

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Selma-to-Montgomery
National Historic Trail

S.C.O.P.E.



SCOPE volunteers Peter Geffen (right) and Moshe Shur with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1965. Photo used with author's permission from *The Scope of Freedom* by Willy Leventhal.

During the summer of 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. assigned the Rev. Hosea L. Williams to lead an initiative to register new voters in 120 counties in six southern states (AL, GA, FL, VA, SC, and NC). The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)-Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) project volunteers, predominately-white college students led by African-American community activists, registered more than 49,000 new black voters.

The need for SCOPE workers

In the spring of 1965, as the Voting Rights movement in Selma and the Selma-Montgomery March were challenging the segregated status quo, the struggle was far from over. The SCLC had decided that there was a need for white college students to journey south to join with local activists—to both prepare disenfranchised African Americans for voting, and if necessary, conduct street demonstrations that would put political pressure on the Congress should the proposed Voting Rights Bill

of 1965 be met with congressional resistance and stalling, or even filibuster.

Training SCOPE volunteers

The SCOPE project began with a week-long training orientation at Morris Brown College in Atlanta led by Bayard Rustin, the organizer of the 1963 March on Washington. The orientation “faculty” included leaders from the movement, labor, government, academia, as well as Dr. King, Rev. Andrew Young, Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Junius Griffin, Rev. James Bevel, Stoney Cooks, Gwen Green and others on the SCLC Staff.

SCOPE volunteers in action

Initially, SCLC wanted 2,000 volunteers, and those who came sometimes were transferred or assigned to more than one county by their leader, Hosea Williams (a combat-decorated WWII veteran). Overall roughly 500 predominately-white college volunteers, representing nearly 100 universities, were deployed into 90 of the 120 SCOPE-targeted counties in the six states. The students were housed with African-American families who were paid \$15 a week for their room and board, which barely covered expenses. About 40 of the college volunteers were asked to join the SCLC Field Staff. They were then paid a subsistence salary of \$5 a week, with the African-American community providing housing and meals. Key Field Staff veterans from other SCLC campaigns were assigned to the SCOPE project including Rev. Willie Bolden, Rev. James Orange, Ben Van Clark, Jimmie L. Wells, Lula Williams, Gloria Wise, Pat Simpson, R.B. Cottonreader, J.T. Johnson, Tom Houck, Dana Swan, “Big Lester” Hankerson, Leon Hall, Ben “Sunshine” Owens and others.

The work of SCOPE produces measurable results

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was first passed due in part to the work of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, as well as other civil rights organizations. These organizations mobilized tens of thousands of local activists who risked their lives to assure democracy for all. With the reauthorization of this landmark legislation in 2006, it is fitting that we reflect upon the contributions of these grassroots volunteers who helped in the passage of the initial Voting Rights Act of 1965.