Gene Roberts, "A Remarkable Thing Is Happening in Wilcox County, Ala.: A year ago it had no Negro voter. Today a 30-year-old Negro is running for sheriff—and could win," *The New York Times*, April 17, 1966. <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/remarkable-thing-is-happening-wilcox-county-ala/docview/117110225/se-2?accountid=14816>.

<sup>253</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 167.

<sup>254</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 168.

qualified as a candidate for sheriff in Wilcox after paying \$50 at the courthouse. His candidacy was quickly recognized in the county and the media as a potential threat to Sheriff Jenkins' tenure. The *New York Times* reported that a "remarkable thing is happening in Wilcox County."<sup>255</sup> Despite optimism about the chance for Black political power and the *Detroit Free Press* deeming election day a "day of jubilee in Alabama," all four candidates lost in the Democratic primary elections in May.<sup>256</sup> Black candidates in Wilcox did not win seats for another twelve years when in 1978, 26-year-old Prince Arnold became the county's first Black sheriff in decades and the "white-haired veteran of many civil rights campaigns," Jesse Brooks, (father of Ethel Brooks) became tax collector.<sup>257</sup> Their election kick started a consistent pattern of Black electoral victory in the county that eventually became an almost entirely Black local government.

Wilcox's delayed gains in Black electoral victory were not unlike neighboring Lowndes County, Alabama. Lowndes County had seen a similarly formidable voter registration drive and the mass registration of Black voters in 1966. The third-party Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) ran Black candidates for local positions, but failed to win seats in the 1966 local elections.<sup>258</sup> Despite Black voters outnumbering white voters in the county, a mix of absenteeism, violent intimidation, fear, ballot manipulation, Black voters not supporting LCFO

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<sup>255</sup> Roberts, "A Remarkable Thing Is Happening in Wilcox County, Ala."

<sup>256</sup> Robert Smith, "Read All About It! Negro Voters And Mrs. Wallace Make Big News," *The Southern Courier*, May 14-15, 1966, 2 [http://www.southerncourier.org/hi-res/Vol2\\_No20\\_1966\\_05\\_14.pdf](http://www.southerncourier.org/hi-res/Vol2_No20_1966_05_14.pdf); "Alabama Negro Voters See Victory in Defeats: Tan Majority Counties Bloc Vote Against Wallace in Vain; Fail to Support Individuals." *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 07, 1966. 1, <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/alabama-negro-voters-see-victory-defeats/docview/532378479/sc-2>.

<sup>257</sup> Harriet Swift, "A New Day in Wilcox County: 1978," *Southern Changes*, the Southern Regional Council, Vol. 1, No. 6, 1979, 16, [https://southernchanges.digitalscholarship.emory.edu/sc01-6\\_001/sc01-6\\_002/](https://southernchanges.digitalscholarship.emory.edu/sc01-6_001/sc01-6_002/).

<sup>258</sup> Hasan Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt*, (New York City: New York University Press, 2009), 202.

candidates, and confusion led to the LCFO candidates' defeat.<sup>259</sup> Despite the massive registration gains that Wilcox and Lowndes experienced before the 1966 election, the racism of Jim Crow politics still permeated every step of the voting process. White officials were not going down without a fight and local actors had to continue to fight for years to actualize the promises of the VRA.

What stood in the way of Black voting power in the years between federal intervention in 1965 and the first victories in 1978 was an element of life in Wilcox that the federal government could not change through legislation – the deeply engrained attitudes and social systems that had governed the county for decades. Going from complete Black exclusion to a Black voting majority in less than a year completely changed voter rolls but the turnaround time on voting participation took longer. Many older Black residents of Wilcox had spent most of their lives without the right to vote. One person elected to the school board in 1980, K.P. Thomas, told the Southern Regional Council's journal *Southern Changes* that employers in the county still made voting against certain (usually Black) candidates a precondition of employment.<sup>260</sup> Sheriff Prince Arnold told the journal that fear was the biggest motivator. While Black residents now had the ability to vote, they were still constrained by their economic dependence on wealthier white bosses and managers. It was one thing to register while a federal examiner watched over you, it was a very different feat to cast your vote when the federal government left town. The 1978 elections, a symbol of the triumph of Black political power and citizenship in Wilcox, was possible because Black leaders persisted when federal support fell short. The presence of a federal examiner was decisive in extending the ability to vote, but local Black political

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<sup>259</sup> Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 202-204.

<sup>260</sup> Randall Williams, "Blacks Elected in Wilcox County," *Southern Changes*, the Southern Regional Council, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1980, [https://southernchanges.digitalscholarship.emory.edu/sc03-1\\_001/sc03-1\\_011/](https://southernchanges.digitalscholarship.emory.edu/sc03-1_001/sc03-1_011/).

organizing was indispensable in translating legislative victories and the extension of this most fundamental citizenship right into a lived reality.

The interplay between national developments and organizations and the local Black freedom struggle was demonstrated by both the SCOPE project and in the years following. Wilcox's SCOPE presence revealed conflict between SCLC's organizational goals and local leaders' desire to protest. At the same time, the volunteers' presence revealed that when outsiders worked to advance local goals, they could impact voter registration and develop strong relationships with local people. After SCOPE left, the power of national developments such as the VRA were crucial to ensuring voting access, but the federal government was an unreliable and inconsistent enforcer of rights as it was constrained by the limits of the law and the reality of governing a large and complex nation. Local actors spent decades organizing, mobilizing, and sustaining efforts to get Black voters to the polls on election day to actualize the benefits of the federal government's intervention in 1965. Neither local people nor national organizations and government could secure voting rights as a reality for Black people in Wilcox on their own. Instead, the fight for Black citizenship rights in Wilcox was an exercise in synthesizing the local and national civil rights movements to harness the strength and authority of both.



### Chapter 3: *Voter Registration and School Desegregation in Taliaferro County, Georgia*

#### Genesis of the Movement in Taliaferro

For Taliaferro County, Georgia, the civil rights movement started in the spring of 1965. Since at least 1961, Taliaferro had an NAACP chapter, but local people's civil rights sensibilities did not become a substantive and mobilized social movement until the firings of six Black teachers four years later.<sup>261</sup> Following a May 4, Taliaferro County Board of Education meeting, the contracts of six Black educators at the all-Black Murden Elementary and High School were cancelled for the next academic year. Five teachers including Ann Harris, Calvin and Florence Turner, Fannie Blackwell, and Myra Wright, in addition to the school's principal, Evans Harris, received letters from the school superintendent about their termination. The letters gave no reason for their firing. Instead, it said only that it had been "unanimously decided" that they would not receive contracts for the following school year "in the best interest of the Taliaferro County School system."<sup>262</sup> While no official reason was given, local residents speculated that the Board of Education was targeting the educators for allegedly using their classrooms to advocate for civil rights. In response to the firings, students at Murden threatened not to attend graduation but eventually went through with the ceremony.

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<sup>261</sup> "Georgia State Conference, 1960-1963," Folder 001501-006-0553, Papers of the NAACP, Part 27: Selected Branch Files, 1956-1965, Series A: The South, Group III, Series C, Branch Department Files, Geographical File, NAACP Papers: Branch Department, Branch Files, and Youth Department Files, ProQuest History Vault, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001501-006-0553&accountid=14816>, 61.

<sup>262</sup> "Civil rights demonstrations in Crawfordsville, Georgia, assignment of Summer Community Organization and Political Education Program volunteers, John Hope Franklins reinterpretation of African American role during Reconstruction era, southern voter registration campaign, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s address at Morris Brown College, arrest of civil rights workers in Wilcox County, Alabama, and southern opposition to voting rights bill, Publications, June 1965," Folder: 001566-003-0702, Series IX, Publications, 1958, 1960-1966[, 1967-1968], Subseries 1, Press Releases, 1958, 1960-1966[, 1967-1968], Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954-1970, Part 3: Records of the Public Relations Department, ProQuest History Vault, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001566-003-0702&accountid=14816>, page 3.

Almost immediately after being dismissed from his teaching position at Murden, Calvin Turner became the leader of civil rights activity in Taliaferro. Turner was the chairman of the Taliaferro County Voters League (TCVL), secretary of the local NAACP chapter, the head of Taliaferro Head Start efforts, and the director of the local SCOPE project later in the summer.<sup>263</sup> In response to the firings, Black students were eager to organize and demonstrate against the injustices. Frank Bates, a senior at Murden who led many of the protest efforts that summer, credited Turner with jumpstarting the movement though tensions had been gradually growing.<sup>264</sup> After the firings, Turner reached out to SCLC seeking guidance and the organization “agreed that they would do what they could to help them to restore their teachers” through marches, protests, and boycotts.<sup>265</sup> The SCLC sent in field staff including Willie Bolden, Tony Scruton, James Gibson, and others to aid local efforts.<sup>266</sup>

From the genesis of the organized civil rights movement in Taliaferro, the SCLC played a role in shaping and guiding the local movement’s development. A county of roughly 3,500 people, about one fourth the size of Wilcox, Taliaferro was small, rural and 60% Black. Though according to Turner, there had “been a lot of tension between the white and Negroes for maybe five or six years,” the May firings ignited the first sustained direct action civil rights protest

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<sup>263</sup> “Branch directory, 1962-1963,” Folder: 009054-001-0530, Papers of the NAACP, Part 25: Branch Department Files, Series C: Branch Newsletters and Printed Materials, 1956-1965, Group III, Series I, Printed Matter, Directories, Jan 01, 1962 - Dec 01, 1963. ProQuest History Vault. <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=009054-001-0530&accountid=14816>, 64.

<sup>264</sup> “Oral history interview with Frank Bates, African-American, male, Local SCLC, 0270, Crawfordsville, Georgia. 0270,” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Tape 0270, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/project-south/catalog/qv355ys8105>, transcript page 2.

<sup>265</sup> “Oral history interview with Calvin Turner, African-American, male, SCOPE project leader, 0272-7 (side 2), Crawfordsville, Georgia. 0272-7,” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Tape 0272, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/project-south/catalog/jg316yv9570>, transcript page 2.

<sup>266</sup> “Crawfordsville GA School Bus Struggle (Jun-Oct),” 1965, *Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement*, <https://www.crmvet.org/tim/tim65b.htm#1965crawford>.

movement in the county.<sup>267</sup> Not only were local Black people organizing unprecedented civil rights demonstrations, but the introduction of SCLC field workers and white SCOPE volunteers in the following months was a major shift for the small county. National voices such as Hosea Williams and Martin Luther King Jr. were now tuned into the county's politics and vocal in the press about developments.

Despite the new national attention, local leaders retained agency and control over methods of mobilization and strategies of social change. Unlike in Wilcox where protest prohibitions constricted local goals, the SCOPE volunteers of Taliaferro played important supplementary roles to grassroots initiatives and helped strengthen local leadership. Even when SCOPE volunteers left at the end of the summer, Taliaferro leadership sustained continued protest campaigns and fought to translate national legislative victories into lived realities. The development of Taliaferro SCOPE was an exercise in negotiating the balance between SCLC and the local movement. Similarly to Wilcox County, Williams' prohibition on SCOPE participation in demonstrations and desire to focus on voter registration created conflict between SCLC and Turner's visions. Unlike Wilcox however, the Taliaferro SCOPE grew into greater cohesion as SCOPE volunteers helped pickets, boycotts, and protests.

The county's shift to focusing on school desegregation and continued protests into the fall of 1965 demonstrated the primacy of local actors and goals. Though not without hardship, the Taliaferro SCOPE project became a model of synthesizing SCLC's national organizational imperatives to local directives and issues through adapting to county-specific circumstance. With Calvin Turner at the helm of the movement, and white SCOPE volunteers as assistants to an array of projects, the community developed an indigenous Taliaferro civil rights struggle that

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<sup>267</sup> "Oral history interview with Calvin Turner," 2.



both harnessed and instigated influential federal court rulings to desegregate schools and ensure stronger voting rights.

### SCLC Arrives



**Murden Elementary and High School in 1965.<sup>268</sup>**

Strict racial segregation was a mandate in all aspects of life in Taliaferro County in 1965 including public schools. In 1954 the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that racial segregation in schools was unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause. The Court used social science research to hold that separate facilities were inherently unequal by demonstrating that segregated schooling instilled a feeling of inferiority in Black children.<sup>269</sup> Eleven years after the *Brown* ruling, Taliaferro County

<sup>268</sup> Dave Langford, "Murden School in Crawfordville, Georgia, the only African American school in Taliaferro County," Alabama Department of Archives and History, donated by Alabama Media Group, October 13, 1965, <https://digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/amg/id/100746>.

<sup>269</sup> "Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1)," Oyez, Accessed December 3, 2023, <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1940-1955/347us483>.

schools remained entirely segregated. A single-story brick building located in Crawfordville, the seat of Taliaferro County, Murden was the only school serving the county's roughly 600 Black students.

Evans Harris, the principal who was fired in May of 1965, grew up in Crawfordville and had been a student at Murden himself. After graduating from Murden, Harris worked in a shipyard in Virginia Beach, Virginia and later attended Fort Valley State College in Peach County, Georgia where he studied under Dr. Horace Mann Bond, father of SNCC's Julian Bond.<sup>270</sup> Harris later received a master's degree in agricultural education from the Tuskegee Institute and his principal certification from Atlanta University. In 1963, Harris was offered the principalship at Murden by the Taliaferro County Board of Education and accepted.<sup>271</sup> From early in his principalship Harris sought to revitalize Murden and increase the number of students who went to college after graduation. Harris started by "establishing a base philosophy for instruction at the school" that called on "faculty, teachers, and staff to help the students feel that they had ability, that they could learn effectively, that they could accomplish what other students accomplished."<sup>272</sup> Harris felt that the students' achievements and increased strength of Murden under his tenure drew the ire of local white people who used the school's improvements to "sell the idea" that he and the Murden educators "were causing trouble in the community."<sup>273</sup> Improving students' self-concept and encouraging higher education challenged the white supremacist power structure in Taliaferro and resulted in Harris and others being fired. Later in

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<sup>270</sup> Garrick Arion Askew, "The Oral Histories of Three Retired African American Superintendents from Georgia," Doctor of Education (EDD) Dissertation, (University of Georgia, 2004), [https://getd.libs.uga.edu/pdfs/askew\\_garrick\\_a\\_200408\\_edd.pdf](https://getd.libs.uga.edu/pdfs/askew_garrick_a_200408_edd.pdf), 166.

<sup>271</sup> Askew, "The Oral Histories of Three Retired African American Superintendents from Georgia," 179.

<sup>272</sup> Askew, "The Oral Histories of Three Retired African American Superintendents from Georgia," 180-181.

<sup>273</sup> Askew, "The Oral Histories of Three Retired African American Superintendents from Georgia," 181.

life, Harris said that the “dismissals were the start of the whole civil rights movement in Taliaferro County.”<sup>274</sup>

With SCLC staff in town, the first demonstration campaign aimed at eliminating racial segregation in public accommodations began. On May 26, demonstrators split into groups to attempt to integrate three locations: the laundromat, Liberty Cafe, and Alexander H. Stephens State Park. The majority of the sixty participants were local Black teenagers. Frank Bates reported that nine people went to Liberty Cafe, six to the laundromat, and the rest to Alexander Stephens Park.<sup>275</sup> Bates chose to go to the cafe anticipating that there would be violence at the park. James Gibson and Deborah Long, a Black female teenager, were the “spokesmen for the group” at the cafe.<sup>276</sup> When the group arrived, the owner locked both the front and back doors to keep the group from entering. After pleading with the demonstrators to leave, the owner walked across the street to the courthouse and returned with Sheriff Moore and arrest warrants for James Gibson and another SCLC field organizer.<sup>277</sup> The two spent that night in the Taliaferro County Jail on trespassing charges.

The demonstrations at the laundromat and park went mostly without incident. Halfway through the group’s washing cycle at the laundromat, the manager cut off the water claiming it needed to be worked on. Besides leaving with piles of wet clothes there were no significant conflicts. Similarly, at the park the fifty demonstrators entered without issue. The superintendent of the park told *The August Chronicle* that “the park had been integrated for more than a year and

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<sup>274</sup> Askew, “The Oral Histories of Three Retired African American Superintendents from Georgia,” 183.

<sup>275</sup> “Oral history interview with Frank Bates, African-American, male, Local SCLC, 0270, Crawfordsville, Georgia. 0270,” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), Department of Special Collections and University Archives. Stanford University Libraries, Tape 0270, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/project-south/catalog/qv355ys8105>, transcript page 4.

<sup>276</sup> “Oral history interview with Frank Bates,” KZSU Project South Interviews, transcript page 4.

<sup>277</sup> “Oral history interview with Frank Bates,” transcript page 5.

Negroes had access to it.”<sup>278</sup> Named after the former vice president of the Confederacy, Alexander H. Stephens Park was a 1,400-acre memorial to Georgia’s white supremacist roots. Despite the superintendent’s claim, the Black residents of Taliaferro maintained that the park was segregated, and they previously had been denied access.

While the protests themselves were calm, violence erupted later in the day. At 11 a.m. SCLC reported staff member Tony Scruton missing to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).<sup>279</sup> After integrating Alexander Stephens Park, a group of white men approached the car that Scruton and two Black people were in and attempted to attack the individuals. When Scruton exited the vehicle, he was “abducted,” “beaten and then turned over to the sheriff” by the group of white men.<sup>280</sup> While the local newspaper *The Advocate-Democrat* reported that the FBI learned Scruton was “unharmed” later in the evening, an SCLC spokesperson said Scruton “had been beaten with a club wrapped in burlap” and “had abrasions about the face and head.”<sup>281</sup> That same night, Scruton left protective custody and returned to his housing in the community.

Later that week, over 200 people attended a mass meeting at Springfield Baptist Church coordinated by SCLC staff. Still recovering from his assault and jailtime and two days into a hunger strike, Tony Scruton looked “awful, tired, and exhausted.”<sup>282</sup> At the meeting, Willie Bolden talked about how being in the movement brought him closer to God and urged

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<sup>278</sup> “Demonstration Wednesday,” *The Advocate-Democrat*, Crawfordville, GA, reprinted from *The Augusta Chronicle*, May 28, 1965, accessed on microfilm from the University of Georgia.

<sup>279</sup> “Demonstration Wednesday,” *The Advocate-Democrat*, May 28, 1965.

<sup>280</sup> “White Civil Rights Worker Seized, Beaten in Georgia,” *The New York Times*, May 27, 1965.

<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1965/05/27/97203416.html?pageNumber=19>.

<sup>281</sup> “Demonstration Wednesday,” *The Advocate-Democrat* May 28, 1965.

<sup>282</sup> “African American protest demonstrations, voter registration progress reports and arrest of civil rights workers in Crawfordsville, Georgia, Records of Randolph T. Blackwell, 1965,” Folder: 001569-008-0514, Jan 01, 1965 - Dec 31, 1965, Series II, Records of Randolph T. Blackwell, 1963-1966, Subseries 2, Records of the Voter Education Project, 1964-1966, Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954-1970, Part 4: Records of the Program Department, ProQuest History Vault, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001569-008-0514&accountid=14816>, page 2.

intentional and thoughtful action going forward in the Crawfordville movement. Calvin Turner spoke about fear but told the crowd that freedom was won mentally, not physically. Andrew Young, executive director of SCLC, delivered the final speech of the meeting and led the crowd of 200 in a march to the courthouse in what was the largest demonstration thus far. Unlike the previous demonstrations, an SCLC field organizer reported that roughly two-thirds of the attendees were older people.<sup>283</sup> Whether because of Young's presence or a growing call to action, the Crawfordville movement was gaining broad, intergenerational support in the local Black community. In the following days, protests continued as residents boycotted downtown stores and attempted to integrate the pool at Alexander Stephens Park.

The arrival of outsider Black and white civil rights workers shocked the sensibilities of many white people in Taliaferro. One of the least populous counties in Georgia, Taliaferro largely avoided any mass mobilization events directed by prominent national organizations such as SCLC. In response to these emerging efforts the local weekly newspaper, *The Advocate-Democrat*, published a lead story on June 4 exalting Sheriff Moore. The article praised him for the "fine work he and his deputies have done in enforcing law and order" claiming that "law officers throughout the state" had "marveled at the fine way Sheriff Moore" had responded to the demonstrations.<sup>284</sup> Further, the article called Sheriff Moore a "true Southern gentleman" and advocated that he receive an "Outstanding Sheriff in Georgia For 1965" award.<sup>285</sup> If "the monument of Alex Stephens" the article argued, "could talk he would praise the people of

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<sup>283</sup> "African American protest demonstrations, voter registration progress reports and arrest of civil rights workers in Crawfordville, Georgia, Records of Randolph T. Blackwell, 1965," ProQuest History Vault, page 3.

<sup>284</sup> Carey Williams Jr., "Sheriff M. B. Moore Meets Trouble In Stride," *The Advocate Democrat*, Crawfordville, GA, June 4, 1965, accessed on microfilm from the University of Georgia.

<sup>285</sup> Williams Jr., "Sheriff M. B. Moore Meets Trouble In Stride," *The Advocate Democrat*.

Taliaferro County for the fine and respectable way they have handled this unfortunate situation.”<sup>286</sup>

In addition to praising Sheriff Moore’s jailing of peaceful protestors, the article pointedly attacked the white workers from SCLC. The article infantilized James Gibson by referring to him as “Young Gibson” and “white boy” and claimed that he laid on the floor of Sheriff Moore’s office screaming at his parents about wanting to “be with the Negroes.”<sup>287</sup> “These civil rights workers want to make headlines,” read the article. “They have no home, and it will be the Negro of Taliaferro County who will suffer the consequences” for their presence.<sup>288</sup>

### **SCOPE Volunteers Arrive**

SCOPE volunteers arrived in Taliaferro amid these growing tensions between the groundswell of demonstration efforts for civil rights and the reactionary white backlash in response. Unlike Wilcox County, Taliaferro had a comparatively high number of eligible Black voters on its registration rolls. Taliaferro County sits in the northeastern part of Georgia, roughly 100 miles directly east of Atlanta. In 1960, the county had fewer than 4,000 residents with a median annual income of \$2,676.<sup>289</sup> Hosea Williams’ pre-summer estimates indicated that 815 of 1,073 eligible Black voters and 879 of 917 white voters were registered.<sup>290</sup> Despite having nearly 76% Black voter registration, elections in Taliaferro never reflected the county’s Black majority. Calvin Turner said Black people in Taliaferro had been “brainwashed” into thinking that the

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<sup>286</sup> Williams Jr., “Sheriff M. B. Moore Meets Trouble In Stride,” *The Advocate Democrat*.

<sup>287</sup> Williams Jr., “Sheriff M. B. Moore Meets Trouble In Stride,” *The Advocate Democrat*.

<sup>288</sup> Williams Jr., “Sheriff M. B. Moore Meets Trouble In Stride,” *The Advocate Democrat*.

<sup>289</sup> “Crawfordville GA School Bus Struggle (Jun-Oct),” 1965, *Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement*, <https://www.crmvet.org/tim/tim65b.htm#1965crawford>, paragraph 1.

<sup>290</sup> Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) Program, 1965, 12, Box: 621, Folder: 18. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083. Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library. Untitled document two page document with map of prospective counties and voter registration statistics broken down by county and state.

registration numbers were accurate and that they constituted legitimate Black representation at the polls.<sup>291</sup> Turner argued that the names of dead people and those who had moved out of the county crowded the rolls, falsely inflating Black civic inclusion. Despite rivaling the number of registered white voters, Black voters in Taliaferro had never been able to vote in significant numbers to influence elections.

As the primary liaison between the SCLC and Taliaferro and having requested the volunteers, Calvin Turner was the local leader of SCOPE. Scruton, Bolden, and the other SCLC field staff were informally responsible for directing the volunteers. At the Atlanta orientation, four volunteers were assigned to Taliaferro: Benjamin Lomax, Candace Weber, Reverend Joseph Cooney, and Judith Van Allen.<sup>292</sup> Richard Copeland and Howard Price later joined the group bringing the total number of volunteers to six. Similar to the Wilcox group, none of the volunteers knew each other before receiving their assignments. Despite all ending up in Taliaferro that summer, the volunteers had little in common.

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<sup>291</sup> “Oral history interview with Calvin Turner, African-American, male, SCOPE project leader, 0272-7 (side 2), Crawfordsville, Georgia. 0272-7,” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Tape 0272, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/project-south/catalog/jg316yv9570>, transcript page 3.

<sup>292</sup> “SCLC, List of SCOPE Counties & Volunteers, undated 1965,” *Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement*, [https://www.crmvet.org/docs/65\\_scope\\_list.pdf](https://www.crmvet.org/docs/65_scope_list.pdf), 7.



**Left to Right: Bob Turner, Judy Van Allen, and Frank Bates<sup>293</sup>**

Judith “Judy” Van Allen was born in San Francisco and had an undergraduate degree from Stanford University. The year before SCOPE, Van Allen participated in the Free Speech Movement while pursuing a master’s degree at the University of California, Berkeley.<sup>294</sup> Van Allen found her way to SCOPE through SNCC. She had been looking to work with SNCC that summer but kept receiving noncommittal answers about whether they were taking volunteers. When her fiancée told her about the opportunity to work with SCOPE, she “gave up” on her attempts to work with SNCC.<sup>295</sup> A self-proclaimed “radical” and adamantly non-religious, Van Allen’s identity was distinctly at odds with the image of SCLC as a Christian organization that sought to work within the existing political system to enact change.<sup>296</sup> Over the course of the

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<sup>293</sup> Terry Howard, “SCLC & Me: Southern Christian Leadership Conference,” presentation delivered at Taliaferro Community Center, Taliaferro County Georgia, November 25, 2021, [https://www.crmvet.org/comm/65\\_sclc\\_taliaferro.pdf](https://www.crmvet.org/comm/65_sclc_taliaferro.pdf), slide 5.

<sup>294</sup> “Oral history interview with Judy Van Allen, white, female, SCOPE summer volunteer, 0271 (sides 1 and 2), Crawfordsville, Georgia. 0271,” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Tape 0271, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/project-south/catalog/pw380wf9799>, transcript page 3.

<sup>295</sup> “Oral history interview with Judy Van Allen,” 6.

<sup>296</sup> “Oral history interview with Judy Van Allen,” 18.



summer, tensions festered over the divergence between Van Allen's vision for the project and orders from SCLC.

Candance "Candy" Weber, on the other hand was the youngest and most inexperienced of the volunteers. Just weeks before joining SCOPE, she walked in her graduation ceremony at Roosevelt High School in Seattle, Washington. Weber joined the project three weeks before orientation was set to begin after receiving funding from a Seattle Women's Benefit Guild to finance her summer.<sup>297</sup> Like Van Allen, Weber was working with a SNCC unit back in Seattle when she found out about SCOPE. Rather than seeking out a summer project, Weber said that her decision to join was "just a matter of, I was willing, and they needed someone to go."<sup>298</sup> She approached the summer with hesitation because she felt "unqualified" to be part of the project but felt as though she "had no excuse for not being" there.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> "Oral history interview with Candi Weber, White, female, SCOPE summer volunteer, 0270 (sides 1 and 2), Crawfordsville, Georgia. 0270," KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Tape 0270, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/project-south/catalog/bz345dj5895>, transcript page 2.

<sup>298</sup> "Oral history interview with Candi Weber," 3.

<sup>299</sup> "Oral history interview with Candi Weber," 3 and 4.



**Father Cooney (far left) with Florence Turner and children.<sup>300</sup>**

Father Joseph Cooney was the oldest and most experienced of the volunteers. He attended both the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963 when Dr. King delivered his seminal “I Have a Dream” speech and the Selma to Montgomery march in March of 1965. Having been around civil rights demonstrations for years, Father Cooney received special permission from the Catholic archbishop to participate in SCOPE. When he arrived in Taliaferro, local white people called the Catholic diocese in Atlanta to persuade them to remove him from the project to no avail.<sup>301</sup> Father Cooney was motivated by both religious and

<sup>300</sup> Howard, “SCLC & Me: Southern Christian Leadership Conference,” slide 11.

<sup>301</sup> “Oral history with anonymous, white, male, priest, SCOPE summer volunteer, 0274 (sides 1 and 2), Crawfordsville, Georgia. 0274,” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Tape 0274, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/project-south/catalog/qh763bp8492>, transcript page 9.

intersecting racial and economic reasons. Having worked alongside Black people in summer factory and construction jobs, Father Cooney brought to his civil rights work the belief that “we have to rebuild society” through changing the “mechanism for distributing wealth in our society.”<sup>302</sup> Unlike Van Allen and Weber, Father Cooney had only ever thought about working with SCLC as opposed to SNCC, CORE, or another civil rights organization.

Van Allen, Weber, Lomax, and Cooney rarely worked together on daily efforts. For voter registration work, each volunteer was paired with a local resident to help inform their canvassing. Pairings changed over the course of the summer as local residents moved between responsibilities and roles in the movement. Through these pairings, Weber and Van Allen met a 13-year-old girl named Deborah Long. Long was the person the female volunteers talked to the most that summer and often in engaged and passionate discussions.<sup>303</sup> Deborah was Weber’s second canvassing partner but switched to dedicated picketing after a few weeks. Described as a “livewire” and with a tendency to “sound off rather than discuss,” Long’s skillset was better suited to the front lines of the civil rights struggle than the slow, monotonous work of door-to-door canvassing.<sup>304</sup>

Early in the summer, Father Cooney got involved in the local Head Start Program. As part of his “War on Poverty,” President Lyndon Johnson enacted Head Start through the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to provide a range of services for low-income preschool

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<sup>302</sup> “Oral history with anonymous, white, male, priest,” KZSU Project South Interviews, Tape 0274, transcript pages 11 and 12.

<sup>303</sup> “Oral history interview with Judy Van Allen, white, female, SCOPE summer volunteer, 0271 (sides 1 and 2), Crawfordsville, Georgia. 0271,” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Tape 0271, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/project-south/catalog/pw380wf9799>, transcript page 16.

<sup>304</sup> “Oral history interview with Candi Weber,” KZSU Project South Interviews, transcript page 10; “Oral history interview with Judy Van Allen,” KZSU Project South Interviews, transcript page 16.

children.<sup>305</sup> In Taliaferro, the OEO approved two separate Head Start grants, one for the Taliaferro County School Board and another for the TCVL, headed by Calvin Turner.<sup>306</sup> Father Cooney played an essential role getting the Head Start program running and worked with local volunteers to teach, babysit, and take care of the children in the program.

### **Early Ruptures Between SCLC and Local Goals**

As Calvin Turner, through the TCVL, balanced simultaneous SCOPE, Head Start, and direct-action projects, the tension between SCLC's objectives and local people's goals revealed themselves. The SCLC regularly sent in evaluation teams seeking reports on SCOPE project accomplishments. Van Allen felt pressured to deliver on quantitative goals set by the SCLC regarding voter registration.<sup>307</sup> One SCLC staffer sent to Crawfordville on an evaluation mission wrote to Randolph Blackwell, the Program Director of SCLC, that he was optimistic about the county's voter registration efforts. In the report, the staff member encouraged the feasibility of backing school desegregation efforts. Williams had reportedly discouraged "any activity not directly connected with SCOPE goals" in the county so as to "preclude" canvassing for schools.<sup>308</sup> The staffer described Williams' position as "foolish" noting that the community organization "must organize around issue/s or joint efforts, and school desegregation certainly

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<sup>305</sup> "Head Start History," The Administration for Children and Families, June 30, 2023, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ohs/about/history-head-start>.

<sup>306</sup> "'Headstart' Approved," *The Advocate-Democrat*, Crawfordville, GA, Friday, June 25, 1965, accessed on microfilm from the University of Georgia.

<sup>307</sup> "Oral history interview with Judy Van Allen, white, female, SCOPE summer volunteer, 0271 (sides 1 and 2), Crawfordville, Georgia. 0271," KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Tape 0271, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/project-south/catalog/pw380wf9799>, transcript page 9.

<sup>308</sup> "African American protest demonstrations, voter registration progress reports and arrest of civil rights workers in Crawfordville, Georgia, Records of Randolph T. Blackwell, 1965," Folder: 001569-008-0514, Jan 01, 1965 - Dec 31, 1965, Series II, Records of Randolph T. Blackwell, 1963-1966, Subseries 2, Records of the Voter Education Project, 1964-1966, Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954-1970, Part 4: Records of the Program Department, ProQuest History Vault, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001569-008-0514&accountid=14816>, 4.

qualifies.”<sup>309</sup> The staffer maintained to Blackwell that backing school desegregation efforts “should be encouraged where appropriate” and that narrowly focusing on voting reflected Williams’ tendency to “throw the baby out with the bathwater.”<sup>310</sup>

This strategic debate represented the tension between national organization objectives and local people’s focus. Determined to have SCOPE be a “respected project,” Williams publicly opposed SCOPE participation in demonstrations.<sup>311</sup> The evaluation staffer said that Williams’ tunnel vision on voter registration was born out of a fear of “having the project get into a balls-up with demonstrations” involving inexperienced volunteers.<sup>312</sup> Fears about white students far away from their normal lives leading dangerous protests that would work to harm both the SCLC’s reputation and the advancement of civil rights in the counties motivated Williams’ hesitation. While well founded, these fears directly undermined the orientation message of deference to local leaders. SCOPE volunteers could not always be foot soldiers for local leaders when SCLC prohibited them from demonstrating.

Five weeks into being in Taliaferro, Van Allen felt this tension between SCLC and local objectives acutely. In an interview with a student worker for the Stanford University KZSU radio station, Van Allen said, “What SCLC is really concerned with is that we get a certain number of voters on the books.”<sup>313</sup> If meeting SCOPE’s voter registration goals required “circumventing the

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<sup>309</sup> “African American protest demonstrations, voter registration progress reports and arrest of civil rights workers in Crawfordsville, Georgia, Records of Randolph T. Blackwell, 1965,” Folder: 001569-008-0514, ProQuest History Vault, 4 and 5.

<sup>310</sup> “African American protest demonstrations, voter registration progress reports and arrest of civil rights workers in Crawfordsville, Georgia, Records of Randolph T. Blackwell, 1965,” Folder: 001569-008-0514, ProQuest History Vault, 5.

<sup>311</sup> Quotes from: “Oral history interview with Hosea Williams, African-American, male, SCOPE director of summer project, 0337 (sides 1 and 2), Atlanta, Georgia. 0337,” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, California, Tape 0337, <https://purl.stanford.edu/zn429dv9370>, transcript page 2.

<sup>312</sup> “African American protest demonstrations, voter registration progress reports and arrest of civil rights workers in Crawfordsville, Georgia, Records of Randolph T. Blackwell, 1965,” Folder: 001569-008-0514, ProQuest History Vault, 5.

<sup>313</sup> “Oral history interview with Judy Van Allen,” 8.

local leadership because local people see other goals as mixed in with voter registration,” Van Allen argued, “then from SCLC’s point of view we should circumvent the local people” and focus on registration.<sup>314</sup> Further, Van Allen said that while SCLC talked about “community organization,” she never got “a clear concept” about what it meant in practice.<sup>315</sup> With an emphasis on reporting numbers back to headquarters, Van Allen felt as though pressure to focus on voter registration necessarily excluded attention on the other two facets of SCOPE: political education and community organization.

Unlike Van Allen, Father Cooney and another SCOPE volunteer felt as though SCOPE was interconnected with the direct-action campaigns. When asked by the Stanford radio interviewer about the separation between the SCOPE volunteers’ work and the local direct action campaign, Father Cooney responded that on the ground level there was “only one movement.”<sup>316</sup> In Cooney’s view, the work being done could not be separated as every element built on the other to produce broad social change. Another volunteer noted that because the TCVL coordinated the civil rights activity in the county, the seemingly separate actions were “united.”<sup>317</sup> While SCOPE on the whole was not officially about demonstrating, the volunteer acknowledged that the unique monopoly that the TCVL had on the Taliaferro movement meant

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<sup>314</sup> “Oral history interview with Judy Van Allen,” 8.

<sup>315</sup> “Oral history interview with Judy Van Allen,” 8.

<sup>316</sup> “Oral history with anonymous, white, male, priest, SCOPE summer volunteer, 0274 (sides 1 and 2), Crawfordsville, Georgia. 0274,” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Tape 0274, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/project-south/catalog/qh763bp8492>, transcript page 16.

<sup>317</sup> “Oral history interview with anonymous, white, male, SCOPE volunteer, 0269-1 (sides 1 and 2) Crawfordsville, Georgia. 0269-1,” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Tape 0269-1, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/project-south/catalog/rt360kz3747>, transcript page 19.

that SCOPE workers were expected to work with all programs. The volunteer helped “transport pickets,” took boycotters shopping in neighboring counties, and helped with Head Start.<sup>318</sup>

Whether or not the SCOPE volunteers participated in the daily pickets around the courthouse and boycott of white-owned businesses was insignificant to local white people who associated the volunteers’ presence with the demonstration campaigns regardless of what they did. On July 15, an interracial group of picketers marched around the county courthouse in the center of Crawfordville’s downtown section. The whole of downtown Crawfordville fit within a two-by-two block radius. As the hot Georgia sun beat down on them, the picketers sat under the awning of Liberty Cafe. Since the confrontation in May, the cafe remained closed. Sheets taped from the inside blocked the view into the cafe’s large front windows. A “Closed” sign hung in front of the sheets.<sup>319</sup> By the end of the summer, Liberty Cafe became Bonner’s Private Club. The change was understood by Calvin Turner as an attempt to avoid integrating the restaurant by making it a private space.<sup>320</sup> Across the street, nearly 20 picketers marched around the courthouse holding large hand-made signs while white people watched from their parked cars.<sup>321</sup>

### **Taliaferro’s First Black Police Chief**

On July 15, Crawfordville got its first Black police chief. The sudden appointment of 65-year-old Jesse Meadows surprised nearly everyone in Crawfordville. A retired sawmill worker who served more than a year in prison, Meadows was an unorthodox choice to head the town’s

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<sup>318</sup> “Oral history interview with anonymous, white, male,” KZSU Project South Interview, Tape 0269-1, transcript page 19

<sup>319</sup> WSB-TV (Television station: Atlanta, Ga.), “Blacks Picket in Crawfordville,” 1965-07-15. Accessed December 6, 2023, [http://crdl.usg.edu/do:ugabma\\_wsbn\\_wsbn48375](http://crdl.usg.edu/do:ugabma_wsbn_wsbn48375).

<sup>320</sup> “Oral history interview with Calvin Turner, African-American, male, SCOPE project leader, 0272-7 (side 2), Crawfordville, Georgia. 0272-7,” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Tape 0272, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/project-south/catalog/jg316yv9570>, transcript page 2-3.

<sup>321</sup> WSB-TV (Television station: Atlanta, Ga.), “Blacks Picket in Crawfordville,” 1965-07-15. Accessed December 6, 2023, [http://crdl.usg.edu/do:ugabma\\_wsbn\\_wsbn48375](http://crdl.usg.edu/do:ugabma_wsbn_wsbn48375).

law enforcement division. Meadows was reportedly “persuaded by city and county officials to accept” the job and when asked about his work history responded, “I didn’t do nothing but sit and fish.”<sup>322</sup> The reason for the hire given by Sheriff Moore was simply that the county did not have a police chief. Local Black leaders and SCOPE volunteers saw through the façade of racial inclusion. Meadows was reportedly an opponent of civil rights and quoted saying the civil rights demonstrators were “tearing up the town.”<sup>323</sup> Hosea Williams called Meadows’ appointment “a joke.”<sup>324</sup>

SCOPE volunteers were among the most prominent voices opposing Meadows. While SCOPE volunteers had largely been separate from the demonstration campaigns, they became more involved after Meadows was hired. Richard Copeland was quoted in dozens of newspapers calling Meadows a “tool.”<sup>325</sup> “He is more antagonistic toward us,” said Copeland “than some of the white persons here.”<sup>326</sup> Meadows responded to the civil rights workers saying, “They ought to go on back home and let us alone. I’ve been living here ever since I was born. These white folks have never done anything to us.”<sup>327</sup> Copeland paid the price for his public opposition when on July 23 he was beaten by two white men in front of the Taliaferro courthouse.<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> “New Negro Police Chief Jails Crawfordville Rights Picket,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 17, 1965, accessed on ProQuest Historical Newspapers,

<http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/new-negro-police-chief-jails-crawfordville-rights/docview/1612060737/se-2?accountid=14816>.

<sup>323</sup> “New Negro Police Chief Jails Crawfordville Rights Picket,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 17, 1965

<sup>324</sup> “Negro in Georgia Gets Police Post: Crawfordville Hires First of Race in State as Chief,” *The New York Times*, July 17, 1965, accessed on ProQuest Historical Newspapers, <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/negro-georgia-gets-police-post/docview/116932760/se-2?accountid=14816>.

<sup>325</sup> “He’s a Segregationist: Georgia Town Gets Negro Chief of Police,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 17, 1965, accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers,

<http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/hes-segregationist/docview/155267098/se-2?accountid=14816>.

<sup>326</sup> “He’s a Segregationist: Georgia Town Gets Negro Chief of Police.”

<sup>327</sup> “He’s a Segregationist: Georgia Town Gets Negro Chief of Police.”

<sup>328</sup> “SCOPE Incident Reports, July 1965,” *Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement*, [https://www.crmvet.org/docs/6507\\_scope\\_rpts.pdf](https://www.crmvet.org/docs/6507_scope_rpts.pdf), 4.





**Group marching to the Crawfordville Courthouse, Summer of 1965. Father Cooney can be seen in the middle at the photo behind the man in the beige hat.<sup>329</sup>**

Meadows' first action as Chief was to arrest Frank Bates for "failing to obey an officer."<sup>330</sup> Protests immediately followed. On Saturday July 17, a group of 30 Black residents were arrested, including Frank's brother Fred, for boycott activities and protesting Bates' arrest.<sup>331</sup> The snowballing arrests unleashed a torrent of opposition from Black residents and SCLC staff and volunteers. On Sunday, an integrated group of 250 protestors marched down to the courthouse as local white people watched. Andrew Young told reporters, "We want the record to show we're not here to protest the hiring of a Negro police chief. We're glad to have a Negro police chief. We're here to protest the fact that the Negro police chief made a mistake."<sup>332</sup>

<sup>329</sup> "Civil Rights Movement Photographs: SCOPE Project 1965." Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement. [https://www.crmvet.org/images/imgscope.htm#scope\\_ga](https://www.crmvet.org/images/imgscope.htm#scope_ga).

<sup>330</sup> "He's a Segregationist: Georgia Town Gets Negro Chief of Police."

<sup>331</sup> "Protest Negro's Arrest, Civil Rights Leader Says," *Americus Times-Recorder*, Americus, GA, Monday, July 19, 1965, accessed on microfilm from the University of Georgia.

<sup>332</sup> "250 Stage March At Crawfordville," *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 19, 1965, accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers, <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/250-stage-march-at-crawfordville/docview/1637039333/se-2?accountid=14816>.

After the weekend's mass arrests and unrest, the Crawfordville Mayor, W. G. Taylor, called for a biracial meeting on Tuesday night to resolve the mounting tension. The mayor and six businessmen were set to meet with a similar number of Black leaders to restore peace in the community. Following the meeting, Mayor Taylor announced that, just six days into his appointment, Meadows would retire as police chief.<sup>333</sup> Mayor Taylor admitted that while the appointment was made in an effort to quell racial unrest in Crawfordville, "the tension has increased since the appointment of Meadows, rather than decreased."<sup>334</sup> Mayor Taylor took the announcement as an opportunity to direct blame onto SCLC by saying that the organization "picked the town as a focus point for their summer campaign against alleged racial discrimination."<sup>335</sup> Just as soon as the white power structure in Crawfordville was willing to use Meadows as a pawn in displaying a haphazardly constructed image of racial equality in Crawfordville, it was willing to discard him when the plan backfired. The Meadows incident demonstrated the strength of direct action when SCLC and SCOPE worked to boost local efforts. Quotes from SCOPE workers about Meadows' hire filled newspapers from Los Angeles to Boston while hundreds of Black residents physically demonstrated outside the courthouse, forcing the hand of the Mayor.

### **School Desegregation Developments**

While many in the county were focused on Meadows' appointment, school desegregation efforts continued to advance. As part of Murden Principal Evans Harris' attempt to improve his students' self-concept, he instilled in them the belief that they deserved entry into any space that

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<sup>333</sup> "Negro Police Chief Resigns," *Americus Times-Recorder*, Wednesday, July 21, 1965, page five. Accessed on microfilm from the University of Georgia.

<sup>334</sup> "Negro Police Chief Resigns."

<sup>335</sup> "Negro Police Chief Resigns."

their white peers had access to. By the July 15 deadline, 87 Black students from Murden had applied to transfer to the Alexander Stephens Institute. The Alexander Stephens Institute, the second public site named after the vice president of the Confederacy to gain attention that summer, was the only other school in Taliaferro and exclusively served the county's 194 white pupils.<sup>336</sup> As a notary public, Calvin Turner was the official witness and stamped almost all of the applications.<sup>337</sup> But his involvement and leadership in the transfer effort made him the target of local segregationists, including Superintendent Lola Williams. County officials told the press that many of the applications appeared "to be forged" and on July 27 Turner was arrested on his first count of forgery.<sup>338</sup> The first count came from the sworn statement of a Black bus driver named Dock Davis that his name had been forged on a transfer application. The next day, Turner was served a second count of forgery related to a local parent, Mrs. Edna Swain's, signature on an application.<sup>339</sup>

At the same time that white Taliaferro school officials were using the judicial system to punish Turner for encouraging school integration, they were hatching a plan to avoid desegregating the Alexander Stephens Institute. Starting in late July, Superintendent Lola Williams knew that the Alexander Stephens Institute would be closing down at the start of the next school year.<sup>340</sup> Having submitted a plan for school desegregation in accordance with the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Taliaferro education officials were scrambling to circumvent their own plan. On August 5<sup>th</sup>, the white school in neighboring Warren County hired four white educators from the Alexander Stephens Institute in the culmination of extended conversations between the

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<sup>336</sup> *Turner v. Goolsby*, 255 F. Supp. 724 (S.D. Ga. 1966), page 4.

<sup>337</sup> "Integration Leader Held in Forgery," *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 29, 1965, accessed through ProQuest Historical Newspapers, <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/integration-leader-held-forgery/docview/1535034330/se-2?accountid=14816>.

<sup>338</sup> "Integration Leader Held in Forgery."

<sup>339</sup> "Integration Leader Held in Forgery."

<sup>340</sup> *Turner v. Goolsby*, 255 F. Supp. 724 (S.D. Ga. 1966).

school districts.<sup>341</sup> Superintendent Williams transferred her own child to a school in Green County and all but fifty white students followed suit. With such a small remaining student population, the Taliaferro school system decided to close the Alexander Stephens Institute for the next academic year. None of the Black students and families, both those who applied to transfer and those who did not, were notified that the school would be shutting down. The decision came as a shock when school resumed in September and the single-story building of the Alexander Stephens Institute sat empty.

### **VRA & Continued White Opposition**

Overwhelmed by the direct action campaigns, school desegregation efforts, and local white people's resistance, voter registration efforts suffered. In mid-July, Father Cooney told *The New York Times*, that since May, no Black residents in Taliaferro had been able to register to vote. Father Cooney pointed to the county's comparatively high rate of Black registration as the cause. "The reason is that if we can register another 200 or 250 Negroes they will be in the majority," said Father Cooney.<sup>342</sup> Calvin Turner also noted the difficulty of getting people registered because of white fears about a Black electoral majority. Turner requested SCLC send a SCOPE team to Taliaferro that summer because he felt that the work of voter registration was "too big a job for the local people to do it alone."<sup>343</sup> In the nine years preceding SCOPE that

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<sup>341</sup> *Turner v. Goolsby*, 255 F. Supp. 724 (S.D. Ga. 1966).

<sup>342</sup> "Negro in Georgia Gets Police Post: Crawfordville Hires First of Race in State as Chief," *The New York Times*, July 17, 1965, accessed on ProQuest Historical Newspapers, <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/negro-georgia-gets-police-post/docview/116932760/se-2?accountid=14816>.

<sup>343</sup> "Oral history interview with Calvin Turner, African-American, male, SCOPE project leader, 0272-7 (side 2), Crawfordsville, Georgia. 0272-7," KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Tape 0272, <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/project-south/catalog/jg316yv9570>, transcript page 3.

Turner worked with the local NAACP on registration drives, he estimated they had added 100 voters to the rolls.<sup>344</sup>

Having white volunteers was a double-edged sword in Turner's view. On one hand, the volunteers were inexperienced with Black, rural, Southern life and the depth and severity of institutionalized and personal racism. Turner saw the SCOPE orientation as naturally insufficient to fully prepare the volunteers for what they confronted in Taliaferro. In his eyes the "best orientation one could have, is to go into the community and let the community orientate them."<sup>345</sup> Turner noted that it would take time for the white volunteers to fully grasp the issues afflicting Black people in Taliaferro and to understand the deeper reasons that kept them away from the polls. On the other hand, Turner saw the volunteers' race and outsider status as an advantage. The white volunteers had both the time and money to put forth a significant effort at registration in a way that local Black residents could not. Further, Turner saw their involvement as an opportunity to break down entrenched assumptions between Black and white people. Having white volunteers gave Black people in Taliaferro the "chance to know that all white people are not like the ones that they generally know."<sup>346</sup>

Protests in Taliaferro followed President Lyndon Johnson's August 6 signing of the VRA. The bill was a watershed in the progress of civil rights legislation, throwing the weight of the federal government behind Black voting rights. On Sunday, August 14, an integrated but predominantly Black group of over 100 people marched to the Taliaferro courthouse to demand enforcement of the bill. The demonstrators sat on the steps leading up to the courthouse doors and pledged to stay in place until the unregistered Black participants were on the rolls. SCOPE

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<sup>344</sup> "Oral history interview with Calvin Turner," 5.

<sup>345</sup> "Oral history interview with Calvin Turner," 7.

<sup>346</sup> "Oral history interview with Calvin Turner," 6.

volunteer Howard Price attended the demonstration and reported that a Black and white youth had a confrontation during the march, but it was otherwise peaceful.<sup>347</sup>

Disdain for the volunteers from the white community remained strong in the final weeks of SCOPE. On August 6, the *Advocate-Democrat* reprinted a letter sent by a local white woman, Wilma Miller, to the administration at Catholic University in Washington D.C where Father Cooney's address indicated he went to school. The letter requested that the university withdraw Father Cooney from Taliaferro. "Father Cooney's presence in the day to day street demonstrations is doing great damage to the Catholic Church in general and to our parish church in particular" read the letter. "The few Catholics in this area are undergoing a barrage of criticism of the Church because" Father Cooney "takes part in harassing the citizens of Crawfordville when there is no legal cause."<sup>348</sup> The letter went on to imply that Father Cooney was engaged in sexual impropriety with Black "girls" in the county because he stayed in the homes of local Black families. "It is not here suggested that his moral character should be placed in question," said Miller, "but it is easy to conclude that he places himself in the position where such accusations can be made."<sup>349</sup>

SCOPE's official end date for volunteers was August 28 and there is no indication that any of the volunteers stayed passed that date. In a summary report of SCOPE's accomplishments that summer, Hosea Williams noted that out of 280 attempts to register, 90 Black voters were successful in Taliaferro through the efforts of the volunteers. Given Father Cooney's mid-July statement that they had not been able to successfully register any people until that point, the

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<sup>347</sup> "100 Negroes Stage Sitdown At Courthouse in Georgia," *The New York Times*, Sunday, August 15, 1965, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1965/08/15/96712807.html?pageNumber=80>.

<sup>348</sup> "Interesting Letter," *The Advocate-Democrat*, Friday, August 6, 1965, Crawfordville, Georgia, accessed on microfilm from the University of Georgia, paragraph 2.

<sup>349</sup> "Interesting Letter," *The Advocate-Democrat*, paragraph 5.

passage of the VRA was likely a boon to registration efforts.<sup>350</sup> In a county of fewer than 5,000 residents, having 90 people added to the rolls was significant. Even though questions remained about mismanagement of the voter registration roll, SCLC reported that because of SCOPE efforts, more Black people were registered than white people in Taliaferro.<sup>351</sup> Greatly helped by the number of Black people registered before SCOPE arrived, the project was notionally able to flip the political balance. Whether Black people would be allowed to cast their votes remained uncertain.

The benefit of the SCOPE organization in Taliaferro was best seen in the county's sustained direct-action campaign into the fall of 1965. While the volunteers left at the end of August, a number of SCOPE staff stayed, including Willie Bolden, and local teenagers who worked with SCOPE volunteers took on leadership roles. The catalyst for the revived direct-action campaign came on September 1, when the new academic year was supposed to start. On the first day of school, Black members of the county learned that the all-white Alexander Stephens Institute was shut down because all the white students transferred out of the county. The Taliaferro school system facilitated the transfers with the other counties on an agreement that Taliaferro would pay to bus the students to school.<sup>352</sup> After approving the transfers of almost 200 white students, "the Green and Warren County school systems testified and stated that they would be unable, because of crowded school conditions, to take any of the 87 Negro children who applied for transfer to the Taliaferro County white school."<sup>353</sup> The Black students were forced to remain at Murden while white families fled Taliaferro schools for neighboring districts.

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<sup>350</sup> Hosea Williams, "The Results of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's 1965 Summer Community Organization and Political Education Project," Civil Rights Movement Documents SCLC's SCOPE Project June 1965-March 1966, *Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement*, <https://www.crmvet.org/docs/scope65.pdf>, 4.

<sup>351</sup> Hosea Williams, "The Results of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's 1965 Summer Community Organization and Political Education Project," <https://www.crmvet.org/docs/scope65.pdf>, 2.

<sup>352</sup> *Turner v. Goolsby*, 255 F. Supp. 724 (S.D. Ga. 1966).

<sup>353</sup> *Turner v. Goolsby*, 255 F. Supp. 724 (S.D. Ga. 1966).

Within a week of Stephens' closure, SCLC set up a "Freedom School" to assume responsibility for hundreds of Black students' education. By October 7, at least 324 of the 585 Black students in Taliaferro were attending SCLC's Freedom School.<sup>354</sup> A press statement from Hosea Williams on September 23 noted that 75 Black students "stay at home because their parents have been so intimidated by white segregationists, many of them their employers, that they are not attending any school at all."<sup>355</sup> Because local white officials had "indicated their staunch unwillingness to abide by federal legislation" through circumventing desegregation orders, Williams directed his "staff in Taliaferro County to use all conceivable nonviolent means to bring public attention and pressure" to the county.<sup>356</sup> In sharp contrast to his hesitation earlier in the summer about SCOPE participating in demonstrations, Williams now called for a march from Taliaferro to Atlanta to bring the county's grievances to Georgia Governor Carl Sanders' doorstep.<sup>357</sup> In response, Sanders threatened to send the Freedom School students to reform school on the grounds that they were violating the state's compulsory schooling law.<sup>358</sup>

The closure of the Alexander Stephens Institute and denial of transfer applications sparked daily demonstrations. On September 17, five Black high school students were charged with interfering with school operations by urging other students to boycott Murden.

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<sup>354</sup> "Field reports from Georgia including voter registration statistics, reports from Taliaferro County, Chatham County voter registration campaign, African American school boycott and civil rights demonstrations in Taliaferro County, and report on Atlanta city elections of 1965, Records of the Voter Registration and Political Education Project, 1964-1965." FOLDER: 001569-019-0788. Jan 01, 1964 - Dec 31, 1965. Series IV, Records of the Voter Registration and Political Education Project, 1963-1968, Subseries 1, Office Files, 1963-1968, Subseries ii, Alphabetical File, 1963-1968. Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954-1970, Part 4: Records of the Program Department. ProQuest History Vault.

<https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001569-019-0788&accountid=14816>, page 25.

<sup>355</sup> "Field reports from Georgia including voter registration statistics..." FOLDER: 001569-019-0788, ProQuest History Vault, 7.

<sup>356</sup> "Field reports from Georgia including voter registration statistics..." FOLDER: 001569-019-0788, ProQuest History Vault, 9.

<sup>357</sup> "Field reports from Georgia including voter registration statistics..." FOLDER: 001569-019-0788, ProQuest History Vault, <https://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=001569-019-0788&accountid=14816>, 9.

<sup>358</sup> "School Boycott Hit As Violation of Law," *The Advocate-Democrat*, Crawfordville, GA, Friday, October 1, 1965, accessed on microfilm from the University of Georgia.



Superintendent Williams signed the warrants for the students' arrest.<sup>359</sup> The next week twelve more demonstrators were arrested including an SCLC staffer, Lynn Kilgore, and local teenager Fred Bates who were booked on "kidnapping" charges for transporting a Black student to the Freedom School.<sup>360</sup>

The daily protests took place at the bus stop for white students being transported to neighboring counties. Crowds of white parents, Black protestors (the vast majority of whom were teenagers), and law enforcement officers lined the streets around the bus stop as Black students attempted to board the buses. White children stuck their hands out of the open bus windows to wave to news cameramen as the three large yellow school buses reading "Taliaferro County Schools" pulled away. Each morning after the buses departed, the Black protestors got into their cars and followed the route to Warrenton Elementary and High School in Warren County where the majority of the white pupils were newly enrolled. About a dozen police officers in white helmets carrying batons lined the street in front of Warrenton, anticipating the protestors' arrival. When one car of Black protestors arrived at Warrenton on the morning of September 25, a group of white men on foot surrounded the car and attempted to force open the front passenger door. After the officers' continued verbal requests for the demonstrators to leave, the protestors eventually returned to their cars peacefully, and no one was injured.<sup>361</sup>

These protests continued daily through rain and shine for the next week. On October 5, the demonstrators took their protest to the abandoned Alexander Stephens Institute and staged a

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<sup>359</sup> "Five Arrested in Taliaferro," *The Advocate-Democrat*, Crawfordville, GA, Friday, September 17, 1965, accessed on microfilm from the University of Georgia.

<sup>360</sup> "Twelve Negroes Still Held in Taliaferro," *The Advocate-Democrat*, Crawfordville, GA, Friday, September 24, 1965, accessed on microfilm from the University of Georgia.

<sup>361</sup> WSB-TV (Television station: Atlanta, Ga.), "WSB-TV newsfilm clip of African American high school students protesting continued segregation of local schools following the transfer of all local white students to schools in neighboring counties, Crawfordville, Taliaferro County, Georgia; also African American students prevented from entering a school in Warrenton, Warren County, Georgia, 1965 September 25," 1965-09-25, accessed December 5, 2023, [http://crdl.usg.edu/do:ugabma\\_wsb\\_tv\\_wsb38841](http://crdl.usg.edu/do:ugabma_wsb_tv_wsb38841), 3:25.

sit-in on the front lawn. One student at the bus stop wore a jacket with “Freedom S.C.L.C.” emblazoned in hand-drawn letters on the back. After being denied at the bus stop, the crowd marched two-by-two to the Alexander Stephens Institute. Student demonstrators brought books and newspapers with them to stage a read-in. The leader told the group, “Everybody get comfortable, we’ll be here a while.”<sup>362</sup>

In response to the growing tension, Georgia State Senator Leroy Johnson, the first Black person to be elected to the state legislature since Reconstruction, held a press conference on October 4, to announce that he and a committee would be travelling to Crawfordville on a fact-finding mission. Senator Johnson described Crawfordville as “sitting on a powder keg” and made clear that he was in “complete disagreement with the Governor’s suggestion that the reformatory is a solution to the problem.”<sup>363</sup> Troubled by the Crawfordville Mayor’s statement that there was no plan for reconciliation, Senator Johnson argued that what Crawfordville needed most was true leadership and for the local and state government to enact integration in accordance with the law.

While Senator Johnson was visiting, Hosea Williams visited Taliaferro to lead a massive demonstration. Williams marched over 200 people down to the courthouse that night, demanding integration in the county. When asked whether he had discussed his fact-finding mission with Governor Carl Sanders, Senator Johnson replied, “He doesn’t consult me about what he does, and I don’t consult him about what I do.”<sup>364</sup> Williams delivered a more pointed criticism of

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<sup>362</sup> WSB-TV (Television station: Atlanta, Ga.), "WSB-TV newsfilm clip of African American students protesting continued school segregation in Crawfordville, Taliferro County, Georgia, 1965 October 5," 1965-10-05, accessed December 5, 2023, [http://crdl.usg.edu/do:ugabma\\_wsbw\\_wsbw39376](http://crdl.usg.edu/do:ugabma_wsbw_wsbw39376), (06:52).

<sup>363</sup> WSB-TV (Television station: Atlanta, Ga.), "WSB-TV newsfilm clip of state senator Leroy Johnson speaking about racial tensions over school desegregation following a fact-finding mission to Crawfordville from Atlanta, Georgia, 1965 October 4," 1965-10-04, accessed December 5, 2023, [http://crdl.usg.edu/do:ugabma\\_wsbw\\_wsbw48724](http://crdl.usg.edu/do:ugabma_wsbw_wsbw48724), Segment 1 (0:15) and Segment 2 (0:08-0:15).

<sup>364</sup> Don McKee, “Sen. Johnson Backs Taliaferro Negroes,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 4, 1965, accessed on ProQuest Historical Newspapers, <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/sen-johnson-backs-taliaferro-negroes/docview/1637049712/se-2?accountid=14816>.

Governor Sanders, taking his speech at the rally as an opportunity to call Sanders “nothing but an illiterate George Wallace.” He followed the comment by saying, “if it wasn’t for fools like Sanders, Georgia would be much harder (to integrate).”<sup>365</sup>

By mid-October, local white people were growing increasingly angry about the demonstrations. On October 15, *The Advocate-Democrat* ran five separate stories on its frontpage criticizing the SCLC and the demonstrators. Two days before, angry white people threw “taunts, fruits, and fists” at demonstrators.<sup>366</sup> With discontent growing, the decision over desegregation turned to the courts. The October 22 US District Court decision in *Turner v. Goolsby* transferred power over the desegregation plan to State School Superintendent Claude Purcell.<sup>367</sup> The court’s decision gave him three options: to bus the 87 Black students who applied to transfer to integrated schools in other counties, to bring the white students back to Taliaferro and reopen the Alexander Stephens Institute, or to do both.<sup>368</sup>

The demonstrators won the battle over school integration on November 18. Under the golden morning sun, 87 Black students boarded buses alongside white students to enroll at white schools in neighboring Warren, Wilkes, and Green counties. There were no incidents at the bus stop or upon entering the schools. A few adults and one police officer were on hand as the students arrived and watched the calm buses pull away.<sup>369</sup> The morning’s victory was just a first step in genuine desegregation. Bussing a select number of students to neighboring counties was neither sustainable nor genuinely inclusive as almost 500 Black students remained in segregated

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<sup>365</sup> McKee, “Sen. Johnson Backs Taliaferro Negroes.”

<sup>366</sup> “Violence At School Bus Stop,” *The Advocate-Democrat*, Crawfordville, GA, October 15, 1965, accessed on microfilm from the University of Georgia.

<sup>367</sup> *Turner v. Goolsby*, 255 F. Supp. 724 (S.D. Ga. 1966).

<sup>368</sup> “Purcell Pondering Taliaferro Ruling,” *The Advocate-Democrat*, Crawfordville, GA, reprinted from *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 22, 1965, accessed on microfilm from the University of Georgia.

<sup>369</sup> WSB-TV (Television station: Atlanta, Ga.), “White Children Fill Buses to be Transported to Black Schools,” 1965-11-18, [http://crdl.usg.edu/do:ugabma\\_wsb\\_n\\_wsb\\_n49023](http://crdl.usg.edu/do:ugabma_wsb_n_wsb_n49023).

classrooms. Calvin Turner and the Taliaferro civil rights movement continued to build on their progress in the following months and years, but integration and racial justice was in motion in Taliaferro.

## **Conclusion**

Across the board in Taliaferro, local leaders and SCOPE volunteers agreed that one of the project's most significant impacts was how the time spent between volunteers and local people shifted both groups' perspectives on each other. Over the course of the summer, Judy Van Allen and Candy Weber grew close to Deborah Long. In one of their conversations, Van Allen and Weber spent an hour trying to convince Long that race relations were different outside the South. Long adamantly refused to believe she would be allowed to walk in the front door of Weber's house in Seattle.<sup>370</sup> After the hour, Long conceded because she trusted Weber and Van Allen were truthful, but the interaction signaled that the volunteers' friendly presence could have an impact beyond quantifiable registration statistics.

Calvin Turner saw this dynamic clearly and told a Stanford student news volunteer that despite the volunteers' outsider status coming with inexperience, their presence helped inspire hope that racial conciliation was possible. One way the volunteers were helping was to "remove that fear, from the Negroes, that whites were always untruthful" and that they were always maneuvering to "take whatever they can from the Negro."<sup>371</sup> Even for Turner, being around the volunteers was eye opening. He told the Stanford student, there "have been things that I have always wondered about whites, that have more or less been cleared up in my mind."<sup>372</sup> Hosea

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<sup>370</sup> "Oral history interview with Judy Van Allen," 11.

<sup>371</sup> "Oral history interview with Calvin Turner," 6.

<sup>372</sup> "Oral history interview with Calvin Turner," 6.

Williams recognized a similar trend across the over fifty counties involved in SCOPE that summer. Williams described the “revelation” brought on by bringing people together.<sup>373</sup> For many of the local people that worked with SCOPE volunteers, it was the first time they encountered “sincere” white people that “were attempting at least to understand” the issues that afflicted their community.<sup>374</sup> Williams also felt that many of the volunteers had been changed by the summer. Having witnessed the realities of Southern racism, they would “never be the same.”<sup>375</sup>

These reflections reveal a painful but important dimension of this coalition-based organizing. That outsider status sometimes hindered the volunteers’ ability to integrate into communities and work at the discretion of local leaders was undeniable. Yet, at the same time, their presence produced positive outcomes in the social and individual realms. Black leaders, both from SCLC and those such as Turner in Taliaferro, consciously labeled the interpersonal benefits of bringing together a multiracial group. As shown in the SCOPE orientation, SCLC was committed to organizing for integrationist ends. As other civil rights groups such as SNCC, moved toward more separatist visions of autonomous Black political power, SCLC remained committed to working with white allies to advance citizenship rights for Black Americans.

In order to achieve these ends, the SCLC used the SCOPE volunteers to actualize national legislative gains on the ground. SCOPE volunteers and staff in Taliaferro County played an instrumental supplementary role to the development of the local movement for Black civil rights. While registering 90 people to vote should not be diminished, the secondary role that

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<sup>373</sup> Oral history interview with Hosea Williams, African-American, male, SCOPE director of summer project, 0337 (sides 1 and 2), Atlanta, Georgia. 0337.” KZSU Project South Interviews (SC0066), Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, California, Tape 0337, <https://purl.stanford.edu/zn429dv9370>, transcript page 4.

<sup>374</sup> “Oral history interview with Hosea Williams,” 4.

<sup>375</sup> “Oral history interview with Hosea Williams,” 6.

SCOPE volunteers played to the TCVL, Calvin Turner, and other local leaders and organizations was the project's greatest strength. Though local white people criticized the SCLC for entering the community and stoking racial tensions, the Taliaferro movement succeeded because local leaders dictated its strategy and organized around distinctly local issues. By having the SCOPE volunteers assist boycotters, drive picketers to and from downtown Crawfordville, help establish Head Start, and do the taxing work of canvassing, local leaders and people had room to pursue strategies they wanted and remained at the helm of the movement. While SCOPE volunteers did not always agree with Turner's decisions, their lack of control was the project's greatest strength because it ensured the movement continued when they left at the end of the summer.

Taliaferro SCOPE saw a more effective blend of the national and local arms of the Civil Rights Movement in terms of strategy and methods than Wilcox County, Alabama, helping propel faster wins and federal intervention on school desegregation. The federal government played an important role in school desegregation through court orders and mandating that state officials abide by integration rules. But federal intervention was spurred by local people and leaders. Just as in Wilcox, the prosperity of the Taliaferro movement was dependent on the vigor of local actors. The dance between the local and national elements of Taliaferro civil rights was twofold. On one hand, SCLC and local leaders worked to synthesize their respective goals and methods to confront the denial of Black citizenship rights. On the other hand, there was a dynamic interplay between local actions and federal intervention. Much of the Taliaferro civil rights action sought to force the hand of federal officials to step in and enforce civil rights. The federal government was a necessary actor, but it was also not a given. Federal intervention came to Taliaferro because local people, in conjunction with SCLC, made it. Therefore, there was a necessary and reinforcing relationship between the local and national movements. Local actors

had to fight not just for legislative protection but also for enforcement. Civil rights victories in Taliaferro were dependent on *both* a lively local movement and the help of federal courts and national organizations. Finding synthesis between the local and national civil rights movements was the key to Taliaferro's success.

## Conclusion

*“The plant of freedom has grown only a bud and not yet a flower.”*

– Martin Luther King Jr., 1967<sup>376</sup>

The Voting Rights Act was one of the most important legislative advancements in Black civil rights in the twentieth century. Nearly a century before President Johnson signed the VRA, the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution extended suffrage to Black men. The amendment proclaimed that the right “to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”<sup>377</sup> Voting discrimination on the basis of sex was later eliminated in 1920 with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment.<sup>378</sup> Together, these amendments were supposed to ensure broad suffrage rights. Yet when SCOPE volunteers arrived in Wilcox County, Alabama in June of 1965, no Black residents, either male or female, had voted in the county since Reconstruction.<sup>379</sup> Even in Taliaferro County, Georgia, where three-quarters of Black voters were registered, intimidation and threats from local white people kept many Black voters from exercising their right to vote.<sup>380</sup> Racially discriminatory practices abounded throughout the South in the forms of literacy tests, poll taxes, grandfather clauses, threats, violence, and outright refusal by local white election officials to allow Black people to vote. With the VRA on the horizon, SCOPE volunteers were

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<sup>376</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Martin Luther King Jr. Saw Three Evils in the World,” *The Atlantic*,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/martin-luther-king-hungry-club-forum/552533/>.

<sup>377</sup> U.S. Constitution, amend. 15, sec. 1, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/15th-amendment>.

<sup>378</sup> U.S. Constitution, amend. 19, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/19th-amendment>.

<sup>379</sup> Harriet Swift, “A New Day in Wilcox County: 1978,” *Southern Changes*, the Southern Regional Council, Vol. 1, No. 6, 1979, 16, [https://southernchanges.digitalscholarship.emory.edu/sc01-6\\_001/sc01-6\\_002/](https://southernchanges.digitalscholarship.emory.edu/sc01-6_001/sc01-6_002/).

<sup>380</sup> SCOPE press kit, 1965, Subseries 6.2, Box: 359, Folder: 3. Southern Christian Leadership Conference records, Manuscript Collection No. 1083, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, document with registration statistics by county.



sent across the South to make good on the decades old promise of full citizenship rights for Black Americans.

Hosea Williams' final report on the results of the project indicated that SCOPE volunteers registered almost 50,000 people out of nearly 69,000 cumulative attempts.<sup>381</sup> Of these, 1,200 registrations came from Wilcox and 90 from Taliaferro.<sup>382</sup> Between Joyce Brians' end-of-summer estimate of 500 registrations and the *New York Times*' 280-person figure from early July 1965, it is possible that Williams' report is slightly inflated or that most registrations came from late in the summer, just after VRA passage. Even taking the lowest estimates for both counties, SCOPE volunteers undeniably made important progress by registering hundreds of prospective voters. The comparatively low number of registrations in Taliaferro reflects the county's high existing registration rate (75.9 percent) and the community's primary interest in school desegregation efforts.<sup>383</sup>

While SCOPE volunteers made progress, they were hurt by the late passage of the VRA. In Wilcox County, significant increases in Black voter registration rates came when a federal examiner arrived in late August. By the summer of 1966, Black voters were a majority in Wilcox.<sup>384</sup> A similar balance existed in Taliaferro, despite its shift to school desegregation. Federal intervention was central and vital to the extension of Black voting rights. Without the

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<sup>381</sup> Sum of state totals provided by: Hosea Williams, "The Results of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's 1965 Summer Community Organization and Political Education Project," Civil Rights Movement Documents SCLC's SCOPE Project June 1965-March 1966, *Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement*, <https://www.crmvet.org/docs/scope65.pdf>. Exact sum is 49,518 but it is clear that the bottom of the document is cut off as a total for Florida is not indicated. This means the number likely meets or exceeds 50,000.

<sup>382</sup> Williams, "The Results of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's 1965 Summer Community Organization and Political Education Project," pages 3 and 4.

<sup>383</sup> Additionally, given the county's voting age population being 1,990, 90 people still constitutes 5% of eligible voters which could be a decisive margin in elections.

<sup>384</sup> Gene Roberts, "A Remarkable Thing Is Happening in Wilcox County, Ala.: A year ago it had no Negro voter. Today a 30-year-old Negro is running for sheriff—and could win," *The New York Times*, April 17, 1966. <http://proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/remarkable-thing-is-happening-wilcox-county-ala/docview/117110225/se-2?accountid=14816>.

full force of the federal government, SCOPE volunteers in coordination with local people and leaders registered people slowly. It took federal registrars just months to reverse the racial balance in voting power in counties where local and national civil rights efforts had been working for years. By the 1970s, national disparities in registration rates between white and Black voters fell from 30 percent to eight percent.<sup>385</sup> Just two years after VRA enactment, Black voter registration in Georgia and Louisiana nearly doubled, and in Mississippi the percentage of Black people registered to vote increased from just 6.7% to 59.8%.<sup>386</sup> Once it decided to act, the federal government took extreme interventionist steps to change voting in America.

Registration though, did not always mean cast ballots. In Wilcox, it took nearly a decade for a Black candidate to be elected to office, despite multiple candidates running.<sup>387</sup> Intimidation, threats, and violence from white employers and neighbors remained strong deterrents for Black people looking to vote. Federal registrars left when registration was complete but actually voting at the courthouse when federal officials were no longer there proved difficult. Economic reliance on white employers and landlords in small counties made defying those systems difficult. When outsiders and national organizations pulled out of counties, local civil rights leaders and movements were left with the challenges of completing the psychological and social change necessary to make Black citizenship and equality a norm in their communities. So while national organizations and legislative developments were crucial to SCOPE's successes, they could not have existed independent of local actors and actions. Through SCOPE, Williams brought SCLC's resources, press coverage, and outside volunteers to Taliaferro but Calvin Turner, Frank

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<sup>385</sup> Vishal Agraharkar, "50 Years Later, Voting Rights Act Under Unprecedented Assault," Brennan Center for Justice, August 2, 2015, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/50-years-later-voting-rights-act-under-unprecedented-assault>.

<sup>386</sup> Charles Bullock III, Ronald Gaddie, and Justin Wert, *The Rise and Fall of the Voting Rights Act* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press), 23.

<sup>387</sup> Harriet Swift, "A New Day in Wilcox County: 1978," *Southern Changes*, the Southern Regional Council, Vol. 1, No. 6, 1979, 16, [https://southernchanges.digitalscholarship.emory.edu/sc01-6\\_001/sc01-6\\_002/](https://southernchanges.digitalscholarship.emory.edu/sc01-6_001/sc01-6_002/).

Bates, and other locals were absolutely the principals in the county's sustained school desegregation protests. There were inherent limits to what could be done without local leaders and people.

Historical literature on SCOPE has often ignored the stories of these local leaders that negotiated the balance between the national SCLC project and their specific county's needs. The national focus of historians such as David Garrow, Taylor Branch, Rolundus Rice, and others, has eclipsed the fact that SCLC was heavily reliant on local leaders to manage SCOPE volunteers and their activities. The friction, interpersonal relationships, and community-specific dynamics that affected and were changed by SCOPE's presence cannot be left out of the project's story. While most of the existing literature privileges SCLC executive debates about the project, the real story of SCOPE exists in varied county-level experiences. Prescribed national organizational plans for the project were too rigid to be implemented in the same way everywhere. Each county had its own needs, and where SCOPE could be flexible and adapt to those nuances, it contributed in important ways to the development of local civil rights movements as outside volunteers became agents of local social change.

The years following SCOPE also brought new challenges for many of the volunteers as they navigated life after SCOPE. Most volunteers went back to their schools, families, and communities. Dealing with lasting physical debilitation and struggling to mentally adjust back to 'normal' life, Wilcox SCOPE volunteer Joyce Briens found the transition back to San Francisco difficult. Upon her return, she noticed a distinct change in people's response and interest in the Southern civil rights fight. The Friends of SNCC chapter she had previously been a member of told her that white people were no longer welcome as members.<sup>388</sup> Former activist friends'

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<sup>388</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 158.

attention had moved on to Black Power or anti-Vietnam War protesting.<sup>389</sup> Brians recalled that “there didn’t seem to be anyone who wanted to hear about voter registration or ongoing racism in the South.”<sup>390</sup> Even when she was praised by people for her involvement in the movement, she “felt like [she] was getting credit [she] didn’t deserve.”<sup>391</sup> The criminal record she acquired in Wilcox disqualified her from more traditional jobs such as bank work in California.<sup>392</sup> Brians’ perspective on the world was radically changed during SCOPE but she was gripped by an intense feeling of dislocation. Everyone around her had moved on, but she was mentally stuck in Wilcox.

In many ways, the Civil Rights Movement and activism did change in the years that followed. Voting rights and accessibility remained a key site of organizing and civil rights work, but other issues were becoming central. Earlier in 1965 while speaking at Howard University, Martin Luther King Jr. publicly criticized the Vietnam War for the first time.<sup>393</sup> King often dulled his public criticisms of US involvement in Vietnam in order to maintain amicable relations with President Johnson, but by early 1967, he was openly and vocally opposed to the war. At a March 1967 protest, King told the crowd, “The bombs in Vietnam explode at home—they destroy the dream and possibility for a decent America.”<sup>394</sup> King took both a moral stance against war and disagreed on principle with sending young Black men across the world to fight for “liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East

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<sup>389</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 159.

<sup>390</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 159.

<sup>391</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 159.

<sup>392</sup> Gitin, *This Bright Light of Ours*, 160.

<sup>393</sup> “Vietnam War,” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/vietnam-war#:~:text=King%20led%20his%20first%20anti,King%20Leads%20Chicago%E2%80%9D>.

<sup>394</sup> “Vietnam War,” Stanford University.

Harlem.”<sup>395</sup> Voting rights were not substituted by anti-war activism but the breadth of issues had expanded.

In 1967, while addressing a meeting of an organization that discreetly brought white politicians together with Black leaders, King spoke about what he called the “triple evils of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism.”<sup>396</sup> In King’s view, the movement was “moving into a new phase of the struggle” which would go much further toward realizing equality for Black citizens than previous organizing.<sup>397</sup> With the destruction of the basic tenets of Jim Crow, the Black freedom struggle was now tackling the intersecting and entrenched issues of poverty, education, militarism, housing, and employment. King told the crowd:

You see, the gains in the first period, or the first era of struggle, were obtained from the power structure at bargain rates; it didn’t cost the nation anything to integrate lunch counters. It didn’t cost the nation anything to integrate hotels and motels. It didn’t cost the nation a penny to guarantee the right to vote. Now we are in a period where it will cost the nation billions of dollars to get rid of poverty, to get rid of slums, to make quality integrated education a reality. This is where we are now. Now we’re going to lose some friends in this period. The allies who were with us in Selma will not all stay with us during this period.<sup>398</sup>

This new phase would be harder in many ways. Reckoning with the nation’s imperialist tendencies and framing poverty as the result of resource allocation choices instead of a natural phenomenon presented a fundamental challenge to the nation’s identity and character. These were structural critiques of the nation’s foundational systems and principles.

Despite King’s pronouncement about entering a new phase of the Black freedom struggle, Wilcox and Taliaferro counties show that the first phase was not actually complete. For many Black people in rural Southern counties, the fight for true voting rights and school

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<sup>395</sup> “Vietnam War,” Stanford University.

<sup>396</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Martin Luther King Jr. Saw Three Evils in the World,” *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/martin-luther-king-hungry-club-forum/552533/>.

<sup>397</sup> King, “Martin Luther King Jr. Saw Three Evils in the World.”

<sup>398</sup> King, “Martin Luther King Jr. Saw Three Evils in the World.”

integration, the aims of the early Civil Rights Movement, continued well into the 1970s. While King may have been entering a new phase, local leaders such as those in Wilcox and Taliaferro were still organizing for phase one objectives such as voting and integration. For many local civil rights movements, substantive gains lagged behind legal victories, illustrating the importance of centering local perspectives in understanding the transformation in Black civil rights.

The VRA dramatically changed the terms of voter registration organizing as the federal government now played an interventionist role. Williams' SCOPE project was the last voter registration drive of its scale before the original passage of the VRA. Between 1965 and 2006, the Voting Rights Act was reauthorized (with amendments) five times: in 1970, 1975, 1982, 1992, and 2006.<sup>399</sup> During reauthorization proposals, there was "passionate debate about the proper roles of the federal government and the states" in ensuring racial equality in elections.<sup>400</sup> Despite this, with each new authorization, Congressional support remained consistently strong. In 2006, forty years after the VRA's original passage, the Senate voted 98-0 and the House voted 390-33 to reauthorize the act.<sup>401</sup>

While Congress was voting to renew the VRA by wide margins, the Republican party was contriving plans to dismantle Black voting rights. Under the guise of a "ballot integrity" initiative, Republicans spent the 1980s pushing voter disenfranchisement. In 1982, the Republican National Committee (RNC) entered into a consent decree with the Democratic National Committee (DNC) that "agreed to allow a federal court to review proposed 'ballot

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<sup>399</sup> R. Sam Garrett, "The Voting Rights Act: Historical Development and Policy Background," *Congressional Research Service*, April 25, 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47520>, 2.

<sup>400</sup> Garrett, "The Voting Rights Act: Historical Development and Policy Background," 2.

<sup>401</sup> "All Information (Except Text) for H.R.9 - Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, and Coretta Scott King Voting Rights Act Reauthorization and Amendments Act of 2006," roll call vote, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/109th-congress/house-bill/9/all-info>.

security’ programs.”<sup>402</sup> While the consent decree was supposed to curb discriminatory voting acts, Republicans continued to use a process called ‘caging’ to take voters off the rolls. In their caging, the RNC sent letters to voters in districts that voted 75 percent or more for the Democratic presidential nominee in 1984.<sup>403</sup> If letters were returned as undeliverable, Republicans could then challenge that resident’s voter registration and have them taken off the rolls. Prior to the consent decree, the DNC accused the RNC of caging communities of color in New Jersey.<sup>404</sup> Though seemingly racially neutral, the program was targeted at Black voters, particularly those in a Louisiana Senate primary. The Middle Western regional director for the RNC, Kris Wolfe, wrote in a memo, “I would guess that this program will eliminate at least 60,000-80,000 folks from the rolls. If it’s a close race, which I’m assuming it is, this could keep the black vote down considerably.”<sup>405</sup> Wolfe’s comment revealed racial motive in the RNC’s allegedly race-neutral interest in voter rolls. Between 1987 and 2004, the RNC violated the consent decree at least three times in efforts to purge Black voters from registration rolls.<sup>406</sup> Within a few decades of the VRA passage, opponents to Black voting rights had developed supposedly race-blind schemes to disenfranchise Black voters in key elections.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century brought even more challenges to voting access that have seriously imperiled Black voting rights. In 2013 the Supreme Court of the United States gutted the VRA’s most essential provisions. Debate around the VRA’s constitutionality centered mostly on

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<sup>402</sup> “DNC v. RNC Consent Decree,” The Brennan Center for Justice, November 5, 2016, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/court-cases/dnc-v-rnc-consent-decree>.

<sup>403</sup> Martin Tolchin, “G.O.P. Memo Tells of Black Vote Cut: Document is Disclosed Under Court Order—Goals of Program Are Defended,” *The New York Times*, October 25, 1986, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1986/10/25/792286.html?pageNumber=7>.

<sup>404</sup> Vann R. Newkirk II, “The Republican Party Emerges From Decades of Court Supervision,” *The Atlantic*, January 9, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/01/the-gop-just-received-another-tool-for-suppressing-votes/550052/>.

<sup>405</sup> Tolchin, “G.O.P. Memo Tells of Black Vote Cut.”

<sup>406</sup> Newkirk II, “The Republican Party Emerges From Decades of Court Supervision.”

Sections 4(b) and 5 of the bill that together established a “preclearance” system.<sup>407</sup> Preclearance required any state with a history of discrimination in voting to submit proposed changes to election law, procedures, or practices for federal “clearance” before implementation. In a departure from the Court’s precedent of exercising deference to Congress regarding voting laws, the *Shelby County v. Holder* decision struck down Section 4(b)’s coverage formula for preclearance as unconstitutional.<sup>408</sup> The majority opinion was authored by Chief Justice John Roberts. Roberts’ main issue with Section 4(b) was that it relied on voter data from 1965 to determine which counties had severe enough racial discrimination in voting to trigger the bill’s interventionary procedures. The majority opinion said that Congress’s failure to update the formula from its original 1965 form, left the Court “with no choice but to declare [Section] 4(b) unconstitutional.”<sup>409</sup>

While the majority opinion cited the use of old data, the *Shelby* decision was also about whether the Court thought that racial discrimination in voting still existed. Roberts’ opinion said that while the original VRA “employed extraordinary measures to address an extraordinary problem,” no such problem existed anymore. “There is no denying, however,” wrote Roberts, “that the conditions that originally justified these measures no longer characterize voting in the covered jurisdictions.”<sup>410</sup> Justice Clarence Thomas’ concurring opinion went further by quoting a previous decision to say, “Blatantly discriminatory evasions of federal decrees are rare. And minority candidates hold office at un-precedented levels.”<sup>411</sup> Not only was the preclearance

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<sup>407</sup> “About Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act,” The United States Department of Justice (The United States Department of Justice, July 14, 2022), <https://www.justice.gov/crt/about-section-5-voting-rights-act>.

<sup>408</sup> *Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529, Supreme Court of the United States, (2013) in Nexis Uni, <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/api/document?collection=cases&id=urn:contentItem:58RJ-V331-F04K-F07T-00000-00&context=1516831> (accessed March 2024).

<sup>409</sup> *Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529.

<sup>410</sup> *Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529.

<sup>411</sup> *Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529, (Justice Thomas concurring opinion).



formula out-of-date, but racial discrimination in voting was supposedly a practice of a bygone era that no longer required vigilant attention.

Roberts' and Thomas' opinions were a dangerous abandonment of some of the nation's strongest protections of citizenship rights for all. In her dissenting opinion, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg noted that eliminating the preclearance regime "is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet."<sup>412</sup> "Hubris is a fit word for today's demolition of the VRA" declared Ginsburg. Then in his fourteenth term in the United States House of Representatives, John Lewis, the former SNCC chairman who stood side-by-side with Hosea Williams on Bloody Sunday back in 1965, expressed his deep objection to the Court's opinion. He was "shocked, dismayed, and disappointed."<sup>413</sup> As a veteran of the Black freedom struggle, Lewis knew what it was like to stand tall in the face of violent institutionalized racism. He had been beaten alongside others in the fight for Black voting rights. Having lived the denial of Black voting rights, he took the Court's decision "very personally."<sup>414</sup> Lewis was acutely aware of the dangerous contingencies of the Court's elimination of the preclearance regime. Without the ability to determine which counties had sufficient histories of discrimination, the federal government could not proactively stop the implementation of new discriminatory policies.

The *Shelby* decision highlighted the tenuous nature of relying on federal intervention to protect voting rights. As the SCOPE project shows, the guarantee of Black voting and citizenship rights is defined by and relies on the interplay among local and national actors and movements. Federal intervention can be decisive, but it can also be unreliable, limited, and eliminated by Supreme Court rulings. The local arm of the Civil Rights Movement was essential to creating the

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<sup>412</sup> *Shelby County v. Holder*, 570 U.S. 529, (Justice Ginsburg dissenting opinion).

<sup>413</sup> Ari Berman, *Give us the Ballot: The Modern Struggle for Voting Rights in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 283.

<sup>414</sup> Berman, *Give us the Ballot*, 283.

deeply personal and community-based transitions that created atmospheres where it was socially and economically safe to vote. When federal registrars left, it was local actors who scouted and assisted Black candidates in running campaigns to represent constituents. The SCOPE project was a part of the cyclical relationship between the local and national fights for Black voting rights that incrementally made good on the nation's promise of justice and equality under the law. The strength, longevity, and indigeneity of local movements were central to the success of SCOPE projects and the Civil Rights Movement as a whole and will continue to be key in the fight for universal suffrage.

Many of the local people and leaders that SCOPE volunteers and staff worked closely with in order to build up local movements were Black women. Though they rarely held official positions of authority, they were absolutely essential to the project's success as crucial community leaders. In Wilcox and Taliaferro, Black women were vital bearers of cultural and community legitimacy, and they extended that to volunteers. This made the difference in volunteers' trustworthiness and ability to work with local Black residents. Black female teenagers spent long, grueling days canvassing with SCOPE volunteers in Wilcox and protesting school segregation in Taliaferro. Their centrality in the movement was not in spite of their social position as women – it was because of it. Administering the SCOPE project required significant expenditures in daily needs as well as the ability to enter an unknown place and quickly convince people to work with you. Black women were often the community figures that provided the volunteers with shelter, food, and most importantly, safety. Their hospitality signaled trust and their knowledge of community dynamics helped volunteers strategize. Though frequently neglected in existing secondary literature on the Civil Rights Movement, the SCOPE project would not have been able to enact the same level of change without Black women.

Future research on SCOPE and the Civil Rights Movement should continue to expound on the role that local Black women played in bridging the gap between outside volunteers and local people. The role of Black women in the Civil Rights Movement is the subject of some secondary literature that examines their roles as organizers and leaders, the influence of sexual and gender-based violence by white men against Black women on the trajectory of the movement, and more.<sup>415</sup> SCOPE is a particularly apt case study for examining local Black women's role because of its geographic breadth and its intersection between the local and the national arms of the Civil Rights Movement. Analyzing the unnamed roles that Black women played could also build on our understandings of social movement leadership and hierarchy by revealing distinctly local and female positions. In addition to focusing on local Black women who were community leaders, future histories of SCOPE should critically examine the role that Black teenage girls played in the project. In many counties, including Taliaferro and Wilcox, Black teenage girls were the foot soldiers of the project. They attended protests, canvassed, disseminated information to advance the work of SCOPE, and gave a particularly young and female character to the movement that is not frequently highlighted.

Similarly, the breadth of the SCOPE project leaves room for more comprehensive classification and categorization of county projects. This thesis picked two counties for their similar characteristics but divergent experiences to show a range of SCOPE experiences, but further study could investigate whether patterns emerge across all of the counties or if common categories link counties together. This would allow for synthesis across local histories to help

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<sup>415</sup> Further reading see: Keisha Blain, *Until I Am Free: Fannie Lou Hamer's Enduring Message to America*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2021); Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – a New History of the Civil Rights Movement*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

establish whether there was a normative, or set of normative local experiences in the broader movement. Using SCOPE as a lens could provide helpful information on how local conditions impact social movement success and inform how national organizations and actors interact with various communities.

Local people will continue to play an essential role in ensuring the maintenance of voting rights for all. Though explicit racial discrimination in voting is banned, local election officials continue to use their discretionary powers to impact voter rolls and accessibility. On issues of early voting, mail-in ballots, ballot qualification, voter registration, poll worker training, and resource allocation, local election officials make decisions that impact who can vote. In their policy brief for Harvard University's Roy and Lila Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, Hannah Furstenberg-Beckman, Greg Degen, and Tova Wang argue that "this autonomy and local discretion is the cornerstone of election administration in the United States."<sup>416</sup>

This local control has both advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, local officials can use their power to adjust local voting procedures to the specific contours and needs of their community, thereby increasing enfranchisement. At the same time, local officials can abuse these powers to prevent certain people from voting, creating "vast inequities in the voting system, in ways that often disproportionately negatively impact historically disenfranchised communities of color."<sup>417</sup> Under the current patchwork system, the authors write that "there is an urgent need to empower communities with the information to understand the role and authority

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<sup>416</sup> Hannah Furstenberg-Beckman, Greg Degen, and Tova Wang, "Understanding the Role of Local Election Officials: How Local Autonomy Shapes U.S. Election Administration," Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government (September 2021), [https://ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/role\\_of\\_local\\_election\\_officials.pdf?m=1632410559](https://ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/role_of_local_election_officials.pdf?m=1632410559), 2.

<sup>417</sup> Furstenberg-Beckman, Degen, and Wang, 3.

of their local election officials and to share approaches for how to partner with those local officials to ensure that every eligible voter can access the ballot and have their vote counted.”<sup>418</sup> This policy recommendation ultimately argues that local people will have to continue to fight for their citizenship rights.

The local control of election administration in turn means that future voting rights activism will need to come from the grassroots. Solutions to persistent voter disenfranchisement need to harness the energy of local people and center their specific concerns and experiences. The SCOPE project demonstrated the importance of synthesizing national projects to local ones. Using a national platform and volunteer base to amplify the county-specific dynamics of Southern racial discrimination in voting shows that the local and national civil rights movements did not exist independent of each other. Local incidents animated residents who in turn relentlessly demanded the citizenship and civic rights the United States government had failed to uphold for *all* citizens. The nation’s current decentralized voting system will continue to allow people, particularly marginalized groups, to fall through the gaps. Local leaders, with the support of national organizations, supporters, and groups will need to continue to fight until all citizens have the ability, not just the right, to vote.

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<sup>418</sup> Furstenberg-Beckman, Degen, and Wang, 21.

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