

## **Wilcox County, Alabama Voting Rights Fight Timeline – Final Draft**

**Compiled by Maria Gitin (formerly Joyce Brians), SCLC SCOPE & SNCC 1965**

This timeline highlights events impacting voter registration activities in Wilcox County, Alabama with focus on 1965, when I briefly served as a field worker in the Summer Community Organization and Education Project (SCOPE) of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Included are major events such as Dr. King's visits to Camden, the county seat. Any uncited information comes from either my memoir "*This Bright Light of Ours: Stories from the Voting Rights Fight*" (University of Alabama Press 2014, 2023) which is based subsequent and conversations with participants in these events. Newspaper article titles are in *italics*. Only documented dates are included. There may have been others unrecorded at the time. *Wilcox County Progressive Era* had a complete *whiteout* of civil rights activities. No articles about civil rights or King's visits are found in their archives when I searched the years 1965-70 or in the Wilcox Historical Society website. *Not included are dates of the overlapping School Equality Movement (1965-1971) which deserves its own history.*

**To add documented additions specific to the voting rights movement in Wilcox County AL 1963-1966 please write [msgitin@mariagitin.com](mailto:msgitin@mariagitin.com).** Thank you!

For more about Wilcox County Voting Rights History: *This Bright Light of Ours: Stories from the Voting Rights Fight* (University of Alabama Press) <https://www.thisbrightlightofours.com>  
For additional reports on Wilcox County see Civil Rights Movement Archives: "Our Stories" <https://www.crmvet.org>

### **1962 – Gees Bend, AL**

**Gees Bend ferry service terminated.** The Gees Bend ferry was removed in 1962 resulting in a hour and a half drive for what had previously been a 15 minute ferry ride. That was when locals began organizing for the right to vote. The community endured the hour and a half drive for 44 years. Ferry service was restored in 2006.

### **1963 –Gees Bend, AL**

Dr. King met with farmers Rev. Lonnie Brown and Monroe Pettway, early leaders of the voter registration effort. In addition to restoring ferry service, they wanted representation on the powerful county Agricultural Stabilization & Conservation (ASCS) Committee. The ASCS controlled federal cotton, corn, and okra allotments and subsidies.

Lonnie Brown was a farmer, pastor and insurance agent who organized voters as he visited their homes. Wilcox County landowners tried to intimidate Rev. Brown, claiming he was trespassing. The County registrar refused their voter applications. On behalf of Rev. Brown and local leaders, the U.S. Attorney General's office brought an action against the landowners. In 1965, the federal court of appeals found that the federal government made a "strong case" and that the property owners did in fact "intimidate and coerce" the black citizens of Wilcox County "for the purpose of interfering with their right to vote".

Source: U.S. Court of Appeals, (!965), *U.S. v Bruce*, 353 F2d 474. In addition, Rosetta Marsh Anderson and Robert Finklea reported seeing Dr. King in 1963 in Camden. Nearly every time King went to Selma between 1963-1968, he also came to Wilcox County.

### **1963 Shreveport, LA**

**Rev Daniel Harrell and Major Johns** who would become Wilcox County directors of SCLC's Summer Conference on Political Education (SCOPE) project in the summer of 1965, worked together with Louisiana leaders in a tough campaign to teach literacy and to assist in voter registration. It was a discouraging and minimally successful project but served to cement the men's reputation within SCLC as a strong team who could tackle tough regions. They were sent to Wilcox County Alabama to work with local leaders.

Source: Major Johns brother William Johns recounted this in *"This Bright Light of Ours: Stories from the Voting Rights Fight."*

### **April 1963 - Camden, AL**

Between Ten or twenty men (the number varies from different accounts) from **Gees Bend (Boykin)** and nearby **Alberta** challenged the all-white voter registration system by marching on the courthouse. They politely but firmly demand to register to vote. Local leaders were **Rev Lonnie Brown**, a farmer, preacher, insurance agent and farmer **Monroe Pettway**. **Bernard Lafayette and his then-wife, Colia LaFayette Clark** of the **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)** assisted with this effort. Bernard Lafayette marched with them to the courthouse. He said they wanted to carry guns, but he told them nonviolence had to be practiced. Mr. Pettway was photographed carrying a pitchfork. This was the first documented organized voter registration effort in Wilcox County. The men were not permitted to register. At this time Worth Long of SNCC also did civil rights fieldwork, and community organizing in Wilcox County.

Sources: E-mail confirmation by Colia Liddell LaFayette Clark March 10, 2010. Verbal confirmation with Bernard Lafayette in Selma, AL March 2014. Additional source: Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *In the Shadow of Selma*, Rowman & Littlefield 2004.

### **January 30, 1965-Alabama**

#### **New Vote Drive in Ala Counties**

An article in the *Chicago Defender* mentions Wilcox County as one of the Alabama counties that SCLC is targeting for voter registration efforts. The article states that zero Blacks are registered in Wilcox. However, people there told me that about 50 had been allowed to register. A photo of Rev Dr. Martin Luther King Jr accompanies the article.

Source: *Chicago Defender* article by John Lynch January 30, 1965

### **February 2, 1965 – Wilcox Students Go to Selma**

Students marched on the Dallas County courthouse to demand the right for adults to register to vote. The Dallas County sheriff arrested 400 high school students including 100 from Wilcox County. The Wilcox contingent was led by **SCLC's Daniel Harrell, Camden Academy teacher Albert Gordon** and local Wilcox leader **Ethel Brooks**.

This action was one of a series of student led demonstrations in Selma in early February. **Dan Harrell** had been assigned by SCLC to work in Wilcox County. Other area high school students, most notably from RB Hudson High School in Selma, had been marching since 1963. Hundreds were arrested, some of them as young as 7 years old.

Sources: *International Herald Tribune*. Interviews with student marchers **Cleo Brooks** from Camden and **Mamie Slaughter** from Coy. **Charles A Bonner** an RB Hudson High student leader in Selma also documented this march in his book *Tip of the Arrow* (self-published). Additional source: *To Redeem the Soul of America*, Adam Fairclough, p 233.

### **Notes Winter-Spring Events in Wilcox and Selma**

Martin Luther King Jr remained a lifelong friend of his Morehouse classmate Rev TL Threadgill, Chaplain at Presbyterian Camden Academy. King's frequent visits and encouragement led to increased activism in this rural region. While most of Dr. King's visits were covered by national media, he sometimes slipped in and out of Wilcox County, quietly meeting with adult and student leaders and visiting with his friend Rev Threadgill.

On one visit to encourage to meet with Principal Hobbs and Rev. Threadgill, Chaplain at Camden Academy, students recall that Dr. King stood on a platform (a flatbed truck) to speak. He shook hands with each student. Many remembered that thrilling day. My former canvassing partner student Robert Powell told me that he and fellow student Lewis V Baldwin saw King and Camden Academy Chaplain Rev TL Threadgill chatting under a tree. Rev Threadgill called the boys over and introduced him to his friend from Morehouse College. Dr Baldwin today is a renowned MLK scholar and author.

There were nearly continuous marches and demonstrations by students and adults during this time. This period coincides with events out of Selma leading up to the March to Montgomery (March 15-21). Hundreds of Wilcox activists and leaders participated in those demonstrations, as well as their own. Many were trained in nonviolent action by SCLC.

### **Note on Camden Academy Marches February-April 1965**

There were continuous student marches, demonstrations, boycotts and protests, mass meetings and attempts to register throughout the spring. These lasted until Seniors had to stop six weeks before the end of the school year to make up missed classes. The marches halted completely near the end of May with the departure of boarding students. SCLC in Atlanta directed Alabama staff to limit demonstrations and concentrate on voter registration.

Many demonstrators lived in or near Camden, but hundreds from Coy and dozens from Lower Peachtree, Pine Apple, Boiling Springs, Annemaine, Snow Hill, Millers Ferry, Gees Bend and other rural communities were also active in civil rights work. Young women as well as young men became student leaders. Students in various grades recalled different leaders.

### **February 14, 1965- Gees Bend AL**

As part of a three-county voting rights push, King spoke at Pleasant View Baptist Church on Sunday the 14th per the NY Times.

After meeting Dr. King at Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Gees Bend, one of the Gees Bend quilters, Mrs. Irene Williams began her series of "Vote" quilts. One of William's "Vote" quilts was the logo for the Alabama Delegation to the Democratic National Convention when Barack Obama was selected as the party's candidate for President of the United States in 2008. The quilt is now in his Presidential Library in Chicago.

Source: Quilter's stories online <http://www.geesbendquilts.com/>

### **February 15, 1965 – Camden, AL Student/King March**

The Camden Academy students had already planned a small march from the campus to join the Gees Bend adults demanding the right to register at the courthouse. King spoke at the Academy then joined a march in progress and spoke to a crowd of about 200 supporting the 70 men from Gees Bend who were attempting to register at the courthouse. He came over from **Selma** through driving rain with a caravan of reporters and federal observers. This is the date when King famously confronted Sheriff *Lummie* Jenkins asking him to 'vouch' for the registrants who were required to:

1. Pass a literacy test,
2. Prove citizenship, and
3. Have an already registered voter 'vouch' for their good character and literacy.

Jenkins replied that there was no one to vouch as dozens of armed white men lined the street. The march returned to the church or school. Accounts differ. M

Sources: reported by multiple media including NY Times, Taylor Branch and Griggs Fleming  
***Dr King Leads 2800 in 3 Alabama Vote Marches***, by John Herbers, New York Times published February 16, 1965

### **February 18, 1965 – Marion AL**

While trying to protect his mother and others during an evening demonstration for the right to register to vote Jimmie Lee Jackson is shot by an Alabama state trooper.

**February 26, 1965 – Jimmy Lee Jackson** dies from his wounds. This outrage is the catalyst for SNCC and SCLC to organize a march on Montgomery.

For a more detailed timeline visit: <https://www.crmvet.org/tim/timhis65.htm - 1965m2mtat>

### **March 3-4, 1965 – Camden**

When John Lewis or Dr. King came to Camden, it was always to support already planned marches, not to organize them but to be honorary leaders and speakers. There may have been other marches that were not covered by media. There is no documentation of a March 1 demonstration in Camden but many recall that date in addition to 3,4 and 5.

### ***Stymie Negroes' Vote Registration Drive in Camden -Chicago Defender***

John Lewis of SNCC joins components of two marches which came from two directions each time leading to varying recollections. First, 220 marched from St. Francis Church with John Lewis honored to lead the locals. They were met by Sheriff Jenkins and his violent “rescue squad” (aka known as “goons” to civil rights activists). White men lined the streets carrying pistols and billy clubs. They were confronted with batons and tear gas. The demonstrators regrouped at Antioch Baptist Church. A few hours later, John Lewis led a second group of 60 students and adults from Coy, Gees Bend, and Camden marching from St Francis Church to the Courthouse. He entered the glass doors and held them open, telling people this is your courthouse, you have every right to enter and to register to vote. Sheriff Jenkins tells the marchers there are no registrars today. A small demonstration is held outside. Marchers are notified that there will be a larger march in Selma on March 7th. Hundreds of Wilcox County residents organized carpools to participate in that march which turned into Bloody Sunday.

Additional Sources:

***Camden Alabama March by Blacks Fails- Roy Reed, New York Times, March 5, 1965***

***60 Negroes Alter History – Chicago Defender, March 3 and 4,1965***

Notes: The March 3rd demonstration was organized by **SCLC Dan Harrell** and Camden Academy students who had their own leaders. Johnny Lee Jones of Selma SNCC came over with other students and activists but was not the leader despite being quoted as such. This demonstration was before Bloody Sunday in Selma.

### **March 7, 9 and 21-25th - Selma to Montgomery**

Selma to Montgomery marches - Many Wilcox County activists traveled to Selma to participate in the most famous marches: Bloody Sunday (the 7<sup>th</sup>) and the March to Montgomery (21-25). There were continuous demonstrations in Camden and elsewhere in Alabama throughout March and April. Many SNCC and SCLC activists traveled between Selma and Camden to join in support of these demonstrations.

Sources: eyewitnesses accounts. For detailed timeline of Selma to Montgomery marches: [www.crmvet.org](http://www.crmvet.org)

### **March 7, 1965 Bloody Sunday- Selma**

"Bloody Sunday" march in Selma was led by SNCC's Chairman John Lewis and SCLC's project director Hosea Williams. It was also organized by SCLC's James Bevel. Over 600 people were stopped by state troopers and the county sheriff's posse at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. They were attacked by mounted men with canisters of tear gas, beaten by police with whips and run off the bridge. Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark and state troopers were ordered by Alabama Director of Public Safety Colonel Al Lingo. to stop the demonstrators from crossing the bridge. People were injured and arrested in large numbers. Dr. King was not present but approved of the original march plan, although he had wanted to wait for a permit. Over 100 students and adults from Wilcox County were there including Mary Alice Angion, Betty Anderson, Robert Powell, Phillip Young, and Nathaniel Williams.

Sources: crrmvet.org. Established history with eye-witnesses accounts. Cleo Brooks of Coy, stated that the community of Coy had more residents on the bridge than any other community in the state.

### **March 8, 1965**

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr appears on national television to call for help, requesting people to flood into Selma to create a tidal wave of humanity that would get the world's attention and keep the marchers safe.

Note: I saw King on television, along with footage from the Bloody Sunday march in Selma. This march and Dr. King's subsequent "call to action" inspired hundreds of white college students including me to head South to participate in a massive voter registration drive.

### **March 9, 1965 – Selma "Turn Around Tuesday"**

Dr. King led a march over the Edmund Pettus Bridge up to the point before they would violate a court order. They knelt and prayed, then turned around and returned to the church.

Later that evening, Rev. James Reeb, and two other white Unitarian ministers who had come to Selma to support the voting-rights campaign were attacked and savagely beaten by a gang of white racists. Rev Reeb suffered life-threatening injuries and taken to a Birmingham hospital where he died. Source: <http://www.crmvet.org/>

### **March 11, 1965 - Birmingham, AL**

Rev. James Reeb dies at Good Samaritan Hospital. The death of a white minister prompts Congress to move forward with the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Source: Viewpoint from my conversations with other civil rights veterans 2008-present.

### **March 15, 1965 - Camden Academy**

Many alumni recall Dr. King coming to campus on this date. Some also recall a small march downtown on this date. Others state that King came quietly to encourage them to keep up their demonstrations in parallel with actions in Selma. Photos of students being attacked by police helped build pressure on Congress to pass the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Sources: Mamie Slaughter, Mazie Brewer-Wilmer, Sarah Kimmons, Robert Powell and others.

### **March 17, 1965- US District Court Middle District of Alabama**

#### ***Hosea Williams v George Wallace***

This case was filed on behalf of SCLC to require the court to permit peaceful assembly without interference. Governor Wallace is ordered to provide adequate police protection to "Negro" citizens in the exercise of their constitutional rights. The court noted that as of October 1963 zero (0)% of African American citizens in Wilcox County were registered to vote. Source: *Williams v Wallace*, 240 F.Supp 100, 1965

### **March 21-25, 1965 - Selma to Montgomery**

After five days of marching and camping mostly in the rain, the historic, federally protected Selma to Montgomery march begins and is completed on March 25th. At its conclusion the marchers are estimated to be up to 50,000. This number included dozens from Wilcox County. Marchers from Wilcox County included Betty Anderson, Phillip Young, Robert Powell and many others. Bob Block who later worked in Wilcox also completed the march.

### **March 25th – Montgomery to Selma**

Viola Liuzzo, a 40-year-old white volunteer from Detroit, is murdered while driving marchers from Montgomery back to Selma after the march. 19-year-old Selma activist Leroy Moton who is with her is injured but lives. The shooters were Klansmen, and an undercover agent of the [Federal Bureau of Investigation \(FBI\)](#).

Sources: eyewitness participants and established history

Camden demonstrations intensified after March to Montgomery with renewed pressure to force registrars to comply with the law and to influence passage of the Voting Rights Act.

### **March 31, 1965 - Camden**

#### ***Negroes Halted by Smoke Bombs***

An attempted convergence of two demonstrations, one organized by SCLC from St Francis church that included young people and adults from Gees Bend, Coy as well as Camden, and another march that started from the campus of Camden Academy on the opposite side of town. **Dan Harrell** and **Major Johns** of SCLC are cited as leaders of the St Francis contingent.

The marchers were disbursed with smoke canisters, however since tear gas had already been used, the students did not know if it was smoke or tear gas. The article cites Dan Harrell as saying that 50 blacks were registered in March due to the protests.

Source: Roy Reed special to the *New York Times* published April 1, 1965. NY Times lists Major Johns and Dan Harrell as organizers from St. Francis Church to the town limits. However, student leaders were coming from Camden Academy. *Photo by Bill Hudson.*

Note: Student in center of photo: Willie Parker of Coy, identified by his son Tyrone after publication. Cover photo *This Bright Light of Ours: Stories from the Voting Rights Fight* (University of Alabama Press.)

### **Additional Coverage of March 31<sup>st</sup>**

#### **Camden Smoke Bombs Alabama Children**

A march on March 31st consisted of two groups, one of adults and students from St Francis Church on Highway 221 led by Dan Harrell of SCLC and one of 100 students coming downhill onto Claiborne Street from Camden Academy. They attempted to march on the courthouse but were turned back by smoke bombs thrown at the direction of Mayor Reginald Albritton. The mayor stood and laughed because the students expected tear gas since it had been used the day before. Note: Dorothy Cotton of SCLC is cited as another leader that day.

Source: *Chicago Defender*, *New York Times* and personal recollections of students told to Maria Gitin 2008-present.

### **April 1, 1965 – Camden**

#### **Alabama Town Awaits New Demonstrations**

Source: *Free Lance-Star*, by Joe Zellner April 1 article covers March 31 events.

Long article on the same March 31st demonstration covers a march from Antioch Baptist Church and return to Camden Academy with several additional paragraphs and student names at end. Eric Jones, a SNCC student from the north is quoted.

#### **Smoke Bomb for Demonstrators**

Source: *Ocala Star Banner*

Note: *The Ocala Star* article covers the same march from Antioch Baptist Church but omits mention of the students return to Camden Academy. The article has a photo of students being attacked that is not included in *Free Lance-Star*.

### **April 2, 1965 - Camden**

#### ***March is Blocked at Camden 2D Day: Mayor and Deputies Bar Walk to Courthouse***

Source: *New York Times*

**Camden Academy Students and Gees Benders** are quoted about a renewed effort to march. I spoke with former students who told me there were weeks of weekday marches both from the church and from the school for most of April. Only some demonstrations were covered by national media. This accounts for conflicting memories of the weather, starting locations and dates.

### **April 5, 1965 – Camden**

#### ***Use Smoke, Tear Gas on Ala Demonstrators***

Eleven (11) people were arrested in a third march in the same week. Smoke bombs and tear gas both were used. Adults began at either St. Francis or Antioch Baptist Church while students marched downhill from the Camden Academy.

Source: *Chicago Defender* published on April 6, 1965

Note: Some former students I interviewed said that the police tried to confuse them by using both smoke and tear gas bombs shot from big barrel guns. The police then mocked the students if they panicked when it was smoke instead of tear gas. As time went on organizers told the youth to bring wet towels to cover their faces before leaving campus to demonstrate.

### **April 7, 1965 *US Jury Indicts 3 Liuzzo Suspects***

This article includes three paragraphs on Camden march from Antioch Baptist Church with white clergy and Negro marchers being attacked with tear gas and a white “bearded” youth police wrestled to the ground and arrested. This article states the march was on April 6.

Source: *New York Times*

### **April 8, 1965 - Camden**

#### ***Camden Cops Grab Banner from Selma***

A march with Northern ministers for the first time mentions a white demonstrator being beaten. Eyewitness and participants saw a white reporter beaten. There is a photo of a white man with a bleeding head. Note: I could find nothing further on the reporter. This also could be a report on the April 6 march, datelined two days later. A white youth was beaten April 10<sup>th</sup>.

Source: *Chicago Defender* by reporter Daniel Leon

### **April 9, 1965 – Camden**

After a week of violent reaction to demonstrations, Dr King arrived to speak at Antioch Baptist Church in conjunction with a march. It was the first time Wilcox County demonstrators secured a permit to march. 600 marchers marched from the church to the courthouse. There were no reported incidents.

Source: Dorothy Walker, Alabama Historical Society in an e-mail to Maria Gitin dated 6.9.09

### **April 10, 1965 – Camden**

#### ***Smoke Bombs Halt New Wave of Alabama Marchers***

Source: *Chicago Defender* special by Leon Daniel

The day after King's visit, the KKK and Sheriffs' posse unleashed their fury on the students and their white college student and seminarian-minister allies. Several carloads of SCLC and SNCC workers came over from Selma to participate including Bob Block, Bruce Hartford and Charles Bonner.

Quotes Camden Academy students Ralph Eggleston and Charles Mimms. Photo of 19-year-old white civil rights worker Jim "Arkansas" Benson, whose head was beaten bloody by Camden city police is shown with article.

April 10, 1965 is the day a policeman shoved a shotgun into the chest of 12-year old Camden Academy student Frances Johnson. She famously said, "Mister, you do what you gotta do, but I ain't movin' for nobody." They then beat Benson who was nearby. (Benson has been widely misspelled as Benston.)

Sources: "Arkansas" Strider Benston and others who were there. As told to students in Camden in 2015 by Benson. Frances Johnson confirmed *in the Shadow of Selma*, Griggs Fleming

### **April 20, 1965 - Camden**

#### ***King Hit With Ala. Injunction***

Source: Jim Felder, *Chicago Defender*.

While a 300-person march was already underway in Camden Dr. King came through on another whirlwind tour of Alabama. It states that King arrived after officers "halted without incident about 300 Negroes attempting to march on the courthouse" And that on this date he was handed a state court injunction preventing him from encouraging students to participate in racial demonstrations." Marchers were told they could go to the old jail, but not the courthouse.

### **April 21, 1965 - US Court of Appeals 5th Circuit Alabama**

Federal Court of Appeals finds "substantial un-contradicted evidence" that registration officials in Wilcox County were applying the supporting witness (voucher) requirement in a discriminatory fashion. Records disclosed only one instance of a Black person attempting to obtain a white voter as a supporting witness.

Source: *US v Logue*, 344 F2d 290 (1965)

### **April 21, 1965 - Camden**

Civil rights leaders declare they will protest daily until people are allowed to register and to vote. They continue until six weeks before school lets out so that the seniors could graduate on time.

Source: *Chicago Daily Defender* and Camden Academy Alumni reports.

### **May 6, 1965 – Camden**

Reported that 13-year-old Walter Wilson was publicly beaten by Mayor Albritton for participating in marches from the Camden Academy. His family flees town."

Source: Chicago Daily Defender

According to the older brother of Walter, Sim Pettway Sr., the beating took place at their home, and it was because of his civil rights activities, not Walter's. His mother was roughed up as well. Walter is deceased. Sim Pettway Sr. told the story of his family being forced to flee to Prichard outside Mobile, AL at a 45th anniversary mass meeting in Camden, AL and detailed the attack.

### **June – August 1965 SCLC'S Summer Community Organization and Political Education (SCOPE) project - Wilcox County**

**SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Project) SCOPE (Summer Community Organization and Education) project, directed by Rev. Hosea Williams**, augmented an already active **Alabama Voter Education Project (VEP)**

(<https://glamportal.auctr.edu/exhibits/show/johnlewisblackempowerment/johnlewisblackempowermentvep>) The objective was to work in all Alabama counties with a single focus on voter education and registration. As many as 600 Black and white college students were assigned to six states for ten weeks after attending a 5.5 day 14 hr. a day intensive Orientation in Atlanta GA.

### **June 9, 1965 – Montgomery**

SCLC files a federal complaint to force registrars in Alabama to comply with federal voter registration laws. SCLC's Summer Community Organization and Political Education project began the next day.

Source: Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*.

### **Atlanta Georgia June 14-19, 1965**

To support local leaders in voter education, voter registration and leadership development In Wilcox County, five white northern student volunteers joined SCLC's Daniel and Juanita Harrell , Ethel Brooks and Major Johns. Three white seminary students from California and some SNCC field workers from Selma also worked in Wilcox at various time that summer. Several local leaders and student activists attended the Atlanta Orientation. All efforts focused on voter and boycotts of businesses that refused to hire Black residents. Local leaders agreed to suspend demonstrations for the summer at the request of the national office of SCLC.

One of the activist teachers, Mr. Albert Gordon, took a group of women students to other Alabama counties where they would not be recognized to work on voter

Sources: John Worcester incident reports, Maria Gitin personal dated field notes, and subsequent participant interviews.

### **June 20, 1965 – Atlanta**

#### ***Dr King Opens Rights Drive Tuesday***

This article mentions SCLC SCOPE orientation in Atlanta and the project's plans for the summer. Source: *New York Times*.

### **June 20 – SCLC SCOPE Volunteers Arrive in Camden**

Workers trained in Atlanta arrived in the middle of the night to work with Dan Harrell and Major Johns of SCLC. White men surrounded Antioch Baptist Church where we slept and shot off guns to welcome us to Wilcox. *This Bright Light of Ours: Stories from the Voting Rights Fight* (University of Alabama Press 2014).

### **June 22, 1965**

The SCLC SCOPE office at Antioch Baptist Church is guarded by local youth who are attacked for the first time inside the church. They escape but the office is ransacked.

### **June 23, 1965 – Camden**

While canvassing the Sawmill Quarter, five SCOPE workers and local youth workers were arrested and held for a few hours with some detained for three days. The sheriff's posse planted moonshine on student leader Don Green and kept him in jail longer than the others.

Source: Personal witness, photos by John Worcester and SCLC report files. This and many SCLC reports were dated a day later than the events took place.

### **June 28, 1965 – Camden**

Eighteen (18) SCOPE-SCLC and local civil rights workers are arrested at Antioch Baptist Church and booked into the Camden jail without due process. Local student activist Don Green is beaten in front of us and thrown into solitary confinement when a knife is discovered in his sock. White summer volunteer student Mike Farley is put in a cell with a violent white prisoner and beaten mercilessly throughout the night. We are released a few at a time. All are released within five days, but we ever know when they will be either released or attacked. Leaders Albert Gordon and Major Johns were arrested along with six white civil rights workers: Michael Farley, Joyce Brians (Maria Gitin), Connie Turner, Sheri Thurber Judy Harmon, Ann Nesbit. Black youth who arrested: Don Green, Lester Core, John Davis, Roosevelt Washington, Johnny Jackson, Calister Wright, George Shamburger, Elmo Jones, Harris Knight, and Ashley Stallworth.

Source: I was eyewitness-participant, saved a letter from that date, and field report from John Worcester to SCLC.

### **June 28, 1965**

Sheriff Lummie Jenkins tells cafe owners, Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds that they cannot serve civil rights workers. Mr. Reynolds asks white civil rights workers to please leave and not bring trouble to his store, so we do. We did not eat there the rest of the summer. Source: Maria Gitin letter June 28, 1965

### **June 29, 1965 – Camden**

Masked men beat youth guarding SCLC – SCOPE office at Antioch Baptist Church. Three are beaten badly. Two are hospitalized; one suffers permanent traumatic brain injury. Three of the Klansmen are identified by the youth but none are arrested or serve sentences. Names of the youth and their attackers are included in *This Bright Light of Ours: Stories from the Voting Rights Fight* (University of Alabama Press 2014). Sources: Eyewitness accounts at the time and later Interviews with two of the survivors. I was present immediately afterwards.

Reports in SCOPE papers state that there were 8 youth attacked by 5 masked men and that two were beaten. Incident Report. p 367 SCOPE of Freedom, filed by J. Worcester, one of the white seminarians working with SCLC. According to eyewitness-participant Robert Powell, the names listed are incorrect. They were other evenings when the church was being guarded and there was trouble with a little less violence.

### **June 30, 1965**

The mayor informed SCOPE workers that anyone found in the church after dark would be arrested for public nuisance and taken into protective custody. Maria Gitin witness. Source: SCOPE Incident Report (photocopy) p 367 *SCOPE of Freedom*, Levanthal.

### **July 1, 1965 – Camden**

The New York Times reports a different version of the June 29<sup>th</sup> incident with the local sheriff (PC Lummie Jenkins) stating that the boys' injuries were slight and that both boys were released from the hospital immediately.

Source: *New York Times*

Note: Frank Connor as quoted in *This Bright Light of Ours*, said he was near death and hospitalized for months. I witnessed one other young man with a bandaged head and heard stories from those who escaped.

### **July 2, 1965 –Camden**

#### **Alabama Sheriff Locks Church**

Sheriff Jenkins tells the press that the church deacons asked our SCOPE headquarters be locked after the attack.

Source: Associated Press, *New York Times*.

Note: The Sheriff moved us out of the office at gunpoint. I was among those present as we were assessing the damage caused the night before, during the Klansmen's violent attack on our youth. John Worcester took a photo of us at the broken doorway.

The correct date was June 29th and there were eight young men, all locals affiliated with SCLC and /or working with the SCOPE program of SCLC that summer. All were African American. Five escaped before three were beaten, two badly enough to be hospitalized. A July 3, 1965 article in the *Chicago Defender* supports this claim. The date on the SCOPE staff incident report date is incorrect.

### **July 4, 1965**

Bootleg liquor was planted in local worker Don Green's car and he was arrested within hours after he had been bailed out by SCOPE leaders.

Source: SCLC leaders Harrell. John. J. Worcester incident report to SCLC – SCOPE Atlanta office

### **July 8, 1965 - Camden**

Three carloads of civil rights workers were shot at by white men after being stopped by police. The SCLC cars were trying to leave town to avoid the wrath of whites after Gov. Wallace rally in Camden which was attended by thousands.

Source: J. Worcester incident report to SCLC.

### **July 9, 1965 - *Incident out in County (Arlington)***

SCLC SCOPE and local canvassers forced off highway by white man in a pick-up brandishing a rifle.

Source: SCOPE incident report by J. Worcester. Personal experience with my canvassing partner Robert Powell of Camden who remembered this day well.

### **July 12, 1965 – Camden**

#### ***600 Students Preach Rights Gospel in South***

This Washington Post article was carried in most national and many local papers including The San Francisco Chronicle. This lengthy article is largely critical of our SCLC SCOPE effort in Wilcox.

Source: *Washington Post* Special by reporter Paul Good July 12, 1965

### **July 14, 1965 – Camden**

#### ***SCOPE Offices Reopen***

Tells the real story that Sheriff Jenkins made the deacons board up the church because our SCOPE office was there. Bringing even more danger to the church and our field workers, Rev Freeman defied the sheriff and re-opened the office for our group.

Source: Chicago Daily Defender and personal recollection.

### **July 18, 1965 - Anniston, AL**

Willie Brewster is killed less than 200 miles northeast of Camden. The men who shot him belonged to the National States Rights Party, a violent neo-Nazi group whose members had been involved in church bombings and murders of other Black activists in the region.

Source: [www.crmvet.org](http://www.crmvet.org). Civil rights martyrs.

### **August 6, 1965 - Washington DC**

Congress finally passes and President Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act of 1965. It is months before federal examiners reach Wilcox County and years before African-Americans achieve enough political power to become elected officials in some local jurisdictions.

**MISSING DATE: FIRST MASS REGISTRATION IN WILCOX COUNTY AFTER PASSAGE OF 1965 VRA on August 6<sup>th</sup>? I have not been able to find documentation.**

### **August 20, 1965 – Hayneville AL**

White civil rights worker seminarian Jon Daniels is assassinated, and Catholic Priest. After just being released from jail Richard Morrisroe s severely wounded while walking toward a store. Daniels stepped in front of SNCC student **Ruby Sales** to protect her.

Sources: Author interviews 2005 & 2010 with Jimmy Rogers, SNCC, survivor/witnesses of the attack. Further information: <https://www.crmvet.org/tim/tim65b.htm#1965daniels>

### **September 1965-Camden**

Immediately after thousands of first-time Black voters were registered, Wilcox County joined Governor Wallace's State of Alabama lawsuit asking the federal government permission to purge voting records and re-register all voters using the old literacy tests and 'voucher' system. They also petitioned to require poll watchers to allow voters no more than three minutes to cast their ballots using an egg timer. The three-minute requirement was intended to make it nearly impossible for the voters who were newly literate to complete their ballot. The argument went to the federal district court where it was denied. Federal registrars (all white southerners) were sent to register voters in May of 1966. I cannot find records of federal observers prior to that time, although they must have come in summer 1965 as there are photos of people waiting to register (J. Worcester)

Source: Susan Youngblood Ashmore *Carry it On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama 1964-1972*. P 92-93

### **Fall 1965-Spring 1966 - Alabama**

Governor Wallace continues to fight in court against implementing the Federal Voting Rights Act of 1965. Voters and civil rights activists are harassed, fired, threatened, and put off their property, especially in isolated rural areas like Wilcox County. Teachers at Camden Academy and elsewhere lose their jobs in retribution for their work in the movement and fight for school equality. Despite this, they continue to work for federal funding, school improvement and fair hiring practices.

### **November 1965 –Atlanta**

Dr. King announced to the US government Office of Economic Opportunity in November 1965 that, partially as an outgrowth of SCOPE, SCLC would continue its anti-poverty work. Dan Harrell continued this work in Wilcox County with other local activists who eventually gained some federal funding working to form the Coy Land Movement. They purchased 30 acres of land with the title held by SCLC Wilcox County. The land fell into disuse after Harrell's death.

Source: Oral history from Rosetta Marsh Anderson and Cleo Brooks. Youngblood Ashmore. W. Kate Charley told to Maria Gitin.

### **November 16, 1965 – US Court of Appeals 5th Circuit Montgomery**

Rev Lonnie Brown's 1963 Department of Justice lawsuit to have the right to enter private property for the purpose of registering voters is reinstated by the federal Court of Appeals. The court ruled the federal government made a "strong case" the property owners did in fact "intimidate and coerce" the Negro citizens of Wilcox County for "the purpose of interfering with their right to vote."

Source: U.S. Court of Appeals, (1965), *U.S. v. Bruce*, 353 2d 474.

### **November 23, 1965- US District Court for the Southern District of Alabama**

The Federal court declares it is the duty of Alabama Judges, including Wilcox County Judge Dannelly, to comply with the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and to place names furnished by federal examiners on their voting roll. The Alabama judges claimed to have been in a conflict due to a previous Alabama court decision. The federal court voided all such orders.

Source: *Reynolds v. Katzenbach*, 248 F. Supp 593, 1965

### **December 1965 - Camden**

Rev. TL Threadgill and his family are evicted from their home and church on Camden Academy campus. Both he and his wife lose their jobs because of participation in the voting right movement. Their home and chapel are destroyed by the Wilcox County board of education. Dozens of teachers and other activists lose their jobs as schools are forced to integrate. Some white teachers are assigned to previously all Black schools. White VISTA workers from the north arrive to teach at Camden Academy and other all-black schools that lost teachers who were wrongfully terminated.

Source: Sheryl Threadgill, Griggs Fleming, *Shadow of Selma*

### **December 11, 1965 - Camden**

The Presbyterian Church sends financial aid to teachers fired from Camden Academy for participating in voting rights movement.

Source: *Chicago Defender*

### **1966-1967 –Camden**

In 1966 Wilcox County Superintendent of Schools Guy S. Kelly wrote to Governor Wallace requesting assistance in blocking the federal desegregation orders. Wallace gladly complied by filing petitions on behalf of the state's all-white schools.

Source: Susan Youngblood Ashmore *Carry it On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama 1964-1972* pg 97

**ACSC Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service** of the **USDA** was the conduit for federal farm allotment distribution. Each county had its own ACSC committee. This was the group that in the Fall of 1965 Rev John Golden, Dan Harrell and many locals worked with to get African Americans elected to the committee. Candidates and voters alike were threatened, harassed and attacked. Eventually, in 1966, ten black farmers were able to get elected to this committee. However other county officials continued to block access to Black farmers for their fair share. SNCC observers recorded instances of white officials intimidating Black voters and of outright fraudulent vote counts.

Source: Susan Youngblood Ashmore *Carry it On: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama 1964-1972*, pg 143.

SNCC activists Stokely Carmichael and James Bevel spend time in Wilcox working with student activists on school equity while they are also conducting a major voting rights battle in nearby Lowndes County.

Source: Activist Jesse Smith of Lower Peachtree in conversation with author

Civil Rights Pioneer and **SCLC Education Director Septima Clark** and **SCLC Program Director Dorothy Cotton** taught literacy and citizenship classes to Wilcox County residents.

Source: Personal conversations with Bob Fitch (2010-12), reports and photos by SCLC photographer Bob Fitch at Stanford University Libraries.

### **January 23, 1966 – Antioch Baptist Church, Camden**

In front of his family Farmer David Colston age 32 was shot and killed by local white farmer JT Reaves. The *murder was witnessed* by Rev Dan Harrell, Rev Frank Smith and many black community members who had just left a funeral and planned to return to attend a mass meeting. There was a large silent demonstration the next day. Reaves was arrested but never convicted of any crime.

Sources: *New York Times* Jan 24, 1966. *Jet Magazine* with photo by Bob Fitch.

### **February 1966 – Camden**

Dr. King came to Camden to console students and adults after the Colston murder. He visited with the Threadgills. He also met with Camden Academy Principal Hobbs and Rev. Threadgill.

Source: *In the Shadow of Selma*, Griggs Fleming

### **March 10, 1966 - Jet Magazine**

An ex-basketball player and Korean war veteran, Walter C. Calhoun, a 32-year old 6'2" former grocer, announced that he is running against Sheriff PC Lummie Jenkins.

### **March 1966 - Montgomery AL**

Federal District Judge Frank M. Johnson rules that the Alabama poll tax violates the 15th Amendment of the US Constitution.

### **April 29, 1966 - Camden**

While on a whirlwind Get Out the Vote tour of Alabama, Dr. King spoke from a bullet proof trailer in front of Antioch Baptist Church. His had been informed the church would be firebombed if he went inside. SCLC staff Hosea Williams and Fred Shuttlesworth, as well as King's children Yolanda and Dexter were with him. Fifteen hundred (1500) were in attendance. Civil Rights Photographer Bob Adelman took several of his best-known photos of Dr. King photos that day. Everyone looks very serious because they have been threatened and are still being harassed daily. The state of Alabama was still filing objections to the federal court against allowing the new voters to vote. Gov. Wallace told the county registrars they did not need to comply with the Civil Rights Act of 1965.

Sources: Eyewitness reports, Dated photographs by Bob Adelman.

### **May 3, 1966 – Camden**

The ballot for a national primary includes state and Wilcox County Black candidates for the first time. Walter J. Calhoun, James Robinson, James Perryman, Lonnie Brown and Donnie Irby ran for county offices on the People's Choice Platform and campaigned vigorously. Although voter turnout was excellent, all the African American candidates were defeated. This is date of the Adelman photo voters lined up at the Wilcox Courthouse.

Sources: Susan Ashmore, Bob Adelman *Down Home*, and Bob Fitch photos of campaign materials at Bob Fitch Archive, Stanford University Libraries.

### **August 30, 1966 - US Court of Appeals 5<sup>th</sup> Circuit Alabama**

Federal Court of Appeals confirmed the Wilcox County Board of Education operated a segregated school system and that no students had ever attended an integrated school. Further delay was unjustified since it had been 12 years since *Brown v. Board of Education* and ordered the Board of Education to set up a free choice plan for grades 1,2,3,7,8, and 9 by September 6th, a week later.

Source: *US v. Wilcox County Board of Education*, 366 F2d 769 (1966)

### **1967- Alabama**

Based in Selma Southwest Alabama Farmers' Cooperative Association (SWAFCA) was founded and became a ten county farmers' marketing and supply cooperative to serve Black farmers. It had a Wilcox branch and briefly became the launching pad for a possible third party *The National Democratic Party of Alabama*. The Association was active in getting locals elected, but did not have much effect on national elections.

### **1967-1971**

Student demonstrations for desegregation and school improvement which began in 1965 continue. Several students attempt to integrate the white schools and are mistreated. The Wilcox School Board resists desegregation orders until 1973 by which time they open a Central High School which no white students attend. They dismantle all except one historically black school and open white private Christian schools. This important history cries out for historians and researchers to explore in greater depth.

### **Summer 1967 - Wilcox County**

Southern Rural Research Project (SRRP) white Northern volunteers conduct a study of poverty in the Black community that becomes pivotal in a Supreme Court Case that eventually assists black farmers in getting allocations from the County Agricultural and Stabilization Board. The SRRP report documents Wilcox County's ongoing efforts to block the distribution of federal assistance to which the farmers are entitled. (SRRP Report, [crmvet.org](http://crmvet.org))

### **March 22, 1968 - Dr. King Visits Camden for the Last Time**

Rev Dr. King stopped in Camden as part of a tour to recruit participants for the Poor People's Campaign. Due to a severe rainstorm, King stayed overnight after he spoke although he was scheduled to speak in Selma that evening. His unplanned overnight stay in Camden may have prolonged his life. Under his alias "Eric Galt", James Earl Ray learned of King's planned appearance in Selma. He checked into the Flamingo Motel with a gun. Source: Hampton Sides, *Hellhound on his Trail*, Anchor Books, 2011 pgs 95-96.

### **April 4, 1968 – Memphis Tennessee**

Rev. Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated by James Earl Ray. Ray fled the country with a valid US passport and wasn't captured until two months later in the United Kingdom.

### **1971 School equality demonstrations continued until 1971**

### **November 1978 - Wilcox County**

Thirteen years after the 1965 Voting Rights Act passed Sheriff Prince Arnold becomes the first Black sheriff and first black elected official in Wilcox County. He continued to serve for 32 years. In the same election, Jesse Brooks Sr. of Coy was elected as first African American Tax Collector for Wilcox County. Mr. Brooks did not take office until January while the Sheriff's term began immediately. This made Arnold the first African American elected in Wilcox County.

Source: Sheriff Prince Arnold and other Wilcox residents to Maria Gitin in 2010.

### **SCLC Field Director Daniel Harrell is Murdered**

#### **January 7, 1979 - Coy, Alabama**

SCLC field director and Wilcox County civil rights activist Rev. Dan Harrell was murdered on Sunday by Jim Saulsberry of Coy under suspicious circumstances. Saulsberry claimed self-defense, was arrested and released without charges.

Source: *Wilcox Progressive Era*, interviews with two of Dan Harrell's brothers, his son Dan Jr. and Maria Gitin conversation with Sheriff Prince Arnold in 2010.

### **1983 Wilcox County**

Additional Black candidates are elected including the first County Commissioner.

**1987 Wilcox County, AL**

Most of the 87% Black rural residents finally get county water and sewer lines hooked up. The police, sheriff and most public offices are held by African Americans, although Camden has never had a Black Mayor as of 2025.

**2006 Camden - Gees Bend**

Ferry service to Gees Bend is restored. Residents can now travel to Camden in 15 minutes instead of an hour's drive. A 44-year-old injustice is recognized and reversed.

**2025 Alabama**

Alabama elects its second Black congressmember in the court mandated newly configured District in and around Mobile.