

Grade
Level:
Advanced,
grades 11-12

The Beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi

US History, Black History, Social Studies: Civil/Human Rights, Economics, and Culture

Learning Objectives:

- To understand why many claim that the Civil Rights Movement started only in 1954
- To understand why White southerners responded so negatively to the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision
- To learn why the Citizens' Councils formed and with what effect
- To learn about the historical public arguments White people made about Black Mississippians
- To understand what motivated the reaction against Fannie Lou Hamer's activism

Necessary Materials:

- The [Murder of Emmett Till](#)
- The [Supreme Court's Brown decision](#).
- December 1955 [speech](#) by James O. Eastland
- The ["Confession"](#) by Emmett Till's killers
- [Photograph](#) of Citizens' Council meeting house in Indianola.
- [Letter](#) to parents previewing and explaining the controversial and sensitive nature of this particular lesson plan

Background Knowledge:

Teachers should consult the Supreme Court's [verdict](#) in the May 17, 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling to see on what legal grounds the Court argued that segregated schools were inherently inferior schools. Basic sources on the [Citizens' Councils](#) should also be consulted in order to connect the threat of interracial schools with the threat of interracial relationships and marriage. Students should be made aware of the fact that integration was seen, first and foremost, as a sexual threat—that Black boys would have intimate access to White girls; this would lead to the feared "mongrelization" of the White race. Hortense Powdermaker's [After Freedom](#) provides excellent historical fieldwork from her research in Indianola,

Mississippi and Stephanie R. Rolph's book [Resisting Equality: The Citizens' Council](#), 1954-1989 provides extensive background information about this influential White supremacist organization.

Instruction Steps:

Anticipatory Set

Step One: Read aloud key segments of the Supreme Court's *Brown* verdict, highlighting those portions featuring the effects of segregation on Black schoolchildren. Have each student read a sentence or two so that each gets to participate in the reading.

After reading together, watch the first 5-8 minutes of *The Murder of Emmett Till*. Underscore that Till was murdered by men strongly influenced by the rhetoric of the Citizens' Councils.

With overhead projection, and using Google Maps, you may wish to show how close Indianola, MS is to Money, MS.

Guided Practice

Step Two: The aim in this step is to draw a bold line (you may wish to do this on the board) from May 17, 1954 to July 11, 1954, and then to August 28, 1955. Clarify the significance of each date: the first is the *Brown* decision, the second is the formation of the first Citizens' Council in Indianola, and the third date is when Emmett Till was kidnapped and lynched.

The key move in this step is getting students to understand why so many White people in the South were horrified and very angry about the *Brown* verdict. This will be hard. It involves the threat of interracial relationships (White girls, Black boys). Students will need to understand that following slavery, and to keep Black southerners in a state of terror, public lynching was employed. Many times these lynchings were prompted by a claim that a White woman had been assaulted or threatened by a Black man. White people in the South grew up believing that Black men were

inherently attracted to White women, and could not control themselves around them. The threat of lynching could create enough fear, it was thought, to keep black men in their place. Guilt motivated White men to project onto Black men their worst fears. Why? Because White men had systematically raped Black women for centuries during slavery.

Step Three: Project an image of the Citizen’s Council house in Indianola, and have students comment on the house and what sort of person might live in that house and that particular neighborhood. The aim here is to get students thinking about economic class, specifically how White men could control Black behavior through economic means. Emphasis should be placed on the fact that the Citizens’ Council did not want to be the Ku Klux Klan; its membership sought a social respectability that the Klan didn’t have.

Who was at that first meeting? Plantation managers, bankers and lawyers. Why? The key here is to get students to do a bit of role playing: if a student is a banker, for example, how can they hurt a Black man or woman who has an outstanding loan, or someone who needs credit to run a store? In other words, show students how economics was leveraged to punish blacks seeking more freedoms. Economics was its own form of racial violence.

Step Four: Watch the trial section of *The Murder of Emmett Till*, then read out loud with students the closing of the William Bradford Huie “Confession” article.

Ask the students this question: what does J. W. Milam’s decision to kill Emmett Till have to do with the Brown verdict? What was the “poison” Till was supposedly filled with, and who filled him with it?

Be sure to let students know that the Huie so-called “Confession” article is a series of lies made by Bryant and Milam to keep their “friends” from being tried for kidnapping and murder. Since they had been declared “not guilty” on September 23, they were free to confess.

We know from Willie Reed, who was an eyewitness to Till’s torture and murder, that many men were involved in the crime, not just Milam and Bryant.

Step Five: One of the most powerful men in the U.S. Senate in 1955 was Senator James O. Eastland, who lived in Doddsville, Sunflower County, Mississippi. Eastland was one of the main mouthpieces for the Citizens’ Councils, speaking on their behalf throughout the Deep South as well as in Washington, D.C.

Read several key parts of his December 1, 1955 address out loud, notably those sections that deal with “miscegenation” and “amalgamation.” What are these terms code for? Why did they need to be phrased in code?

Independent Application or Group Work

Step Six: Have students author a song or poem in which they adopt the persona of Fannie Lou Hamer remembering Emmett Till. The song can be in any genre, perhaps ones that your students are most familiar with. If students are comfortable, have them share their lyrics on the board with the entire class.

Closure

Step Seven: This is a very hard lesson plan, but we shouldn’t avert our gaze from the hard history it confronts. Frankly, if we don’t know the people and the ideology that Fannie Lou Hamer was up against—beginning in her very own county—we do her bravery and mission a grave disservice.

Lesson Plan Author: Davis W. Houck

Davis Houck is the Fannie Lou Hamer Professor of Rhetorical Studies at Florida State University, where he has taught since 2000. He has authored or edited 12 books including *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is* (with Maegan Parker Brooks).

