

Grade  
Level:  
Adaptable,  
grades 9-12

# The Origins of Fannie Lou Hamer's Civil Rights Activism and Why It Matters

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

*This curricular unit is written to span two class sessions.*

## Learning Objectives:

- To discover the origins of Fannie Lou Hamer's civil rights activism can be traced back to her childhood.
- To gain a deeper appreciation of her late in life activism, by more fully understanding why the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was organizing in the Mississippi Delta.
- To learn how Mrs. Hamer and SNCC persuaded fellow Black Mississippians to begin the process of becoming citizens.
- To critically consider the multiple barriers to activism, rooted in a brief exploration of Black Deltans' lived experiences in the early-to-mid Twentieth Century.

## Provided Materials

- Drew Leader newspaper article, December 21, 1923, p. 1. [“Negro Runs Amok. 4 Killed and 6 Wounded Near Drew.”](#) (there are several additional newspaper articles reporting on the incident, if your class is interested in researching further.)
- The Negro World newspaper article, [“Died With His Boots On!”](#)
- [Freedom Vote Mock Ballot](#)
- Fannie Lou Hamer September 1964 [Speech in Indianola](#)
- Fannie Lou Hamer, [“To Praise Our Bridges,”](#) in which Hamer recounts the “Joe Pulliam” story (transcript); [audio version](#)
- Film [“Mississippi and the 15th Amendment”](#)
- [Mississippi population map](#) by county and race and registered voters
- [Picture of Pullum's Corner in the Drew Cemetery](#)

## Background Knowledge:

To learn more about the Joe Pullum story that informed Hamer's early understanding of Black resistance to White Supremacist violence, you can consult the

Wikipedia page on “Joe Pullen” for background information on his story (note: that his name was in fact, Joe Pullum, not Joe Pullen nor Joe Pulliam). As several autobiographical sources confirm, Pullum's willingness to stand up to White lynchers directly informed Fannie Lou Hamer's early memories of Black-White relations in the Delta and his act of defiance later informs her courage in the face of mortal danger. She kept loaded shotguns in each corner of her house. To learn more about the 1963 Freedom Vote, you can consult SNCC Digital Gateway's entry on the [1963 Freedom Vote](#).

## Instruction Steps

### Day One

**Note:** If this is your students first introduction to Fannie Lou Hamer, you should demonstrate her historical and contemporary significance before diving deeper into this lesson plan. You can demonstrate her significance for your students by assigning the brief biographical sketch of her life available above for homework or by screening the Fannie Lou Hamer's America Film and/or the Fannie Lou Hamer BrainPOP! episode, both available for free on the Find Your Voice website.

### Anticipatory Set

**Step One:** Review Fannie Lou Hamer's historical significance for students and pique their interest in this multi-day unit by playing a song from the [Songs My Mother Taught Me](#) album, most tracks are available for free on YouTube or screening a clip such as the [PBS American Experience coverage of her 1964 Democratic National Convention Testimony](#).

### Guided Practice

**Step Two:** To help frame the day's discussion, write the following questions on the board and/or distribute a hand-out for the students to fill out as they engage with several primary sources:

## Questions for students:

- What prompted the conflict between Pullum and Sanders?
- How did Pullum evade capture? How was he eventually caught?
- What did locals do with his body?
- Why does Hamer hold Pullum in such high esteem?
- Why did the newspapers reach different conclusions about Joe Pullum?

**Step Three:** Ask students to consider these questions as they listen to Fannie Lou Hamer tell the story of Joe Pullum, available in the audio version of her autobiography.

**Step Four:** Next, you can read aloud, or encourage students to read aloud, parts of the Drew Leader article and The Negro World article.

**Step Five:** (if possible) Project Google Maps to show where the “Wild Bill Bayou” is relative to both Drew and Ruleville. This map-study will demonstrate to your students that Hamer was very close to where the shoot out and the subsequent lynching took place.

## Group Activity

**Step Six:** You can show students the picture of “Pullum’s Corner” in the Drew cemetery before returning to the guiding questions. It might be helpful to divide students into groups to consider the questions before returning to the large group.

## Closure

**Step Seven:** Guide your students to question why it took Fannie Lou Hamer more than forty years after the Pullum events to become a public civil rights activist? Ask them to consider multiple answers to this question as homework and come with a short written explanation to share.

## Day Two

## Anticipatory Set

**Step One:** Encourage students to reflect on the previous day’s lesson by sharing their theories as to why Hamer did not become a public civil rights activist earlier in her life.

## Guided Practice

**Step Two:** The answer to that question is revealed, in part, in Hamer’s recounting of what happened on her trip to the county courthouse in Indianola. Starting at the 1:10 minute mark in the Hamer, “We’re On Our Way” speech Hamer delivered in Indianola in 1964, play this segment aloud for your students.

**Step Three:** Ask students to consider the following questions either as a class or in small groups:

## Questions for students:

- What was Mrs. Hamer trying to do on August 31, 1962? Did she succeed?
- What happened on the group’s way back to Ruleville?
- What happened to Mrs. Hamer once she returned to the Marlow Plantation?
- What happened to Mrs. Hamer less than a week later?

**Step Four:** Now work backwards to Hamer’s baptism into the movement by asking the critical question: Why was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organizing Black men and women in the Delta?

**Step Five:** Project the county map of Mississippi. Note several of the Black-to-White population ratios in various counties, including Sunflower. Describe how the harvesting of cotton, which historically relied first upon slave labor and then the exploitative system of sharecropping contributed to the majority Black populations in many of these counties. Ask students to consider why White people would be threatened by the Black-to-White population ratios—especially in a supposed democracy?

**Step Six:** The aim in this step is to hear from one very prominent White Mississippian, W. Dudley Conner, justify why White people opposed Black Mississippians from getting the franchise. Start “Mississippi and the 15 Amendment” at the 19:50 mark.

1. Does Conner offer a reason why Black people shouldn’t vote?
2. What does he assume about all Black men and women?

## Group Work

**Step Seven:** This is the critical step in this lesson as it relates to Black men and women like Fannie Lou Hamer becoming empowered to try and register to vote; it involves the October/November “mock election” known

as the Freedom Vote. Break the students up into groups and either project or distribute the the mock ballot featuring Aaron Henry and Rev. Edwin King.

**Step Eight:** Ask the groups to consider the following questions and prepare to report back:

- Why run a Black man and White man for the Governor/ Lt. Governor?
- Who is allowed to cast a ballot and where?
- Why would Black men and women bother to cast a voting ballot that doesn't really count?

\*As you circulate around to talk with groups, encourage students to see the point here is that SNCC realized a mock election practiced being a citizen and that practice was the first step toward the real thing.

## Closure

Step Nine: Bring the class back together as a large group and work through the core questions regarding the Freedom Ballot posed above. Mention to the class that the Freedom Vote showed the entire country that Black Mississippians wanted to vote: 80,000 Black people across the state cast ballots in just a few days! This

emboldened SNCC and Mrs. Hamer to keep organizing around the vote; locals like her did want to participate in politics.

**Step Ten:** SNCC orchestrated the Freedom Vote election to demonstrate not only that Black Mississippians

wanted to vote, but that they would vote in droves if barriers to access were removed. So, they held the elections not in county courthouses, which were recognized as bastions of White Supremacy, but rather in local churches, beauty salons, and pool halls. Talk with your students about

why SNCC would choose these locations and how the change in venue engendered different results.

**Step Eleven:** You can encourage students to further explore the mock election phenomenon by holding a mock election in class, studying mock elections orchestrated around the world—such as the elections that inspired SNCC that took place in South Africa—or to consider how mock elections in the US might help dramatize contemporary problems related to voting such as redistricting, access, voter ID laws, felon laws, and more.

## Find Your Voice Highlights

Students are encouraged to find their own voices within this unit through a short writing assignment, group work, and an extended Freedom Vote activity of the teacher's choosing.

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