

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Selma-to-Montgomery
National Historic Trail

Teachers March through Selma

January 22, 1965

"This march by the teachers, the largest professional group in the city and the county, enlisted others to come and join the movement."

--Rev. Frederick Reese

As the year 1965 opened, the active movement to achieve voting rights in Dallas County and the surrounding central Alabama counties was widespread. The Dallas County Voters League (DCVL), planning staffs of both the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), had outlined a program of action that included mass meetings and protests in Selma and the surrounding counties. The immediate goal was to force an end to the court injunction placed on mass gatherings and to test the efficacy of the Civil Rights Act passed the previous year. Further, it was hoped that their efforts might achieve, through concerted action, a solid commitment from the newly-elected Johnson administration to support a voting rights bill in Congress.

Selma protests breeds violent response

In Selma, protest activity focused on integrating local restaurants and the Hotel Albert. The other focal point of action was the Dallas County Courthouse where non-violent measures taken to register African Americans to vote met with violence from the Dallas County sheriff's deputies under the direction of Sheriff Jim Clark. The courthouse building also held the Selma City Jail where many activists had been unlawfully incarcerated. Clark's actions heightened public



awareness and ultimately support for the grassroots voting rights effort in central Alabama. It became clear to the organizers that any active measure taken would provoke a violent response from Sheriff Clark.

Teachers become engaged in protest

In this season of protest, the primary participants, thus far, had been college and high school students aligned with SNCC and religious leaders associated with SCLC. Many other residents sympathized with the movement but had not yet participated in direct action. Such was particularly true in the larger African-American business and professional community which had not yet responded to the hostile climate, in opposition to voting rights, provided by the Selma and Dallas County law enforcement authorities. But on January 22, 1965, a new and distinct group of voting rights supporters assumed the mantle of freedom in Selma.

Rev. Frederick D. Reese, a minister, educator and president of the Dallas County Voters' League (DCVL), was successful in coalescing a core group of 105 African-American teachers to participate in a march with the intent of registering to vote. The group began their journey from Clark Elementary School, located near the George Washington Carver Homes, and continued on to the steps of the Dallas County courthouse.

The teacher-participants, as well as Rev. Reese, faced threats of termination from the leadership of the School Board which failed to stem their determination to execute the march.

Teachers' actions garner tremendous support

After arriving at the courthouse, Rev. Reese was repeatedly assaulted by Sheriff Clark as he attempted to enter the courthouse for the purpose of voter registration. After a final attempt, the marchers led by Rev. Reese returned to Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church. This valiant effort was a strategic victory for the supporters of free voting in Alabama. Other groups of organized professionals soon followed the example set by Rev. Reese and the African-American teachers and the movement gained new momentum as the debate over voting rights became a major issue in Washington.