

American Civil Rights Movement and Everett Tilson Timeline

1954: *Brown v. Board of Education*

On May 17, 1954, the U. S. Supreme Court ruled in the case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. The decision effectively overturned the “separate but equal” Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) ruling of, which had allowed Jim Crow laws that mandated separate public facilities for whites and African Americans to prevail throughout the South during the first half of the 20th century. While the *Brown* ruling applied only to schools, it implied that segregation in other public facilities was unconstitutional as well.

1955: Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Montgomery Bus Boycott

On December 1, 1955, African American civil rights activist Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a public bus to a white passenger. Her subsequent arrest initiated a sustained bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. The protest began on December 5, led by Martin Luther King, Jr., then a young local pastor, and was so successful that it was extended indefinitely. In the ensuing months, protestors faced threats, arrests, and termination from their jobs. Nonetheless, the boycott continued for more than a year. Finally, the Supreme Court upheld a lower court’s ruling that segregated seating was unconstitutional, and the federal decision went into effect on December 20, 1956.

1957: The Little Rock Nine and the Little Rock Central High School Integration

In September 1957 nine African American students attended their first day at Little Rock Central High School, whose entire student population had until that point been white. The Little Rock Nine, as they came to be called, encountered a large white mob and soldiers from the Arkansas National Guard, sent by Arkansas Gov. Orval Faubus, blocking the entrance of the school. For the next 18 days President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Gov. Faubus, and Little Rock’s mayor, Woodrow Mann, discussed the situation. The Little Rock Nine returned on September 23, but were met with violence. The students were sent home and returned on September 25, protected by U.S. soldiers. Although the students were continually harassed, eight of the nine completed the academic year. The entire confrontation drew international attention not only to civil rights in the United States but also to the struggle between federal and state power.

Tilson in 1957: Tilson serves as chair for the organizing committee of Conference on Christian Faith and Human Relations. He experiences his first disagreement with Vanderbilt University Chancellor Harvie Branscomb when he sends a telegram to President Eisenhower in his capacity as the committee chair for the conference.

Tilson in 1958: Abingdon Press publishes his best-known book, *Segregation and the Bible*.

1960: The Greensboro Four and the Sit-In Movement

On February 1, 1960, a group of four freshmen from the Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina (now North Carolina A&T State University), a historically black college, began a sit-in movement in downtown Greensboro. After making purchases at the F.W. Woolworth department store, they sat at the “whites only” lunch counter. They were refused service and eventually asked to leave. As protestors were arrested, others would take their places so that the

establishment was unceasingly occupied. The protest spread to other cities, including Atlanta and Nashville. After months of protests, facilities began to desegregate throughout the country, and the Greensboro Woolworth's started to serve African American patrons in July.

Tilson in 1960: During the spring Tilson takes a very active role in the Nashville lunch counter sit-ins. He speaks out against the expulsion of James Lawson from the Vanderbilt University School of Divinity. He refutes comments made by Chancellor Harvie Branscomb in the *Christian Century* magazine. He leads a prayer before a protest outside the Nashville mayor's office. He begins teaching Old Testament at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio in the fall.

1960: Ruby Bridges and the New Orleans School Integration

On November 14, 1960, six-year-old Ruby Bridges was escorted to her first day at the previously all-white William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans by four armed federal marshals. They were met with angry mobs shouting their disapproval, and, throughout the day, parents marched in to remove their children from the school as a protest to desegregation. Every subsequent day of that academic year Bridges was escorted to school, enduring insults and threats on her way, and then learning her lessons from her young teacher, Barbara Henry, in an otherwise empty classroom. Her bravery later inspired the Norman Rockwell painting, *The Problem We All Live With* (1964).

1961: Freedom Rides

The Freedom Rides began on May 4, 1961, with a group of seven African Americans and six whites, who boarded two buses bound for New Orleans. Testing the Supreme Court's ruling on the case *Boynton v. Virginia* (1960), which extended an earlier ruling banning segregated interstate bus travel (1946) to include bus terminals and restrooms, the so-called Freedom Riders used facilities for the opposite race as their buses made stops along the way. The group was confronted by violence in South Carolina, and, on May 14, when one bus stopped to change a slashed tire, the vehicle was firebombed and the Freedom Riders were beaten. Unable to travel farther, the original riders were replaced by a second group of 10, partly organized by the SNCC, originating in Nashville. As riders were either arrested or beaten, more groups of Freedom Riders would take their place. On May 29 U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy ordered the Interstate Commerce Commission to enforce bans on segregation more strictly, an edict that took effect in September.

Tilson in 1962: Associate Editor of *Ebony* magazine, Alex Poinsett, refers frequently to *Segregation and the Bible* in his article about a civil rights incident in New Orleans. He does so with Tilson's permission and support.

1963: Birmingham Demonstrations

In the spring of 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the SCLC launched a campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, with local Pastor Fred Shuttlesworth and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) to undermine the city's system of racial segregation. The campaign began on April 3, 1963, with sit-ins, economic boycotts, mass protests, and marches on City Hall. The demonstrations faced challenges from many sides, including an

indifferent African American community, adversarial white and African American leaders, and a hostile commissioner of public safety, Eugene (“Bull”) Connor. On April 12 King was arrested for violating an anti-protest injunction and placed in solitary confinement. The demonstrations continued, but, after a month without any concessions, King was convinced to launch the Children’s Crusade. Beginning on May 2, 1963, school-aged volunteers skipped school and began to march. Many submitted politely to arrests, and local jails quickly filled up. On May 3 Connor ordered the police and fire department to set high-pressure water hoses and attack dogs on the youth. The violent tactics against peaceful demonstrators continued in ensuing days, causing outrage in the community, and gaining national attention. The negative media spurred Pres. John F. Kennedy to propose a civil rights bill on June 11. Although the Birmingham campaign eventually negotiated an agreement with local reforms, tensions remained high in the city, and the meeting places of civil rights activists were continually threatened. A bomb on September 15 at 16th Street Baptist Church killed four African American girls and injured others.

1963: March on Washington

The demonstrations of 1963 culminated with the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28 to protest civil rights abuses and employment discrimination. A crowd of about 250,000 individuals gathered peacefully on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., to listen to speeches by civil rights leaders, notably Martin Luther King, Jr. He addressed the crowd with an eloquent and uplifting message that famously became known as the “I Have a Dream” speech.

1964: Civil Rights Act

On July 2, 1964, Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson, signed the Civil Rights Act into law, a stronger version of what his predecessor, President Kennedy, had proposed the previous summer before his assassination in November 1963. The act authorized the federal government to prevent racial discrimination in employment, voting, and the use of public facilities. Although controversial, the legislation was a victory for the civil rights movement.

Tilson in 1964: He and three MTSO colleagues are arrested and incarcerated for attempting to attend Easter services at the Capitol Street Methodist Church along with two young African American men.

1965: Assassination of Malcolm X

On February 21, 1965, the prominent African American leader Malcolm X was assassinated while lecturing at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem, New York. An eloquent orator, Malcolm X spoke out on the civil rights movement, demanding it move beyond civil rights to human rights and argued that the solution to racial problems was in orthodox Islam. His speeches and ideas contributed to the development of black nationalist ideology and the Black Power movement.

1965: Selma-Montgomery March

On March 7, 1965, Martin Luther King, Jr., organized a march from Selma, Alabama, to the state’s capital, Montgomery, to call for a federal voting rights law that would provide legal support for disenfranchised African Americans in the South. State troopers, however, sent marchers back with violence and tear gas, and television cameras recorded the incident. On

March 9 King tried again, leading more than 2,000 marchers to the Pettus Bridge, where they encountered a barricade of state troopers. King led his followers to kneel in prayer and then he unexpectedly turned back. The media attention prompted President Johnson to introduce voting rights legislation on March 15, and on March 21 King once again led a group of marchers out of Selma; this time, they were protected by Alabama National Guardsmen, federal marshals, and FBI agents. Marchers arrived in Montgomery on March 25, where King addressed the crowd with what would be called his “How Long, Not Long” speech. The Voting Rights Act was signed into law on August 6. It suspended literacy tests, provided for federal approval of proposed changes to voting laws or procedures, and directed the attorney general of the United States to challenge the use of poll taxes for state and local elections.

Tilson in 1965: He participated in some of these marches in the 1960s. His eldest son, Stephen, described how his father had to make several quick turns in one small town to elude a following vehicle when returning to Ohio from a march.

1965: Watts Riots

A series of violent confrontations between the city police and residents of Watts and other predominantly African American neighborhoods of Los Angeles began on August 11, 1965, after a white police officer arrested an African American man, Marquette Frye, on suspicion of driving while intoxicated. Later accounts indicated that Frye resisted arrest but were unclear whether police had used excessive force. Violence, fires, and looting broke out over the next six days. The disturbance resulted in 34 deaths, more than 1,000 injuries, and \$40 million in property damage. The McCone Commission later investigated the causes of the riots and concluded that they were not the work of gangs or the Black Muslim movement, as the media had previously suggested. The violence likely exploded from the great economic challenges that African Americans in urban centers faced. They contended with poor housing, schools, and job prospects, despite the passage of civil rights legislation.

1966: Black Panther Party founded

In the wake of the assassination of Malcolm X and urban uprisings, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California, to protect African American neighborhoods from police brutality. The Black Panthers launched numerous community programs that offered such services as tuberculosis testing, legal aid, transportation assistance, and free shoes to poor people. The programs confronted the economic problems of African Americans, which the Party argued that the civil rights reforms did not do enough to address. The Black Panthers’ socialist viewpoint, however, made them a target of the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s counterintelligence program, who accused them of being a communist organization and an enemy of the U.S. government. A campaign to annihilate the group came to a head in December 1969 with a police shoot-out at the group’s Southern California headquarters and an Illinois state police raid. The Party’s operations, however, continued into the 1970s, albeit less actively.

1967: *Loving v. Virginia*

On June 12, 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court declared the Virginia statutes prohibiting interracial marriage unconstitutional in the case *Loving v. Virginia*. The case was decided nine years after

Richard Loving, a white man, and Mildred Jeter, a woman of mixed African American and Native American ancestry, had pleaded guilty to having violated Virginia state law prohibiting a white person and a “colored” person from leaving the state to be married and returning to live as man and wife. Their one-year prison sentence was suspended on the condition that the couple leave Virginia and not return as husband and wife for 25 years. Once settled in Washington, D.C., the couple filed suit in a Virginia state court in 1963. The case made its way to the Supreme Court, which reversed their conviction. Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote for a unanimous court that the freedom to marry was a basic civil right and that to deny that freedom based on the groundless classifications outlined in Virginia state’s law was “to deprive all the State’s citizens of liberty without due process of law.” The ruling thus invalidated laws against interracial marriage in Virginia and 15 other states.

1967: Detroit Riot

A series of violent confrontations between residents of predominantly African American neighborhoods and city police in Detroit began on July 23, 1967, after a raid at an illegal drinking club where police arrested everyone inside, including 82 African Americans. Nearby residents protested, and several began to vandalize property, loot businesses, and start fires for the next five days. Although police set up blockades, the violence spread to other parts of the city and resulted in 43 deaths, hundreds of injuries, more than 7,000 arrests, and 1,000 burned buildings. As the riot took place, President Johnson appointed a National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (the Kerner Commission) to investigate recent urban uprisings. It concluded that racism, discrimination, and poverty were some of the causes of the violence and warned that “our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.”

1968: Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed by a sniper while standing on the second-floor balcony at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. He had been staying at the hotel after leading a nonviolent demonstration in support of striking sanitation workers in that city. His murder set off riots in hundreds of cities across the country, and it also pushed Congress to pass the stalled Fair Housing Act in King’s honor on April 11. The legislation made it unlawful for sellers, landlords, and financial institutions to refuse to rent, sell, or provide financing for a dwelling based on factors other than an individual’s financial resources. After that victory, some of King’s supporters carried on his activities, including staging the Poor People’s March in Washington, D.C., that spring. The civil rights movement, however, seemed to be shifting away from the nonviolent tactics and interracial cooperation that had brought about a number of policy changes. The changes, however, could not overcome deep-seated discrimination and the economic oppression that prevented real equality.

Tilson in 1966-1971: During these years, Tilson becomes deeply involved in the effort to make available integrated housing in Delaware, OH. This initiative, known as the Human Relations Committee (HRC) takes form as the development of Colfret Court on the west side of town. Faculty and staff from the Methodist Theological School in Ohio and Ohio Wesleyan University serve as the prime movers in this effort. The HRC empowered a local black barber and

contractor, Don Mitchell, to develop Colfret Court. Tilson was the last president of the HRC when the last house on the 17 lots in the development was built and sold.

Tilson in 1960-2006: Tilson and his wife, Mary, join both the Asbury United Methodist Church and the Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church in Delaware. They alternated their attendance at each church from Sunday to Sunday. He also strongly supported the Liberty Community Center, an oasis for black youth to develop their artistic talents on the south side of Delaware. Finally, beginning in 1986, he became the driving force behind the Martin Luther King Jr. breakfast in Delaware to promote better interracial relations. Delaware's Martin Luther King Jr. breakfast evolved into something special while Tilson served on the organizing committee. The Delaware community reaped the benefits of hearing such civil rights luminaries as Fred Shuttlesworth (leader in the 1963 Birmingham protests), Congressman John Lewis, Nashville sit-in leader C. T. Vivian, and James Lawson, himself, because of their relationships with Tilson.

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