

Voting Rights: Selma to Montgomery Marches

February 18th-March 25, 1965

In the early 1960s, Selma was a focal point for voting rights. Half of the city's residents were Black but only one percent were registered to vote because the registration board only opened doors for registration two days a month, arrived late and took long lunches.

The Selma to Montgomery marches for voting rights represented the political and emotional peak of the modern civil rights movement. Led by John Lewis and Hosea Williams, the marches were the culmination of the voting rights movement launched by Amelia Boynton Robinson and her husband.

On February 18th, 1965, following what began as a peaceful demonstration for voting rights, Jimmy Lee Jackson was shot in the stomach by a state trooper while trying to defend his mother and 82 year old grandfather from police attacks. He was arrested and charged with assault and battery before he was taken to the hospital. He died on February 26.



The initial march on March 7th, as the marchers reach the bridge.

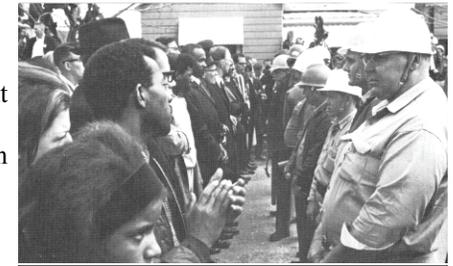
On "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965, some 600 civil rights marchers headed east out of Selma on U.S. Highway 80. They got only as far as the Edmund Pettus Bridge six blocks away, where state and local lawmen attacked them with billy clubs and tear gas and drove them back into Selma. Amelia Boynton Robinson was beaten and gassed nearly to death — her photo appeared on the front page of papers and newsmagazines around the world. Seventeen marchers were hospitalized, leading to the naming of the day "Bloody Sunday".



"Bloody Sunday" - State Troopers tear gas the marchers as they cross the bridge

Two days later, on March 9, 1965, Martin Luther King, Jr. led a "symbolic" march to the bridge. Then, civil rights leaders sought court protection for a third, full-scale march from Selma to the state capitol building in Montgomery. Federal District Court Judge Frank Minis Johnson, Jr., weighed the right of mobility against the right to march and ruled in favor of the demonstrators.

After the second march, James Reeb, a white Unitarian Universalist minister from Boston who had come for the second march and had agreed to stay, was attacked with a club in front of the Silver Moon Café, a hangout for whites. Being turned back by the small local hospital in Selma (reported to be full at the time), Reeb's companions were forced to take him to University Hospital in Birmingham, two hours away. Reeb died on Thursday, March 11, at University Hospital with his wife by his side.



Outside Brown Chapel. Protestors hold vigil waiting to hear the court's decision

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee spokesperson Stokely Carmichael was reported as saying, "What you want is the nation to be upset when anybody is killed... but it almost [seems that] for this to be recognized, a White person must be killed."

On Sunday, March 21, 1965, about 3,200 marchers set out for Montgomery, walking 12 miles a day and sleeping in fields. By the time they reached the capitol on Thursday, March 25, 1965, they were 25,000-strong.

Following this powerful demonstration, Viola Liuzzo and Leroy Moton were driving individuals back to the airport. On one of these trips, a car of four White men, seeing this White Woman and a Black Man, shot at the car. Viola was hit twice in the head and died instantly. Leroy was uninjured. Three of the four men were arrested and charged. The fourth, an undercover FBI agent, testified against them.



The monument outside Brown Chapel in Selma today.

Less than five months after the last of the three marches, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Amelia Boynton Robinson was present during the ceremony.

Jackson, Reeb, & Liuzzo are memorialized in a monument outside the Brown Chapel where each of the marches began.

The events are also brilliantly written about in the book *Selma Lord, Selma: Girlhood Memories of the Civil Rights Days* by Sheyann Webb & Rachel West Nelson who took part in the marches at the ages of 11 & 12.