

E1902, August 73

THE RIGHT TO VOTE



by James T. McCain, CORE Director of Organization



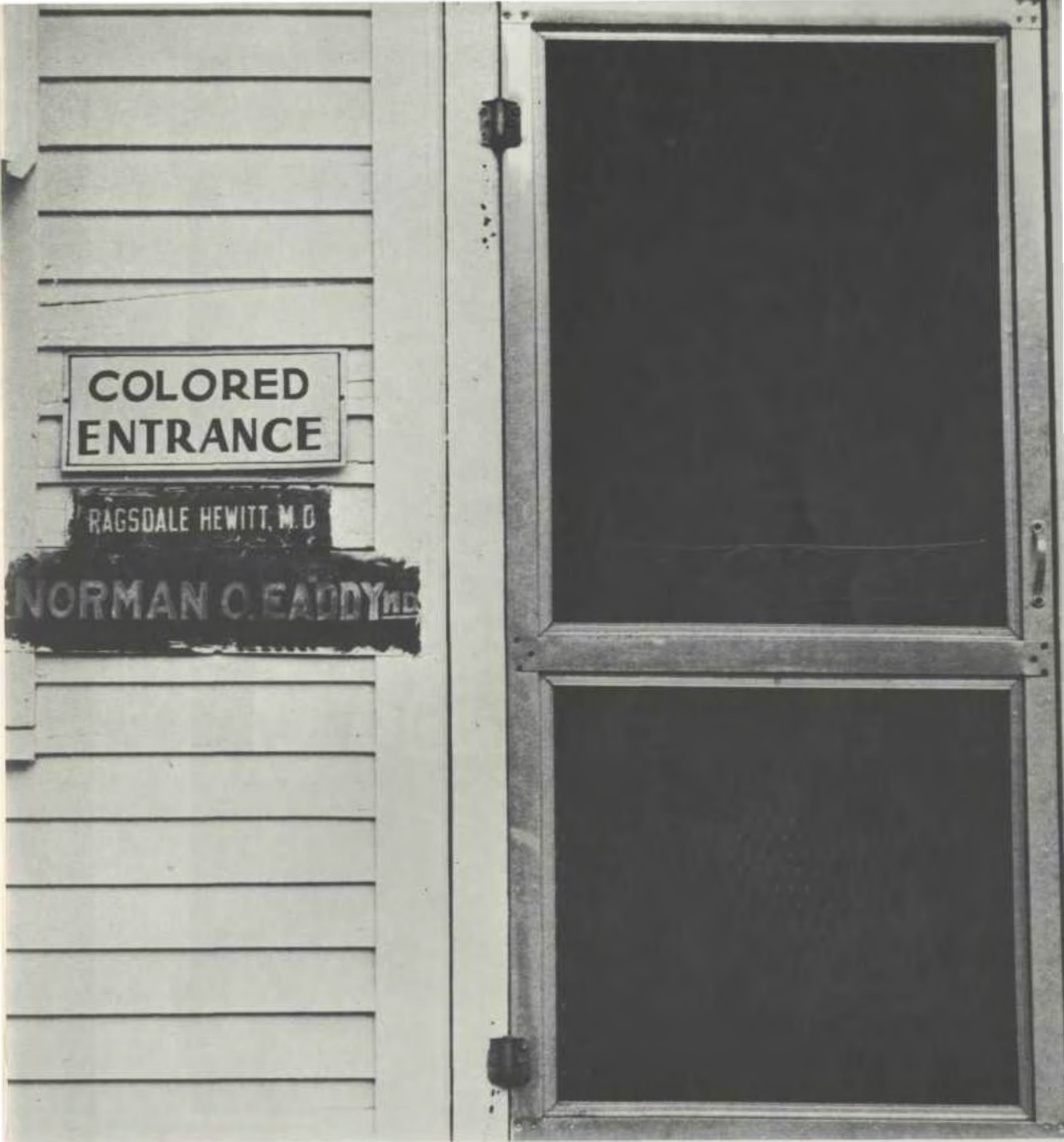


This is Sumter, South Carolina . . . my home town. I was born here, educated in its public schools and graduated from Morris College. I played on those of its streets which were not paved.

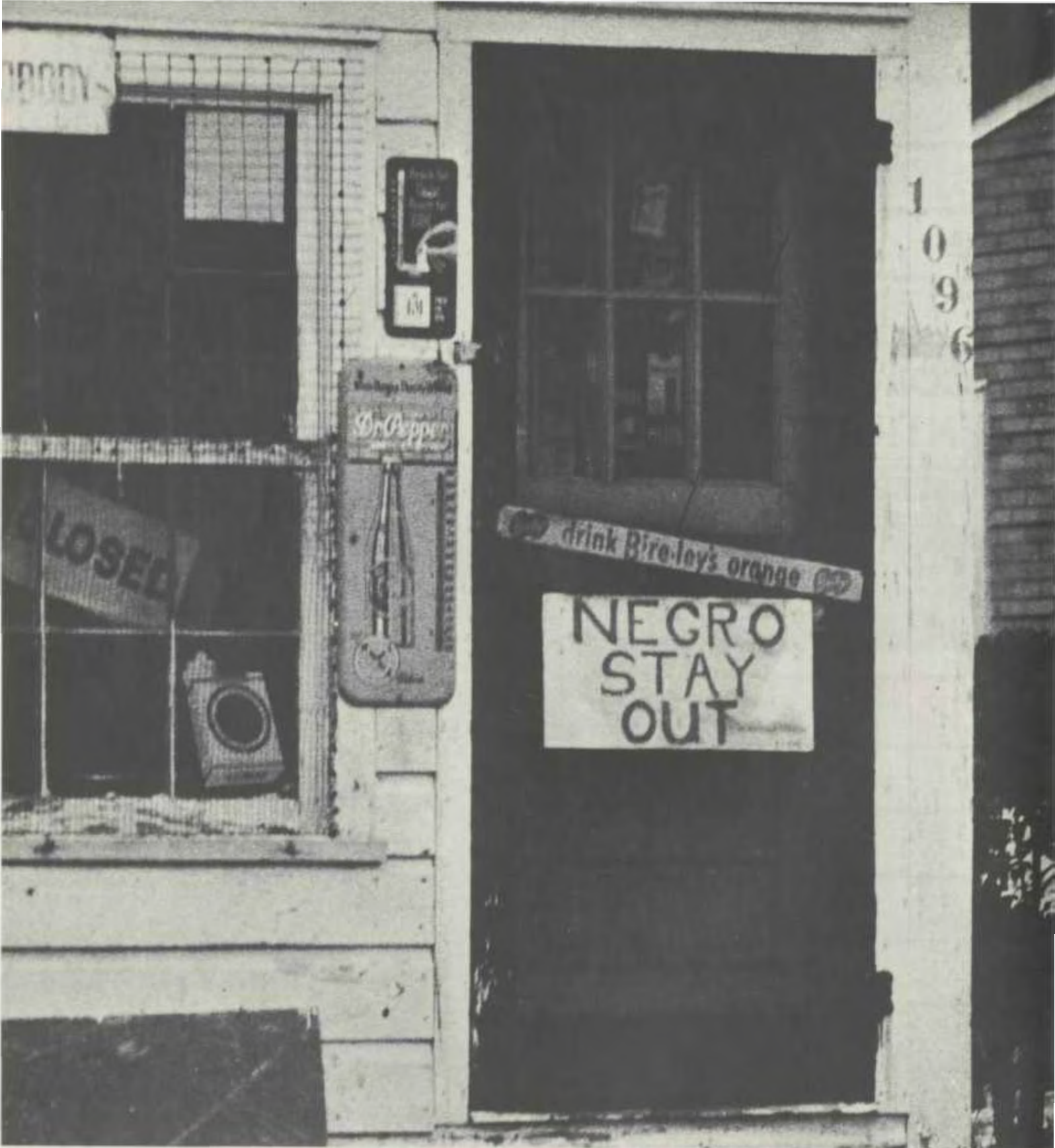


I have seen Sumter grow in population to approximately 24,000 people and spread out over a wide area. I have watched its acorns grow into mighty oaks which have become a source of local pride.





As a Negro boy, I knew there were differences.



But as I grew up, I increasingly became aware that day-to-day living for a Negro in Sumter was not only different, but separate and unequal.

After graduation, I became a teacher and, eventually, a school principal. I was dismissed on suspicion of having gotten parents' signatures in initiating a petition to desegregate the Mullins, South Carolina, public schools. Blacklisted as a teacher, I was unable to find another position in the county.

I had been working on voter registration even before Negroes legally won the right to vote in the state primaries. In 1958, the year after passage of the first federal civil rights law in 87 years, I took a position with CORE, heading a state-wide voter registration campaign. That drive has been stepped-up recently under the direction of Frank Robinson, a longtime friend and also a native of Sumter.



These photos show Frank performing the important first step of house-to-house canvassing. It is necessary to explain to each person why it is important for them to register.





Next comes instruction on how to fill out registration blanks. CORE registration instruction headquarters is open daily. In the center of the next page, Frank's daughter is demonstrating how to complete the blanks.









Here, Frank accompanies three persons to the registration office in the Sumter County courthouse.

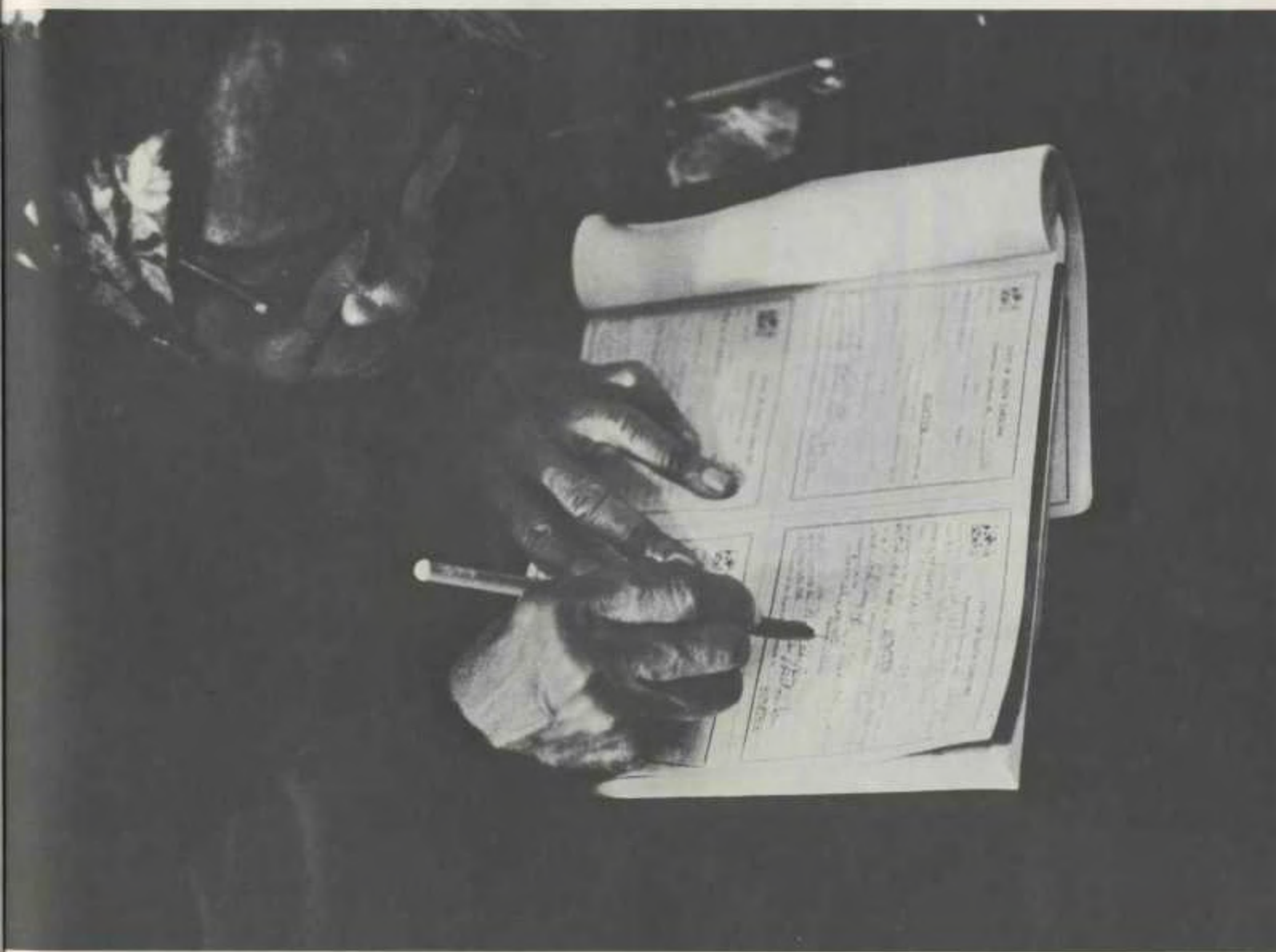


Most persons register without major difficulty.





Applicants rejected because of an error on their blank are given further instruction and are taken back to the registration office to re-apply. Within a month, 750 persons visited our registration instruction headquarters for advice or help in qualifying to register.





The task of registration is completed.





In my first annual report after going to work for CORE, I pointed out that in counties where we had established voter registration committees, the percentage of Negroes registered was higher than in counties where no such group had been functioning. For the first time, during the year's primary runoffs, candidates invited Negroes to meet with them and discuss community problems. In a number of communities, candidates who stressed segregation were defeated. Negroes ran for public office in larger numbers than in any year since winning the right to vote in the formerly all-white state primaries.

For example, in that year Negroes for the first time took over all Democratic Party offices in Sumter's Precinct 3-B and elected 16 of the 17 delegates to the Democratic County Convention. Rev. Fred C. James, a Negro and a leader of Sumter CORE, set a precedent by running for city council. In Columbia, according to "The State," a daily newspaper, "the predominantly Negro Ward 9—was more than enough to

make the difference" of 14 votes by which Lester Bates nosed out his ultra-segregationist opponent in the mayoralty election.

These types of advances were augmented in subsequent years, as the South Carolina voter registration campaign continued.

In Sumter County, registrars have begun using technicalities to bar Negroes from registering. This has long been the practice in Clarendon County where, in 1958, an applicant reported to me that she had been refused a certificate because she mispronounced the word "indict" in reading a portion of the state constitution. And in Williamsburg County, Negroes — some of them teachers and college graduates — were summarily refused registration certificates because in the registrar's opinion, they could not read or write.

It is this kind of technicality which is used today throughout rural areas of the deep south to deny Negroes their constitutional right to vote. Reports of the United States Civil Rights Commission give detailed descriptions of these devices. In one case brought by the federal government, a Louisiana registrar was revealed as unable to pass the test which she gave to prospective Negro voters. Negroes frequently are threatened with loss of job and even with physical violence, if they dare to exercise their voting rights.

Where such a situation prevails, there is need for the type of nonviolent action on voting which Martin Luther King has advocated. This would consist of Negroes assembling nonviolently at registration offices and remaining until registered. In such areas, voting rights must first be won before they can be exercised.

For every United States citizen, voting is a democratic duty. For us, who are Negroes in the south, it is more than that. It is an essential step toward winning equality and ending our second class citizenship. When we win the right to vote in those parts of the south where it is still denied us and when we exercise our voting rights throughout the south, we can put the ultra-segregationist politicians out of business. We can make the south a part of the United States.



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