



# The Sit-Ins of 1960

Excerpted from "[History & Timeline](#)"

## The Rising of the Bread (1958-1959)

Before they stormed the Bastille in 1789, the poor and oppressed of the Paris slums whispered to each other "The bread is rising. The bread is rising." As yeast works its invisible magic on the dough before the loaves are placed in the oven, so too the ferment of revolt and the forbidden words of freedom percolated through the dark tenement cellars and the filthy Parisian alleys behind the glittering palaces. "The bread is rising" was the password that gave admittance to clandestine meetings, and it was the first call to arms of the French revolution.

So too in 1959, hidden from establishment eyes, the bread of revolution is secretly rising among Black students on college campuses throughout the South — and in the North as well. Something has to be done about segregation. Stymied by "[Massive Resistance](#)" and "[All Deliberate Speed](#)," the courtroom strategy of the NAACP is taking too long and has achieved too little. Something has to be done and someone has to do it. If their elders won't, can they?

Over many months, small groups of students study and debate the strategies and tactics of Nonviolent Resistance. Under cover of church, YMCA, and educational conferences, students from different schools meet and argue and dream. Can Gandhi's nonviolent tactics be applied to the segregated South? Can the nonviolent strategies of the [Montgomery Bus Boycott](#) be adapted to opposing segregation in commercial establishments? Is it too dangerous? How will being arrested affect education and future careers? Can they do it? Will they do it?

Beneath the notice of the white power-structure, unknown to Black ministers and most college officials, the bread is rising in the dorms and church basements. Unknown, unnoticed, hidden from view until February 1st, 1960 when four Black students sit down at a Greensboro NC lunch counter and ask for a cup of coffee in the First Sit-in.

To the media, to the power-structure, to the college administrators, the Sit-ins that sweep across the South come as astonishing bolts from the blue. **But the sit-ins are not spontaneous events** — they are the product of months of discussion and planning.

## First Southern Sit-in, Greensboro, NC (Feb, 1960)

Bennett College for Women and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical (NCA&T) are two Black colleges in Greensboro NC. In the Fall of 1959, the Bennett College NAACP chapter discusses strategies and tactics for opposing segregation. The young women seek information from the Oklahoma City NAACP, which had previously used nonviolent direct-action to desegregate local restaurants. They decide to target the Woolworth's lunch counter in downtown Greensboro because it is part of a national

chain that Blacks all over the country patronize. The president of Bennett advises them to hold off until after the long Christmas break, so that their campaign does not begin, and then lose momentum when the students return home for the holidays.

On February 1, 1960, four Black men from NCA&T — Ezell Blair Jr, Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond — sit down at Woolworth's "whites only" lunch counter and ask to be served coffee and doughnuts. They are refused. Though they are prepared to be arrested that does not occur. They stay until the store closes. The next day they return, now joined by Billy Smith, Clarence Henderson, and others. They sit from 11am to 3pm but again are not served. While they wait, they study and do their school work. The local newspaper and TV station cover this second sit-in. At first they call it a "Sit Down," but soon everyone is using the term "Sit-In."



Greensboro sit-in, February 2nd.  
— Greensboro News photo

The Greensboro students activate the telephone networks that had been built over the preceding months, and word is flashed across the South — from one Black campus to the next — Sit-In! Greensboro, North Carolina! Suddenly everyone is aware that Black students have openly defied a century of segregation.

Greensboro students form the Student Executive Committee for Justice to sustain and expand the campaign. The Greensboro NAACP endorses their action. On February 3rd, more than 60 students, now including women from Bennett who have returned from break and students from Dudley High School, occupy every seat at the Woolworth's counter in rotating shifts for the entire day. The Ku Klux Klan also learns of the sit-in, and led by George Dorsett — North Carolina's official State Chaplain — they heckle and harass the students. The students are not deterred. In the following days their number grows — including white students from Womens College (now University of North Carolina) — and the sit-ins spread to Kress and Walgreens lunch counters, and then to other Greensboro restaurants.

Sit-ins, picket lines, and boycotts continue off and on as negotiations get under way, the lunch counters are closed and reopened, and public opinion weighs in. Woolworth and Kress stores in the North and West are boycotted and picketed in support of the sit-in movements that are now spreading across the upper and mid South, Atlanta, and New Orleans. When the college students leave for the summer, Dudley High students carry on. Finally, in July, the national drugstore chains agree to serve all "properly dressed and well behaved people," regardless of race.

## **Sit-ins Sweep Across the South (1960-1964)**

The Greensboro sit-in on February 1st is the spark that ignites a raging prairie fire, a fire for justice that the forces of the old order cannot suppress. First by word-of-mouth, and then via media coverage, the news flashes across the South. Black students defy segregation! In the following week, students in other North Carolina towns — Charlotte, Winston-Salem, Durham, Raleigh, Fayetteville, and others — pick up the torch and begin their own sit-ins at local lunch counters and restaurants.

On February 10, sit-ins spread to Hampton VA, on February 12 to Rock Hill SC, and on February 13, Black students in Nashville TN began a desegregation campaign that lasts for years. By the end of February there have been sit-ins in more than thirty communities in seven states. By the end of April, sit-ins have reached every southern state. By year's end, more than 70,000 men and women — mostly Black, a few white — have participated in sit-ins and picket lines. More than 3,000 have been arrested.

Most of the sit-ins are preceded by careful planning and training in the tactics of Nonviolent Resistance, and are characterized by strict discipline on the part of the protesters that reduces the effects of physical

assaults and provides a clear, powerful message. Some sit-ins, however, are spontaneous and lack of training in nonviolent tactics sometimes results in demonstrators retaliating when attacked by racists. That gives the cops an opportunity to arrest the sit-ins (not the racist attackers) on violence-related charges (with higher bail and stiffer sentences), and for a hostile local media to discredit the protests.

There had been earlier sit-ins in Oklahoma, Kansas, [Baltimore](#), [Miami](#), and cities in the North. And there had been previous student protests against segregation in the South — such as those in [Orangeburg in 1956](#) — but after the first sit-in on February 1, it is as if a dam has broken, and the waters that had steadily been building up are suddenly unleashed. Often the action takes place near college campuses where students have been talking and quietly organizing; sometimes it takes place where there has been almost no preparation. And everywhere, new people became involved who have not been to meetings and who have never thought of themselves as activists before they participate in their first sit-in.

Several factors may explain why the Greensboro sit-in ignites a freedom firestorm across the South when earlier student protests had remained local:

- The cumulative affect of [Brown vs Board of Education](#) and subsequent school integration struggles in [Alabama](#) and [Little Rock](#), the [Emmett Till lynching](#), the bus boycotts in [Montgomery](#), [Tallahassee](#) & other cities, and the assassinations of voter registration activists such as [Harry & Harriet Moore](#), [Reverend Wesley Lee](#), and [Lamar Smith](#) create a climate of tension and determination among young Blacks that with the Greensboro Sit-In reaches its tipping point.
- The discussions, workshops, and meetings between activists from different colleges in the months immediately prior to Greensboro prime students for action, and create a communications web that is activated on February 2nd.
- Previous student actions such as those in [Orangeburg](#) in May of 1956 had occurred just as school was ending for the term, so there could be no campus-based follow up. Greensboro occurs in the middle of the school year.



Peoples Drug store, Arlington, VA.  
— *Richmond Times-Dispatch* photo

Yet for all that it is widespread, the sit-in movement is mostly limited to the Upper and Mid-South. Except for Rock Hill and Orangeburg SC, Atlanta GA, and New Orleans & Baton Rouge LA, each of which have significant sit-in movements in 1960, attempts to build sit-in movements in the Deep South states of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana are ruthlessly quashed by arrests and violence. And even in the Upper and Mid-south, sit-ins are mostly limited to college towns.

### Sit-ins — Important Points

As Movement veterans, there are two points that we believe are of particular importance regarding the wave of sit-ins that flashed across the south in 1960:

- **Young people take the lead.** The sit-ins do more than just challenge segregation, they also challenge the established leadership within the Black community and their traditional reliance on legislation and litigation. Prior to the wave of sit-ins, Black students had followed the lead and relied on the direction of adult leaders: teachers, preachers, lawyers, and the officials of the NAACP and community organizations. With the sit-ins, young people take the lead and chart new directions and strategies of their own, sometimes in cooperation with the adults, sometimes in

opposition to them. In the years to follow — the turbulent “60s” — it is the young who set the pace, seize the initiative, and determine the direction of the Freedom Movement.



Arrested for defying segregation.  
— *Nashville Tennessean* photo

• **Movements grow by taking action.** Action inspires more action, and nothing is more contagious than courage. “Movements” are movements because they take action and move. That is true for both individuals and organizations. At the dawn of the sit-ins, CORE has just 8 chapters in the mid- and deep-South (2 in FL and 6 in SC). SCLC has between 30-40 affiliates across the region, some of them active some of them moribund. The NAACP, the oldest and largest of the organizations, has a bit over 200 southern branches and around 170 Youth groups. But throughout the Deep South the NAACP is under vicious attack by the White Citizens Council and state governments — it’s on the defensive and fighting just to survive. It’s [outlawed in Alabama](#), and only the courage of Medgar Evers and Aaron Henry are keeping it alive in Mississippi. Largely suppressed in Louisiana as a “subversive” organization, membership has fallen from 13,000 in 65 branches, to 1700 members in 7 branches, mostly in New Orleans. And SNCC — which will emerge as the cutting edge of the Movement and the exemplar of youth leadership — does not yet exist.

The sit-ins both challenge the existing organizations and reinvigorate and re-energize them. By the end of 1960 all them (and, of course, the newly formed SNCC) are experiencing a new birth of activity, new members are joining, new branches, chapters, and affiliates are forming, and new, more militant leadership is emerging.

### **Charlotte & Rock Hill Sit-ins (Feb-Mar, 1960)**

Inspired by Greensboro, sit-ins by Smith University students begin in Charlotte NC on February 9. Led by [J. Charles Jones](#), 200 students occupy all downtown lunch counters. On the 12th, students from Friendship Junior College sit down at Woolworth's and McCrory's in nearby Rock Hill, SC.

To oppose any form of integration, 350 businessmen form a White Citizens Council in Rock Hill and South Carolina Governor (later U.S. Senator) Ernest Hollings supports them with the assertion that the sit-ins “...are purely to create violence and not to promote anyone’s rights.” But the students make it clear, “We’re not seeking intermarriage. We don’t feel that sitting next to a white person will help us digest our food any better. We just want to be able to sit down and have a cup of coffee like other customers.”

By July, most of the Charlotte lunch counters and restaurants accept integration and agree to serve Blacks. But Rock Hill continues to resist any form of racial equality. The sit-ins continue and many are arrested — 70 in one day, on March 15. Protests continue through the year, and in February of 1961, the students move to a Jail-No-Bail strategy.

### **Nashville Student Movement (1960-1964)**

The Nashville Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC), an affiliate of SCLC, is founded in 1958. Led by Rev. Kelly Smith and divinity student C.T. Vivian, it organizes workshops on Nonviolent Resistance by James Lawson who had studied nonviolence with Gandhi’s disciples in India. In the Fall of 1959, Lawson, now a Vanderbilt University divinity student, begins regular anti-segregation strategy meetings and nonviolent training sessions for students attending Nashville’s Black colleges: American Baptist Theological Seminary, Fisk University, Meharry Medical College, and Tennessee Agricultural & Industrial (now Tennessee State Univ).

Prominent among those attending Lawson's sessions are students who will soon assume major leadership roles in the awakening Freedom Movement: Marion Barry, James Bevel, Bernard Lafayette, John Lewis, Diane Nash, and C.T. Vivian.

On Saturday, February 13, less than two weeks after the Greensboro sit-in, more than 100 students commence the Nashville Student Movement — the largest, best organized, most disciplined, and most persistent of the student sit-in groups in the South. They occupy the Kress, McClellan, and Woolworth's lunch counters. Hundreds more join as the sit-ins continue — lunch counters at Grants and Walgreens, Greyhound and Trailways, and local department stores are added. White racists heckle, harass, and attack the students who meet — and defeat — violence with the tactics of Nonviolent Resistance.

Nashville's Black community stands solidly behind the students. Two days after the first sit-in, the leadership of Nashville's Black religious community votes to support the students. The NCLC organizes a crippling boycott of downtown merchants.

Racist violence against the sit-ins escalates with harassment and beatings. The violent hecklers are not arrested, instead the non-violent protesters are hauled off to jail. The city tries to intimidate the students and break the boycott with mass arrests that fill the jails to overflowing. Jailing the students fails to break the movement, the united students and community hang tough. When 81 of the students are convicted of "Disorderly Conduct" they refuse to pay the fine, choosing instead to serve their time in jail. Sit-in leader Diane Nash explains, *"We feel that if we pay these fines we would be contributing to, and supporting, the injustice and immoral practices that have been performed in the arrest and conviction of the defendants."*

Lawson is expelled from Vanderbilt and other student leaders are threatened with reprisals. The sit-ins continue. The Mayor offers a "compromise" — divide the lunch counters into separate Black and white sections. NCLC and the students reject his proposal — separate is not equal.

On April 19, the home of Black attorney Alexander Looby, who has been defending the students in court, is destroyed by a terrorist bomb. Thousands of demonstrators — students and adults, including some whites — march through Nashville to the steps of City Hall. Diane Nash confronts Mayor Ben West, forcing him to admit that segregation is wrong and that the lunch counters should be desegregated.

Nashville becomes the first Southern city to at least start desegregating its public facilities, though demonstrations continue in Nashville until passage of the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#) finally makes overt, legally-sanctioned segregation illegal.



Confronting the Mayor, Nashville TN.  
— *Nashville Tennessean* photo

### **Mass Arrest of Student Protesters, Orangeburg, SC. (Feb-March, 1960)**

After several days of training in the tactics of Nonviolent Resistance using the [CORE Rule For Action](#), on February 25th some 40 students from South Carolina State and Claflin College try to sit-in at the Kress store in downtown Orangeburg. The lunch counter is closed and the stools removed to prevent Blacks from sitting at a "white-only" facility. For three weeks the students sit-in and picket.



Orangeburg students march against segregation, 1960.  
Photo by Cecil Williams.

On March 15 — a cold winter day — Claflin Student Council President Tom Gaither and State College freshman Charles “Chuck” McDew, lead almost 1,000 students on a peaceful march downtown to protest segregation and support the sit-ins. The cops attack them with clubs and tear-gas and the fire department knocks them off their feet with freezing water from high-pressure hoses. Almost 400 of the marchers are forced into a police stockade in the largest Freedom Movement mass arrest up to that time. They are convicted of “Breach of the Peace,” but the U.S. Supreme Court overturns the convictions two years later because their side-walk march was a peaceful, orderly petition for redress of grievances within the protection of the 1st Amendment.

Following the arrests and trials, many of the main student leaders leave campus to devote their full energies to the Freedom Movement. Tom Gaither becomes a CORE field secretary and Chuck McDew becomes the second Chairman of the newly formed [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee](#) (SNCC).

## Baltimore Sit-ins & Protests (1960)

The Civic Interest Group (CIG) is one of the main direct-action organizations active in Baltimore, MD. Led by students from Morgan State, CIG also includes activists from Coppin State College, Black high school kids, and some white students from Goucher College and Johns Hopkins University.

Up the street from Morgan State is the Northwood Shopping Center where eating and entertainment facilities are segregated. Early in March, CIG begins picketing and sit-ins at Hecht's department store, Arundel's Ice Cream Parlor, and the Northwood movie theater. Some protesters are arrested. Within a short time the eating places agree to serve everyone regardless of race, but the theater continues to bar Blacks. Protests continue at the cinema for years.

The CIG students expand their protests to the lunch counters and tea rooms of the big downtown department stores which quickly agree to desegregate. Other Baltimore lunch counters, cafes, and restaurants, are more recalcitrant and direct-action continues at those facilities.

In June, students are arrested for sitting in at Hooper's Restaurant. After being convicted of trespass, their case is appealed by Thurgood Marshall and Juanita Jackson Mitchell of the NAACP. Five years later, in 1965, their convictions are overturned by the Supreme Court. Robert Mack Bell (16), the student body president of Dunbar High School, is one of the arrested students. He later graduates from Harvard Law School, and in 1996 becomes the Chief Judge of the Maryland Court of Appeals.



Baltimore, Morgan State students under arrest, for protesting segregation, 1960.  
Photographer unknown.

## Atlanta Sit-ins (Mar-Oct, 1960)

Atlanta University, the Interdenominational Theologic Center, and Clark, Morehouse, Morris Brown, and Spelman Colleges have adjacent campuses. Together, these Black institutions are known as the Atlanta University Center (AUC).

After reading about the Greensboro sit-ins, AUC students Lonnie King, Julian Bond, Herschelle Sullivan, Carolyn Long, Joseph Pierce, and others form the Committee on Appeal for Human Rights (COAHR). They organize workshops and training sessions on the strategy and tactics of Nonviolent Resistance and begin recruiting students willing to take an oath of nonviolence and sit-in at local lunch counters.

On March 9, COAHR students publish "[\*An Appeal for Human Rights\*](#)," in Atlanta newspapers. A declaration of war against racism and discrimination, the Appeal condemns in specific detail the injustices of segregation, demands that it be ended, and unequivocally states:

"We [AUC students] have joined our hearts, minds, and bodies in the cause of gaining those rights which are inherently ours as members of the human race and citizens of these United States. . . . We do not intend to wait placidly for those rights which are already legally ours to be meted out to us one at a time. Today's youth will not sit by submissively, while being denied all the rights, privileges, and joys of life. . . . We must say in all candor that we plan to use every legal and nonviolent means at our disposal to secure full citizenship rights as members of this great Democracy of ours."

The Appeal is also a challenge to the "old guard" leaders of Atlanta's Black community and their slow strategies of negotiation and litigation. Against the advice of their more cautious elders, 200 AUC students launch sit-ins on March 15, targeting facilities at government buildings and interstate bus and train terminals since — in theory — public access to these are guaranteed by the 14th Amendment.

Seventy-seven students are arrested for sitting-in, as are the six students who had signed the March 9 "Appeal for Human Rights." The 83 are charged with "Breach of the Peace," "Refusing to Leave Premises," "Intimidating" the restaurant owners, and "Conspiracy," a serious felony. If convicted, they face 99 years in the penitentiary. Negotiations with the white power structure slowly get under way while direct-action continues until the students leave for summer vacation. An ultimately successful legal defense of the arrested students is mounted. The negotiations with the Atlanta power structure are long and ultimately fruitless — they will not agree to end segregation.

Over the summer, COAHR plans for the fall when students return. On the weekend of October 14-16, SNCC holds a strategy conference at AUC of student-activists from across the South, and many Atlanta students attend. On October 19, COAHR resumes large demonstrations and sit-ins, this time targeted at eight of Atlanta's segregated downtown stores. In addition, hundreds of AUC students picket an Atlanta police station to protest previous arrests and general mistreatment of Blacks by the cops. A small number of whites from Emory and Georgia Tech also protest segregation. In all, 52 protesters are arrested and charged with "Trespass" and "Refusing to Leave Private Facilities." Fourteen of those arrested refuse to post bond as part of a "Jail-No-Bail" strategy to intensify the struggle.



Picketing Rich's department store, Atlanta GA, 1960. Photographer unknown.

Rich's Department Store is the flagship emporium of the downtown business district, and it becomes a primary sit-in target. The students ask Dr. King to join them in sit-ins at Rich's restaurants, including the upscale Magnolia Tea Room on Rich's 6th floor. Though reluctant to be arrested due to legal troubles stemming from his Movement activities in Alabama, Dr. King participates and is hauled off to jail with the students. In solidarity with those following the "Jail-No-Bail" strategy, he refuses to post bond and remains imprisoned.

The arrests galvanize Atlanta's Black community and some "old guard" Black leaders join the ongoing protests. Blacks boycott the segregated stores. Negotiations are resumed. Six days later, on October 24, Atlanta Mayor Hartsfield orders the release of all demonstrators still imprisoned. But [Dr. King is kept in jail](#).

Protests and boycotts continue. By September of 1961, many store owners have desegregated their lunch counters. In 1962, a federal court rules in favor of a COAHR lawsuit and orders the desegregation of the city's public pools and parks. But overall, in spite of power structure propaganda touting Atlanta as the "City too busy to hate," Atlanta lags behind many other southern cities. Student leaders tell the new Mayor in 1963 that, "*Three years have passed without our having realized the goals which we set down.*" The struggle continues until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 makes segregated public facilities illegal. Even after that, it takes years to break down the barriers of custom, bigotry, and social pressure.

### **Nonviolent Action Group (NAG), Howard University, (1960)**

Inspired by the Greensboro Sit-ins, students at Howard University in Washington DC found the Nonviolent Action Group (NAG). In the years to come, NAG emerges as one of the most active, and most influential, of the student groups that establish SNCC. NAG students are soon sitting in at segregated area amusement parks such as Glen Echo Park in Maryland, participating in the [Route 40 Project](#), supporting the Baltimore students at the Northwood Theatre protests, joining the [Freedom Rides](#), and facing mob violence in [Cambridge MD](#) and the [Eastern Shore](#).

Of all the student sit-in organizations, NAG addresses the widest and most varied range of issues. As with the other student groups, NAG confronts both off-campus segregation and on-campus issues related to student rights (freedom of speech, association, and political activity, administration authoritarianism and paternalism, etc). But because it is located in Washington DC, NAG is also involved in national political issues involving the White House and Congress. And through contact with the embassies and foreign student delegations of emerging nations, NAG encounters and interacts with the international de-colonization/national-liberation struggles of Africa and Asia.

While hundreds participate in NAG-organized protests from time to time over the years, or attend an occasional meeting, NAG itself never has more than 50 or so active members — roughly half of whom are women, and a handful are white. This totals one-half of one percent (0.005) of Howard's 8,000 students. But despite their small numbers, NAG's influence is deep and significant. This pattern of tiny size and great impact is typical of all the student action groups on campuses around the South (and compared to most of SNCC's student affiliates, NAG is actually quite large).

As the Freedom Movement evolves and grows, many of its most dedicated activists and organizers come out of NAG, including: Ed Brown, Rap Brown, Charlie Cobb, Courtland Cox, Dion Diamond, Ruth Howard, Karen House, Tom Kahn, Mary Lovelace, Bill Mahoney, John Moody, Joan Mulholland, Cleveland Sellers, Mike Thelwell, Hank Thomas, Muriel Tillinghast, Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), Cynthia Washington, and Jean Wheeler.

## Savannah Sit-ins & Boycott (1960-62)

In 1960, roughly one-third of Savannah residents are Black, but unlike other cities in the Deep South more than half of them are registered to vote (Black registration is as high as white registration). Elected officials know that Blacks can affect the outcome of elections which they prove by electing a racial “moderate” as Mayor in 1960. The new Mayor appoints Black representatives to various municipal governing bodies.



Mass meeting, Savannah GA.  
Photo by Ken Thompson

On March 16, Black students in Savannah sit-in at eight downtown lunch counters. Three are arrested. Led by postman Westley Wallace Law of the NAACP, the local movement then demands desegregation of facilities, use of courtesy titles (Mr., Mrs., Miss, instead of the usual “boy” or “girl”), and hiring of Black clerks and managers. To win these demands, they call for a boycott of white-owned downtown stores.

Young activists keep the boycott strong with picket lines, sit-ins, and other forms of direct-action at public beaches and parks, on the buses, at movie theaters and white churches. Weekly mass meetings are held each Sunday afternoon after church services. Unlike Albany in 1961-62, the city of Savannah does not resort to mass arrests of everyone who demonstrates, and some of those they do arrest have their convictions over-ruled as unconstitutional.

The boycott is particularly effective, forcing some of the large stores into bankruptcy. The protests and boycott continue for 19 months, from March of 1960 to October of 1961. In June of 1961 the bus line agrees to begin hiring Black drivers. In October the city agrees to desegregate parks, swimming pools, busses, and restaurants and the boycott is lifted.

## Baton Rouge Sit-ins & Student Strike (March-April, 1960)

As sit-ins spread across the upper and mid-south, the all-white Louisiana State Board of Education threatens “Stern disciplinary action” against any student who participates in a sit-in. The President of Southern University (SU) — a segregated, state-funded, Black college in Baton Rouge — tells students they will be expelled if they sit-in.

On March 28, seven SU students are arrested for sitting-in at a Kress lunch counter. Charged with “Disturbing the Peace,” their bail is set at \$1,500 (equivalent to \$10,000 in 2006 dollars) — an astronomically high bond for a misdemeanor charge. The next day, nine more students are arrested for sitting-in at the Greyhound bus terminal. The following day, led by SU student and CORE



Baton Rouge, Southern University students under arrest for sit-in at Kress lunch counter, 1960.  
— *Advocate* photo.

supporter Major Johns, 3500 students march to the state capitol building to protest segregation, the arrests, and the outrageous bail amounts.

Major Johns and the 16 students arrested for sitting in are expelled from SU and barred from all public colleges and universities in the state of Louisiana. In response, SU students call for a student strike — a boycott of classes until the 17 are reinstated. Marvin Robinson, President of Senior Class and one of the expelled students later explains: *“What is more important, human dignity or the university? We felt it was human dignity.”*

The SU administration tries to break the boycott by appealing to the students' school spirit and calling parents with accusations that the student leaders are inciting a riot. The parents, fearing for the safety of their children, begin pulling their sons and daughters out of the university. The boycott evolves into a mass withdrawal to protest SU's complicity with segregation. Over the weekend of April 2nd, hundreds of students leave SU, hundreds of others want to leave but are unable to do so due to lack of funds for bus fare.

Eventually, the U.S. Supreme Court overturns the “Disturbing the Peace” convictions of the 16 students who were arrested for sitting at “white-only” lunch counters. In 2004 — 44 years after being expelled — they are awarded honorary degrees by Southern University and the state legislature enacts a resolution honoring them.

### **New Orleans Merchant Boycotts & Sit-ins (1960-1963)**

There are three major Black colleges in New Orleans — Dillard University, a private college; Xavier University of Louisiana (XULA), a venerable Catholic institution; and the newly opened Southern University of New Orleans (SUNO), which is state-financed and subject to the Louisiana Board of Education and legislature.

In 1960, close to 40% of New Orleans' population is Black. The city's main shopping-commercial avenue is Canal Street where all the stores are white-owned with segregated facilities — Blacks can buy goods but not eat at the lunch counters, the restrooms are segregated, and so on. There is also a Black shopping-commercial district — the second largest in the city after Canal Street — along Dryades Street. Here the stores are also white-owned, but the shoppers are almost all Black. Blacks can use the facilities, yet except for an occasional janitor all of the employees and managers are white. Many of the white store-owners are Jews who are themselves prevented from owning stores on prestigious Canal Street by the same white power-structure that enforces segregation on Blacks.

In late 1959, Rev. Avery Alexander, Rev. A.L. Davis (SCLC), and Dr. Henry Mitchell (NAACP) organize the Consumers' League of Greater New Orleans (CLGNO) to fight employment discrimination by the Dryades Street merchants. Said Reverend Alexander: *“There were a hundred stores and there were no Blacks clerking in any of the stores. No managers, no assistant managers. No white collar workers. We didn't believe it was equitable when ninety percent of the customers were Black.”*

For several months in late 1959 and early 1960 the League negotiates with the Dryades Street merchants — to no avail. Despite their own experience of discrimination as Jews, the store owners refuse to open “white” jobs to Blacks. In April, the League launches a boycott of the Dryades stores that won't employ Blacks as anything but menials.

The boycott is effective. The week before Easter is traditionally a major business peak, but on Good Friday the street is empty of shoppers. A few stores begin to hire Blacks, but most continue to refuse. Over the following months, many stores close or move to the white suburbs rather than hire Blacks.

The boycott continues, and customers take their business elsewhere. Dryades Street — once a busy commercial district — becomes a street of abandoned, boarded-up stores.

Students from XULA, SUNO, and Dillard — along with a few white students from Tulane and University of New Orleans (UNO) — join the picket lines on Dryades Street. When the CLGNO pickets are temporarily halted by an injunction, they form a CORE chapter led by former XULA student body President Rudy Lombard, Oretha Castle from SUNO, Jerome Smith one of the students who withdrew from Southern University in Baton Rouge, and Hugh Murray a white student from Tulane.

On September 9, the new CORE chapter stages a sit-in at the Woolworth on Canal Street. The integrated group of Blacks and whites is arrested and charged with “Criminal Mischief.” The next day, CORE leader Oretha Castle is fired from her job at the Hotel Dieu Hospital: *“The good nun gave me my paycheck and said, ‘Take it, and get out of here, and don’t ever come back.’”*

Hampered by lack of bail money, CORE sit-ins continue off and on as funds become available, and the NAACP Youth Council led by Raphael Cassimire pickets the stores to protest segregation and the arrests. Crowds of angry whites taunt, abuse, and attack the CORE and NAACP demonstrators, beating them, scalding them with hot coffee, and throwing acid on them.

On September 16, 1960, CORE field secretary Jim McCain, Reverend Avery Alexander, and other members of CLGNO are arrested for picketing stores on Claiborne Avenue. Some 3,000 people attend a support rally for the “jailbirds” at the ILA (longshoremen's union) hall, and SCLC leader A. L. Davis opens his church to CORE activists for meetings and training sessions in Nonviolent Resistance.

On September 17, Rudy Lombard, Oretha Castle, Dillard student Cecil Carter, and Tulane student Sydney Goldfinch are arrested for sitting-in at the McCrory's department store lunch counter. As a Jew, Goldfinch is particularly hated by the white power structure. He is charged with “Criminal Anarchy” which carries a potential sentence of 10 years in state prison, his bond is set at \$2,500 (equal to \$17,000 in 2006). As police repression against the Movement increases, not only are sit-ins and picketers arrested but so too are those whose only “crime” is handing out leaflets.

The New Orleans sit-ins, pickets, boycotts, and arrests continue for years, culminating in a massive [Freedom March](#) in September of 1963. Slowly — too slowly — public facilities in New Orleans are desegregated. Passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 overturns all segregation laws, but custom and practice yield slowly, taking years more to change.

See the [“History & Timeline”](#)  
for descriptions and analyses of other Freedom Movement events and struggles.