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The Tougaloo Nine: The Students Who Challenged Jim Crow at the Jackson Municipal Library

Nine Students, One Library, and a Defining Challenge to Mississippi's Jim Crow Order



William Spivey Follow 14 min read · 1 day ago

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File:Commemoration of Tougaloo Nine at Trustmark Park.jpg — Wikimedia Commons

In one of the longest-awaited victory speeches in American history, Scott Colom delivered his at Tougaloo College, just outside Jackson, Mississippi's capital. Not only did it take eight days after the election for Colom to be declared the winner. It had been 145 years since Mississippi had a Black Senator. When Blanche Kelso Bruce finished his 6-year term in 1881, he probably had no idea how long it would be before Mississippi sent another Black man to Washington.

How Mississippi's "Affidavit Ballots" Demonstrate How Voter Suppression Works | by William Spivey | The Polis | Nov, 2026 | Medium

Mississippi was one of the most dangerous states in America for people working to end racial segregation and secure voting rights during the Civil Rights Movement. From the 1950s through the late 1960s, Black activists, NAACP organizers, voter-registration workers, students, and visiting civil-rights volunteers faced threats, beatings, bombings, and murder.

Before Scott Colom: The History of Statewide Black Elected Officials in Mississippi | by William Spivey | The Polis | Nov, 2026 | Medium

Some were prominent national figures. Others were local residents whose names never received the same recognition, even though they risked — and lost — their lives challenging Jim Crow. Here are some of the most important people killed in Mississippi because of their civil rights activities:

Date and location/Why they were targeted

George Wesley Lee-May 7, 1955 — Belzoni

A minister, NAACP leader, and voting-rights organizer. He encouraged Black residents to register and vote. He was shot and killed after refusing to abandon his voter-registration work.

Lamar Smith — August 13, 1955 — Brookhaven

A World War I veteran who helped Black residents vote. He was shot dead on the courthouse lawn in broad daylight while assisting voters.

Herbert Lee-September 25, 1961 — Liberty

Worked with SNCC organizer Bob Moses to register Black voters. He was shot and killed by state legislator E.H. Hurst.

Medgar Evers — June 12, 1963 — Jackson

Mississippi NAACP field secretary. He organized voter registration, investigated racial violence, and fought school segregation. He was assassinated outside his home.

Louis Allen — January 31, 1964 — Liberty

Witnessed Herbert Lee's murder and provided information to federal investigators. After enduring threats and harassment, he was shot and killed outside his home.

Henry Hezekiah Dee — May 2, 1964 — Meadville area

A young Black man abducted and murdered by Klansmen who falsely believed he was involved in an effort to arm Black residents.

Charles Eddie Moore — May 2, 1964 — Meadville area

A college student abducted and murdered alongside Henry Dee. Their bodies were recovered during the search for the three Freedom Summer workers.

James Earl Chaney — June 21, 1964 — Philadelphia

A Black civil-rights worker from Meridian working with CORE on voter registration and community organizing.

Andrew Goodman — June 21, 1964 — Philadelphia

A white New York volunteer who came to Mississippi for Freedom Summer voter-registration work.

Michael Schwerner — June 21, 1964 — Philadelphia

A CORE organizer working to register Black voters and organize communities. He had become a particular target of the Ku Klux Klan.

Vernon Ferdinand Dahmer — January 10, 1966 — Hattiesburg

A businessman and NAACP leader who offered to pay poll taxes for Black residents who could not afford them. Klansmen firebombed his home and store. He died from his injuries.

Wharlest Jackson — February 27, 1967 — Natchez

An NAACP leader and civil-rights activist. He was killed when a bomb planted in his truck exploded after he left work. His promotion at a chemical plant, previously reserved for white workers, was believed to be the motive.

Other victims of racial violence connected to the movement

Several other people deserve recognition, although they were not necessarily civil-rights workers themselves.

- Mack Charles Parker (1959, Poplarville): A 23-year-old Black man kidnapped from jail by a white mob, beaten, murdered, and thrown into the Pearl River. His murder illustrated the racial terror surrounding Black life in Mississippi.
- Ben Chester White (1966, Natchez): An elderly Black man murdered by Klansmen who hoped his death would divert attention from a civil-rights march. He was not himself a movement activist.
- Roman Ducksworth Jr. (1962, Taylorsville): A Black military police officer on leave who was shot by a police officer after being ordered off a bus. The officer may have mistaken him for a Freedom Rider.
- Benjamin Brown (1967, Jackson): A 19-year-old Black student shot by police during disturbances following a demonstration at Jackson State College.

I want to devote this story to nine students who did not die for the struggle—but knowingly assumed the same risks as the others because it was, after all, Mississippi.



File:The Jackson Municipal Library Sign on the Mississippi Freedom Trail.jpg — Wikimedia Commons

In the spring of 1961, Mississippi remained one of the most rigidly segregated states in America. The Supreme Court had declared public-school segregation unconstitutional in Brown v. Board of Education seven years earlier, but Mississippi's political leadership continued to resist racial integration. Segregation governed virtually every aspect of public life, from schools and restaurants to transportation, hospitals, theaters, and public libraries. Black residents could pay taxes to support municipal institutions but could be denied access to the facilities those taxes maintained. In Jackson, the state capital, this contradiction was particularly evident in the public library system. Black residents were directed to a separate facility, the George Washington Carver Library, while the larger and better-resourced main library on North State Street was reserved for white patrons. Nine students from Tougaloo College decided that this arrangement should no longer be accepted.

Their action became known as the Tougaloo Nine, and their March 27 protest was the first student sit-in against segregation at a public library in Mississippi. Although the students did not immediately integrate the library, their demonstration exposed the injustice of the city's policy, brought the issue into the courts and public debate, and helped establish a pattern of direct-action protest that would become increasingly important to Mississippi's civil-rights movement.

Tougaloo College: A place where resistance could grow

Tougaloo College was an especially important institution in this struggle. Founded in 1869 by the American Missionary Association, the school had been established to provide educational opportunities to formerly enslaved people and their descendants. Located just north of Jackson, Tougaloo developed into a center of Black intellectual life and, eventually, civil-rights organizing.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, the college was more than a place where students prepared for professional careers. It provided an environment in which young people could discuss segregation, racial inequality, political participation, and the possibilities of challenging Mississippi's established racial order. Students were exposed to teachers and activists who encouraged critical thinking and civic involvement. The campus also became a gathering place for civil-rights workers who could not safely meet elsewhere in the state.

The college's location was significant. Jackson was Mississippi's political and administrative center, where segregationist officials and institutions exercised considerable influence. Tougaloo students did not have to travel far to confront the system they opposed. They could see its effects in their daily lives and could organize to challenge it.

The students involved in the library protest were also members of the North Jackson Youth Council of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). They were part of a larger movement that believed young people had an important role in confronting racial discrimination. Their action was not an impulsive visit to a library. It was a carefully prepared demonstration.

Who were the Tougaloo Nine?

The nine students were Meredith Coleman Anding Jr., James Cleo Bradford, Alfred Lee Cook, Geraldine Edwards, Janice Jackson, Joseph Jackson Jr., Albert Earl Lassiter, Evelyn Pierce, and Ethel Sawyer.

The group consisted of five men and four women. They were young college students, but they understood their protest could have consequences that went far beyond arrest. Mississippi had a long history of violence against Black people who challenged white political and social authority. The

students knew that police harassment, imprisonment, threats, and physical violence were possibilities.

Medgar Evers, the Mississippi field secretary of the NAACP, played a central role in preparing the students. Evers had been organizing against segregation and racial discrimination throughout the state. He understood that direct action could expose the contradictions of Mississippi's segregation laws and force public officials to respond to challenges they preferred to ignore.

The students received preparation in nonviolent resistance. They understood that the purpose of their demonstration was not to provoke violence but to make the injustice of segregation visible. They entered the library, requested materials, and remained there peacefully despite demands that they leave.

March 27, 1961: The read-in

At approximately 11 a.m. on Monday, March 27, 1961, the nine students entered the Jackson Municipal Library at 301 North State Street. Joseph Jackson Jr. served as the group's spokesman. He approached the circulation desk and asked for a philosophy book that he needed for a college research project.

The request was entirely ordinary for a college student. The extraordinary circumstance was that Jackson was Black and the library was reserved for white patrons.

The library employee reportedly challenged his presence and summoned the library director. When the director appeared, the students explained that they were conducting research. They were told that they could use the George Washington Carver Library, the city's designated facility for Black residents.

That response illustrated the very problem the students intended to expose. They were not asking for a special service or privilege. They wanted access to the same municipal library available to white citizens.

The students examined the card catalog and selected books. They then spread out at tables and began reading quietly. They did not disrupt library operations, threaten employees, or interfere with other patrons. Their presence alone violated the city's racial restrictions.

Police were summoned and ordered the students to leave. The students refused. They understood that leaving would undermine the demonstration's purpose. If they accepted the order to use the separate library, they would be accepting the principle that the city had the authority to decide which public facilities Black citizens could enter.

The police arrested all nine students. They took them to the Jackson city jail and charged them with breach of the peace. The arrests transformed a quiet demonstration over library access into a public confrontation between students seeking equal treatment and city officials determined to maintain segregation.

The photographs taken that day became important historical evidence. The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, the state agency established to monitor civil-rights activities and investigate those challenging segregation, documented the protest. One particularly significant photograph shows Ethel Sawyer following her arrest. The agency's interest in the students demonstrated that Mississippi's segregationist authorities regarded even a peaceful attempt to read in a public library as a matter requiring government surveillance.

The arrests became a larger confrontation.

News of the arrests spread to Jackson State College, another historically Black institution in the city. Students there organized a prayer vigil in support of the jailed Tougaloo students. The response demonstrated that the protest was no longer simply a matter involving nine individuals. It had become a concern shared by a wider community of Black college students.

Medgar Evers and other civil-rights activists also supported the students. Evers understood that the city's treatment of the Nine could become a key test of whether Mississippi would tolerate peaceful protest.

The following day, March 28, the students faced trial. They were convicted and fined $100 each, with suspended jail sentences. The charge of breach of the peace was particularly significant because it demonstrated how segregationist authorities could use public-order laws to punish people whose actual conduct was peaceful.

The students' refusal to leave a public library had been transformed into a criminal offense. Rather than addressing the discrimination that prompted the demonstration, the authorities prosecuted those challenging it.

But the confrontation was not over. Supporters gathered outside the courthouse and jail as the case unfolded. Jackson State students and other demonstrators continued to express solidarity with the Tougaloo Nine. Police responded with force, including dogs, billy clubs, and tear gas. Among those injured was an 81-year-old Black man, W. R. Wren, who suffered a broken arm.

The violence against supporters demonstrated how a peaceful protest over access to books could become a much larger confrontation when local authorities insisted on preserving segregation.

It also highlighted a key distinction between the students and the government officials opposing them. The students had entered the library quietly, requested books, and sat down to read. The police response involved arrests and the use of physical force against supporters.

The incident became an early example of the dangers facing Mississippi's emerging student movement.

Why the library mattered

It might be tempting to regard the library demonstration as a relatively small protest compared with the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the lunch-counter sit-ins, or the Freedom Rides. But the students understood that access to information was inseparable from access to opportunity.

The main Jackson library contained resources that were not necessarily available at the Carver branch. The students had legitimate academic reasons for wanting to use its collections. Their educational needs made the discrimination particularly difficult to defend.

The issue also involved public ownership and public responsibility. The municipal government maintained the library, supported by taxpayers, including Black residents. Yet those residents were denied equal access to its facilities.

The segregation system attempted to make this arrangement appear normal. Black citizens could contribute to the public treasury but could not enjoy the same public services as white citizens.

There was also an educational contradiction. Mississippi's Black colleges were preparing students for professional careers and intellectual leadership, but the state's public institutions restricted their access to resources that

could help them succeed. The Tougaloo Nine directly challenged that contradiction. Their protest insisted that a public library should serve the public, not one race.

Their demonstration also fit into a larger national movement. The Greensboro sit-ins of February 1960 had inspired students throughout the South to challenge segregation through direct action. Black students were increasingly unwilling to wait for politicians, courts, or reluctant civic leaders to dismantle Jim Crow voluntarily. They were prepared to confront discriminatory practices themselves. The Tougaloo Nine brought that movement to Mississippi's capital.

The struggle continued after the arrests.

One important distinction is necessary when discussing the legacy of the Tougaloo Nine: their demonstration did not immediately desegregate the Jackson Municipal Library.

The city's white leadership did not abandon its segregation policy simply because nine students had been arrested. The protest exposed the injustice, attracted public attention, and created pressure for further action, but the struggle required additional organizing and legal intervention.

On January 12, 1962, the NAACP filed a federal lawsuit challenging Jackson's segregation of public facilities. The case sought to secure Black residents' access to the main library, parks, and other recreational facilities. One of the plaintiffs was W. R. Wren, the elderly man injured during the police attack on the Tougaloo Nine's supporters.

Tougaloo President Daniel Beittel also supported the students' efforts. He resisted pressure to discipline or expel them and recognized the college's obligation to stand behind students exercising their rights. Beittel even

suggested that opening the library to all Jackson residents without discrimination could help end the legal dispute.

This was an important development because it demonstrated that the students' protest had consequences beyond the immediate arrests. It helped establish the library question as part of a broader legal challenge to segregation in Jackson.

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struggle. The Tougaloo Nine had helped initiate that process, but they were part of a much larger campaign rather than the sole cause of the library's integration.

A beginning, not an isolated event

The importance of the Tougaloo Nine becomes even clearer when their demonstration is placed within the subsequent history of Mississippi's civil-rights movement.

In May 1961, the Freedom Riders arrived in Jackson to challenge segregation in interstate transportation facilities. Among those arrested in Jackson was John Lewis, who would later become a prominent civil-rights leader and member of Congress.

Tougaloo students continued challenging discrimination. In 1962, students and their faculty adviser, John R. Salter Jr., protested segregated downtown businesses. In 1963, another group of Tougaloo students staged a sit-in at the Woolworth lunch counter in Jackson. The famous demonstration attracted national attention and was met with physical violence.

The college also became an important meeting place for civil-rights leaders and organizers. Its campus provided a setting where Black and white activists could meet, discuss strategy, and organize campaigns that would have been difficult to conduct openly elsewhere in Mississippi.

The Tougaloo Nine helped establish that tradition of student activism. Their demonstration showed that young people did not have to wait to graduate, enter politics, or become established community leaders to challenge injustice.

Their example also demonstrated that civil-rights activism did not always begin with a large march or a dramatic confrontation. Sometimes it began with a simple request: a student asking for a book in a public library.

Remembering the Tougaloo Nine

The old Jackson Municipal Library building still stands at 301 North State Street. It is an important landmark in Mississippi's civil-rights history because it was the site of the March 27, 1961, read-in. The library later moved across the street to the former Sears building and became the Eudora Welty Library.

In 2017, a Mississippi Freedom Trail marker was dedicated to commemorate the library sit-in. The marker recognized the nine students whose actions challenged the city's segregation policy. The Mississippi Department of Archives and History also maintains a collection of documents, correspondence, legal records, photographs, and newspaper coverage associated with the Tougaloo Nine.

Their story received renewed attention in 2025 with the publication of M. J. O'Brien's The Tougaloo Nine: The Jackson Library Sit-In at the Crossroads of Civil War and Civil Rights, published by the University Press of Mississippi.

The book examines the demonstration, arrests, trial, and subsequent confrontations in Jackson.

The significance of the Tougaloo Nine is not simply that they were arrested for entering a library. It is that they understood the relationship between education, citizenship, and equality. They recognized that segregation was not merely about where Black people could sit, eat, or shop. It was also about who had access to the resources necessary to participate fully in American society.

Mississippi had created a system in which Black citizens could be educated, but their educational opportunities were restricted by the same government that collected their taxes. The students challenged that contradiction by demanding access to a public institution that belonged to the entire community.

Nine students walked into a library, requested books, and refused to leave. Their actions did not immediately end segregation, but they helped turn a local injustice into a public civil-rights issue and contributed to the pressure that eventually dismantled the city's discriminatory policies.

Their demonstration deserves recognition alongside the better-known sit-ins and Freedom Rides of the period. The Tougaloo Nine were among the young people who understood that freedom would not simply be handed to them. They had to demand, defend, and secure it.

Why did Scott Colom choose Tougaloo College for his victory speech?

Scott Colom's decision to deliver his victory speech at Tougaloo College was about more than choosing a historic Mississippi campus for a political celebration. He could have chosen the much larger Jackson State University,

where two people were killed, and 12 others were wounded when Mississippi law-enforcement officers opened fire on students. This came ten days after the Kent State shootings but is mostly lost to history.

The Jackson State Shootings That Time Forgot | by William Spivey | The Polis | Medium

More than six decades after the read-in, Colom stood on the campus of the institution that helped produce those young activists, celebrating his election as Mississippi's first Black U.S. senator since Reconstruction. The symbolism was difficult to miss: a state that once arrested Black college students for attempting to use a public library had now elected a Black man to represent it in the United States Senate. The Tougaloo Nine challenged Mississippi's racial barriers one library book at a time; Colom's election represented another milestone in the unfinished struggle for political representation. His choice of venue connected the present achievement to the courage of those who helped make it possible.

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Written by William Spivey

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Tom Mitchell

What are your thoughts?

Melanie Hilda 🌹 💦 ⭐ her/she
1 day ago

I believe real change begins when ordinary people find the courage to challenge injustice. Their story reminds me that standing up for basic rights, even at great personal risk, can leave a lasting impact on generations. 🌟📝🌎⭐

8 Reply

fran rooks
1 day ago

Because of your articles history is learning the atrocities Blacks encountered simply to vote and receive the same rights whites had. Bravo to you, Mr. Spivey.

1 Reply

Van G
14 hours ago

Growing up in a small Midwestern town, there was only 1 library. It was also a place where all the other segregation in town was left outside. People there were nice to everyone who was interested in books and learning. It was like an oasis, a place… more

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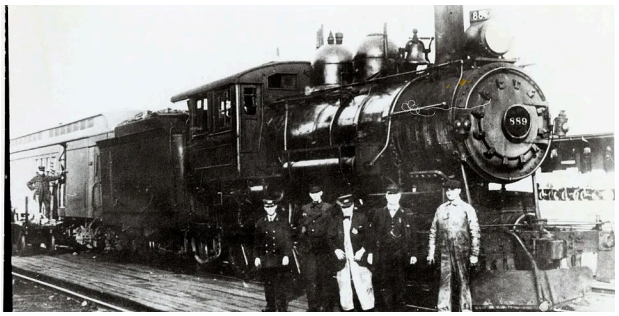


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