



Martyrs of the Movement I

While the intended course of the movement to affirm the right to vote for African Americans in Alabama was non-violent, the movement to affect change was violently opposed throughout the Civil Rights period. The violence experienced by civil rights leaders and participants took many forms, from psychological intimidation to murder. Few of the perpetrators were ever brought to justice.

There were many victims of this violence throughout Alabama and the South, but over the years, memorials and commemorations have focused on a representative few. Among them were a group of active participants in a series of initiatives ranging from Marion to Montgomery, Alabama between February and August of 1965. Each of these martyrs of the central Alabama freedom movement was associated with a specific event or phase in the achievement of full voting rights for all citizens.

Jimmie Lee Jackson, February 26, 1965

In the winter of 1964-65, the leaders of the Dallas County Voters League (DCVL), the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were engaged in developing a plan for challenging restrictions to voter registration in central Alabama. In Selma, a court injunction had prevented open gatherings and protests by civil rights activists had been broken by a group of DCVL members dubbed "The Courageous Eight." Then in Marion, Perry County, on February 18, 1965, the first night march of the movement that led from Zion's Chapel Methodist Church to the county jail to protest the incarceration of activists became a focal point of action and resistance.

During this event, Alabama State Troopers who had been brought in to augment Marion police led an unprovoked assault on the non-violent marchers. In the ensuing melee, a young African-American activist, Jimmie Lee Jackson, fled into a nearby café where he was shot as he attempted to protect his mother and grandfather. Jimmie Lee Jackson died eight days later at Good Samaritan Hospital in Selma. The murder of Jackson initiated a plan to conduct a march to the Alabama State Capitol in Montgomery to bring focus upon the cause of voting rights and the attendant violence that had plagued their efforts.

Rev. James Reeb, March 11, 1965

On Sunday, March 7, 1965, over 300 local activists, led by John Lewis, Hosea Williams, Bob Mants, and Albert Turner, crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge to be confronted by Alabama State Troopers, which resulted in the infamous "Bloody Sunday." Two days later, on March 9th, in response to a challenge and call from Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., religious leaders from across the country repeated the march to the Edmund Pettus Bridge. At the end of the bridge, they conducted a session of prayer and then returned to their departure point at Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church in Selma, thus ending the "Ministers' March."

Following the "Ministers' March," also known as "Turnaround Tuesday," that evening in Selma, a small group of ministers commiserated over the day's events and considered what measures would be taken next in pursuit of voting justice. Among this number was a young Unitarian minister from Boston, Massachusetts, Rev. James Reeb. In company with two other ministers, Rev. Reeb was leaving Walker's Café (today Strong's Cafeteria #2) when four white men leaving the segregationist Silver Moon Café, located on the corner next to Walker's, assaulted the group. Rev. Reeb was mortally wounded by a head blow from a blunt instrument in the hands of one segregationist. He died two days later at the University of Alabama, Birmingham Hospital.