

# **Freedom Summer 1964: Vicksburg, Mississippi Remembered**

William B. Melish

*In memory of the many good people of Vicksburg,  
who taught me so much*

Written in Liverpool, England, 2022–2024

## Preface

The American writer, Henry James, once said, “Memory is a window into the past” (preface to *A Small Boy and Others*). While true, memory also has its pitfalls and deceptions: it can get dates wrong, conflate facts, and especially omit other important details, as well as undoubtedly reveal other weaknesses. I have learned something of this in writing down these memories of the 1964 Summer Project in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Hopefully, the few contemporary accounts from both myself and others in the project that are given in the internet links in this file, as well as other contemporary accounts that may emerge, will help to correct some of these weaknesses.

A word is needed about the use of racial terminology. The terms “African American” and “Black American,” so much in currency today, were not in daily usage in the 1960s. In the following manuscript I have used the terminology that was current at the time, and in the place of Mississippi, when these events took place: “Negro, colored and white.” If any reader finds these terms offensive, they should remember that other times were different from our own (and will be different again in time).

Liverpool, England, June 2024

When I first arrived in Vicksburg, Mississippi about the middle of August 1964 it felt like a foreign country (I grew up in Brooklyn, New York and went to college in Boston, Massachusetts). At that time Mississippi had its own national flag, the Stars and Bars of the Old Confederacy, its own national anthem, "Dixie," and its own deep-South accent. But most of all, it had legal racial segregation. What struck me were the "white only" and "colored only" signs in many public places to designate building entrances, public toilets and other facilities. Although in many places signs were not really needed to tell you where colored and white people were supposed to go.

For instance, my first day in Vicksburg I went to the town center to look around and get familiar with the place. Washington Street was the main shopping street at that time, running parallel to the Mississippi River and situated on a steep bluff above it. No signs were really needed here, because the East end of the street, the colored section, was shabby and run-down while the West end was clean, well painted and maintained. Being August it was hot and humid, the temperature in the upper 90s, and I badly needed a haircut. I have to admit that I instinctively walked almost the length of Washington Street until I came to the clean, bright section and looked for a barber shop. It was my mistake to not even think of looking for a haircut on the shabby end of the street.

In the "white" shop the barber asked me how I wanted my hair cut, I told him and then felt instantly uncomfortable sensing how different I sounded from the Mississippi accents around me. Resolved not to speak again until this was over, I kept quiet, as did the barber. That is until he was nearly finished and trimming the back of my neck hairs with a barber's straight razor. Holding my head bent forward with the razor on my neck, he said to me, "Are you one of these nigger lovers?" Instantly I felt sick inside (and fully realized the big mistake I had made). With a quavering voice I said something totally lame like, "no, I'm just a tourist." I'm sure he didn't believe me, but the haircut soon ended without further words. I paid and left and fully realized my first big mistake in Mississippi. I had unconsciously sought the nicest looking place to get my haircut, as I might have done in New York City. From that moment I learned that my place was in the colored community and that Mississippi white people might be dangerous.

The rest of Vicksburg pretty much shared that contrast of shabby run-down and clean and bright with only a few exceptions. You soon noticed that in the colored sections the streets were unpaved dirt and the houses were mainly made of wood with peeling paint. In the white neighborhoods the streets were paved and the houses nicely painted white, some with big front porches. The houses on Cherry Street, in particular, were set back from the street, large

and wealthy looking. The convenience stores, gas stations and other small businesses in the two parts of town followed the same pattern of somewhat shabby and solid prosperous.

Vicksburg being built on high bluffs above the Mississippi River there were some ravines and “bottom lands” in the town with its hilly, deeply cut landscape. This allowed the city to survive a long siege by Union Forces during the Civil War. Vicksburg liked to think of itself as a peaceful “tourist town” with its Civil War National Battleground Park and monuments. It also had some ante-bellum Old South mansions where tourist buses would bring in day visitors, mainly late middle-aged ladies with blue rinse hairdos, who would come for “high tea” served on pretty porcelain plates and starched white table clothes in the mansion dining room. (I had occasion to see one of these fancy dining rooms several years later via a young African American woman family friend who worked in the kitchen.) The Vicksburg sheriff even once said to us, “You tell us if any one threatens you because we don’t want any trouble here.” He seemed to think the Vicksburg Civil Rights Project was harmless because, in his mind, it was so unnecessary. [For a one-page description of Vicksburg, its sheriff, and its mayor written from the perspective of an experienced volunteer, see [“Report from Vicksburg, July 1, 1964,”](#) apparently by Richard N. Gould.<sup>1</sup>]

The project “Freedom House” followed this somewhat eccentric or sharply contrasting Vicksburg pattern. It was the old Baptist Academy on 1016 Hossley Street, once a Negro Baptist Church seminary, now no longer used and made available to the project free of charge. Long before “Freedom Summer” descended on the Academy it also housed the Brown Family in part of the building: middle-aged single mother Bessie Brown, her older daughter Sandra (maybe age 18) and her baby, Dennis Brown about 16 (but who looked about 13) and younger brother Carl. The family thought the arrival of all these out of state project volunteers was wonderful, as they were a source of novelty, friendship and daily interesting conversations. And Dennis Brown immediately joined in the project activities.

The Baptist Academy building was the epitome of picturesque Vicksburg. A two story, wooden frame structure, it sat atop a maybe 200-foot-high knoll with a steep dirt driveway up to the entrance, with room for a car to turn around. The ground floor consisted of a large class room with bolted-to-the-floor desks, a hallway and staircase. On the opposite side of the hallway was the Brown family’s apartment, consisting of a large kitchen at the rear of the building, their single bedroom and a bathroom. On the second floor a large bedroom was situated at

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<sup>1</sup> Richard N. Gould papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Freedom Summer Digital Collection (hereafter WHS FSDC), Archives Main Stacks, SC 3072, <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/17422/rec/4> (accessed June 2024).

the building's rear, with a corridor and smaller bedroom in front and a bathroom and office opposite the hallway. The two bedrooms were used to house temporary overnight visitors from other projects and new volunteers before they could be housed with local people.

I spent my first seven nights in the large bedroom before I was housed with Mrs. Artimese Garrett, a widow now retired and one-time secretary of the Vicksburg NAACP. Her house was at 3022 Confederate Ave in the National Vicksburg Civil War Battleground Park. Confederate Ave marked the high bluff and the city's defenders' line of forts and trenches which faced



Mrs. Garrett and myself (photograph probably by Mary Jane Melish, Dec. 1964)

Union Ave., lower down across numerous ravines, marking the Federal siege line. (As it happened my great-great grandfather served in the Federal line under General Grant. I always thought it somehow fitting that Mrs. Garrett had "liberated" her house from its Old South Plantation Heritage.) Mrs. Garrett would not take any money for housing me, although I

supplied and cooked my own food (except for gargantuan Sunday dinners which she insisted on providing: delicious Southern home cooking consisting of rabbit, squirrel or chicken, gravy, greens, sweet potatoes and home-made biscuits). Fortunately for me she had another boarder on the second floor, Foster (whose surname I forget), a member of her church who worked locally for the railroad and who helped tackle these huge Sunday dinners. My room was in the top of the house in her garret.

The day after I moved into Mrs. Garret's I was back at the Freedom House in the afternoon to collect a few things I'd left in that big bedroom. I remember there was a female sleeping in the bed I'd occupied, a volunteer from the Jackson Civil Rights Office who had stayed up all night to finish her news releases and had a ride back to Los Angeles with another volunteer in order to depart for a Fulbright Fellowship in Belgium. But they only got as far as Vicksburg when his car broke down, sabotaged by a local white garage in Jackson. (It seems he hadn't learned my Vicksburg barbershop lesson.) I remember this female person stirring while I quietly tried to collect my clothes from the bedside and me saying something like, "don't wake, I'm just collecting a few clothes." A year and a half later I met Ilene Strelitz, another Freedom Summer volunteer, in New Haven, Connecticut, and in conversations learned to our mutual amusement that in the Vicksburg Freedom House, "we shared a bed, but not together." (As it happened, we got married a little over a year later.)

[At the invitation of another volunteer, Bill then visited the West Coast for ten days. When the central COFO office in Jackson made one of their routine calls to Vicksburg to check in, the Jackson Incident Report and business log editor typed, "Bill Melish went to California. If he were to return needs subsistence. Vicksburg wants him back."<sup>2</sup>]

SNCC had decided that the presence of large numbers of Northern, largely white students would bring in much needed funds and media attention. By the time I got there the focus of the Vicksburg Project was voter registration. There also was a state-wide "Freedom School" program, summer school classes for Negro children that taught about slavery, segregation and the origins of the Civil Rights movement. Vicksburg had had a few Freedom School classes, but by the time I got there they had petered out. [On a "List of volunteers" compiled by the

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<sup>2</sup> Hamond, "Vicksburg 10 p.m.," Freedom Information Service--WATS reports, Sept. 18, 1964, WHS FSDC, Historical Society Library Microforms Room, Micro 780, Reel 1, Segment 7, <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/47477/rec/5>, accessed June 2024.

Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) Bill is listed as assigned to the Freedom Schools.<sup>3]</sup>

Negro Voter Education and Registration was the primary activity, a deeply threatening activity to white Mississippi at the time. Freedom Summer was officially organized by The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), an artificial alliance of The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). However, in reality there were deep disagreements between the first two and latter two organizations. The vast majority of the projects were run by SNCC, with the Meridian Project in Neshoba County run by CORE. But on the ground local NAACP people certainly gave support to the other organizations’ work. Indeed, local black people in Vicksburg often referred to us, the summer volunteers, as “you Freedom Riders,” a term above and beyond organizations, but one that always embarrassed me, because I knew I would never have had the courage to go on those 1961 Freedom Rides where white mob violence, beatings and jail were guaranteed. White Mississippi was right at least in one thing, this was a revolution underway—a revolution in consciousness and political participation at the very least.

The Vicksburg project was unusual in that it did not have a SNCC Field Secretary as project director as did all the other projects. Field Secretaries were experienced Black SNCC staff, mainly Southern college or divinity school graduates, who were usually not from the community they were assigned to. Instead, in Vicksburg, two local Black men, Willie Johnson and Johnny Ferguson, were project director and deputy director. However, the Vicksburg Project was recognized by the Jackson COFO office and included in their Incident Reports.

The State of Mississippi, as with much of the South, did not allow Negro people to vote, other than a handful of individuals. Even though the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, passed in 1870 after the Civil War, prohibited denying citizens the right to vote on account of race, color or previous servitude, the Southern States by the mid-1960s used Voter Qualification Tests to prevent the great majority of Colored people from voting with a daunting voter qualification test which consisted of one or more long sections of the Mississippi State Constitution written in highly formal, legal language which the applicant was told to read and then explain in their own words to a white Mississippi State Registrar. The vast majority of Negro applicants always failed the test while whites passed. COFO’s object, however, was to bring as many Black

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<sup>3</sup> Line 30 of "List of Volunteers," Aug. 4, 1964, WHS FSDC, CORE--Fourth Congressional District Project Office personnel - Applications and Lists, 1964-1965 (Historical Society Library Microforms Room, Micro 793, Reel 2, Segment 31), <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/41860/rec/5>, accessed June 2024.

people as possible to the Court House to attempt to registered to vote and then document in writing each rejection. This evidence would eventually be submitted to the Federal Department of Justice to prove that the State of Mississippi was violating its Negro citizens' constitutional right to vote.

So on the ground in Vicksburg we spent most of the day going house to house in the Negro neighborhoods explaining the right to vote and publicizing the date, time and place of mass meetings where the whole process would be gone into in detail, including volunteers who would accompany applicants to the Court House. It was hot, dusty work in the August and September heat and humidity. On one occasion I was canvassing with Henry Hunter, a local volunteer about 20 years old. Henry also had a very successful side-line as a singer in local Black clubs. Singing with a high falsetto voice and flashing a bright gold front tooth, Henry would melt the local girls to mush and had quite a following. I saw this several time, as project members visited these clubs occasionally on Saturday nights, there being little else to do in Vicksburg. However, the girls got no closer to Henry than his general audience because he already had a steady love. On one day in August while canvassing with him it happened that eventually we came to her street. Whereupon Henry said to me, "Bill, I'll see you later, I got something to do here." Previously knowing this was about where his lady lived, I was less annoyed than maybe just a little bit jealous. Not only was he out of the heat, but also in much more salubrious circumstances. But never mind, I carried on, pouring perspiration, with this tedious but necessary work.



Henry Hunter center, and myself looking at each other, at an NYC Friends of SNCC fund raiser, Dec. 1964.  
(Photographer no longer known.)



The canvassing for voter registration was not only in Vicksburg, however. We also went to Negro communities in the county, such as the hamlet of Waterville up Highway 61 north of Vicksburg. It was aptly named due to periodic flooding of the Mississippi River or its tributary, the Yazoo. Here the houses were wooden structures with tin roofs, sometimes referred to as "shotgun shacks" because they often consisted of three rooms in a row, front to back, with a door in the same place in each. If any occupants were in, they mostly would talk to you at the front door, politely listening to your talk, but you never were sure if they would come to any meeting.



Ernestine Washington on the right (who lived on dry land and whom I met with her husband Elijah Washington a few months later) & a friend who lived in Waterville, MS, with Yazoo River backed-up, April, 1975. (Photograph by Ilene Strelitz Melish)

But in one of these shacks I was invited in to the front room. The curtains were drawn and the air was very close with the smell of poverty. It took all my resources to carry on with my talk because in addition to the old woman who had invited me in, there was a middle-aged woman lying on a bed bare chested with a younger man lying beside her with his face buried in her breasts. There was nothing I could say except some variation of my usual talk, as though everything else was normal. No one on the bed moved or spoke, and when I finished the old woman thanked me, took a leaflet and I left. It would be fair to say that I was not shaken by this but more awestruck at the variety of both the poverty and pressures that could engulf Southern Black life.

[For a broader sense of what the volunteers were doing, and tensions with some of the local whites, see the three pages of "Incident Reports" from the Vicksburg Project in 1964 that a cursory search turned up, with Bill mentioned several times: [Sept. 23–24](#), [Sept. 24–29](#), and [Oct. 31–Nov. 2](#).<sup>4</sup>]

On another occasion, back in town, I was escorting an aged, crippled colored man to the new Vicksburg Court House to try to register to vote. As we got to the imposing Court House steps, a new convertible car with top down and filled with white teenagers, male and female, came along the street. Passing us they jeered and laughed at the sight of an old, "broken down" colored man and a young white man going to the Court House to try to vote. Extremely comical! However, one year later Congress passed, and President Johnson signed, the Voting Rights Act. This said in a nutshell that if a state, county or town did not allow its Negro residents to register to vote, Federal Registrars would be sent in to do the job for them. This was the beginning of it no longer being a laughing matter. (Soon Black Mississippians would be voting and electing Black people to the offices of sheriff, county supervisor and eventually mayors and state representatives.)

The cars used by the Vicksburg project were all secondhand vehicles owned by a few volunteers. They were constantly in need of adjustments or repairs, and we had a small group of Negro garages who were particularly sympathetic. One that especially stands out in my mind was a very old garage in "Dabney's Bottom," one of the very poor Colored Neighborhoods that took its name from the sunken terrain between Vicksburg ridges. I often took my old, 1954 Ford car there to remedy its current ailment. The only mechanic I ever saw

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<sup>4</sup> "Vicksburg Report," Sept. 23–29, 1964, Shelton Stromquist Papers, WHS FSDC, Archives Main Stacks, Mss 641, Box 1, Folder 3, <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/30379/rec/35> and <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/30380/rec/35>; "Incident Report—Vicksburg," Oct. 31–Nov. 4, 1964, from the Richard N. Gould papers, WHS FSDC, Archives Main Stacks, SC 3072 <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/17373/rec/4> (all accessed June 2024).

there was an aged Black man with white stubble hair on his chin and milky brown eyes, always with an unlit roll your own cigarette in his mouth and dressed in ragged old work clothes. He would listen attentively to my description of the current car malfunction and then simply say, “ya sir, I kin fix that. You come back tomorrah.” He never said anything more than that. And when I came back the next day, he never would take any money for his work. This would leave me feeling bad, but that’s the way it was—his contribution to the Freedom Movement.

But that wasn’t always the attitude. At another colored garage with a gas pump where we often bought gasoline, one of the young mechanics, a very good-looking young man, one day said to me, referring to one of the particularly pretty white female volunteers, “how can I get some of that nice white pussy?” I was so shocked at this question that I was stunned into silence. I guess he got the message, because he just laughed and walked away. So we weren’t “Freedom Riders” to everybody in the community. But this response was the exception rather than the rule.

Another memorable character that still lives in my mind’s eye was “Pink Taylor.” He was an elderly colored man easily in his mid to late 70’s, thin, always with a jaunty brimmed hat tilted to the side of his hear. Whenever I met Pink Taylor, he would show me his brand-new Ford pick-up truck, a trade-in which he made every year for the latest model. Proudly showing off his new truck, he would say of the white Ford salesman something like, “shoo ma’n, that sapsucker would try to cheat me, but I always got that peckerwood.” And on another occasion when I and another volunteer were calling by his house, he invited us in and whipped out a very large revolver and insisted on showing it to us. I had no idea if it was loaded or why exactly he kept it, but clearly it made him feel good to show it off. [“Mr. Pink Taylor” is mentioned in the “Incident Report–Vicksburg” for [Nov. 1, 1964](#) mentioned above.<sup>5</sup> He accompanied Bill, Henry Hunter, and two other volunteers to a voter registration meeting out of town that was opposed by the white plantation owner.]

Every weekday night after I came in from work, Mrs. Garrett, Foster and I would watch what I think was the 7 o’clock news which, at that time, always had some segment on white violence towards colored people, either in Mississippi or somewhere else in the Deep South. And Mrs. Garrett would often say to me, “Bill, why do these white people treat us so bad?” A question I couldn’t really answer too well. At other times she told me about her life which to me, coming from New York City, was quite amazing. When she was first married, she and her husband lived in a railroad caboose because he worked on a track repair crew and she was the cook for the workmen. Later, possibly after her husband died, she taught in a one-room rural colored

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<sup>5</sup> Richard N. Gould papers, <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/17373/rec/4>.

school teaching children age six to sixteen. I remember saying to her, “how did you ever teach little children at the same time as teenagers?” She just laughed and said, “when I was teaching the youngest ones, I had the teenagers listening to the middle one’s read or do other work.”

After she retired from her teaching job, she told me how she sometimes did baby-sitting work for a wealthy white Vicksburg doctor. When the Civil Rights Movement was heating up in the 1950’s she told me he often said to her something like, “now Artimese, don’t you get involved with any of this.” And I remember her laughing and recall her saying, “oh no, I certainly won’t.” While she told me that at the same time, she was the secretary to the Vicksburg National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (one of the major national civil rights organizations and banned in Mississippi at that time).

I also can vividly see the large grass back yard to her house where she kept a rabbit hutch with two white rabbits and a clothes line for drying washing. One Saturday I was hanging out my washing on the line, when she came out, went over to the rabbit hutch and pulled out the largest white bunny by the ears and carried it over to the other end of the clothes line. Here she proceeded to tie it upside down by its hind legs to the line and holding its head straight down by the ears with her left hand deftly snapped its neck with her right. The rabbit’s body instantly shot ridged while I stood a few feet away simply gawping at this unexpected scene. She just looked at me—and then burst out laughing at the city boy. (The rabbit was to be Sunday dinner the next day.) This was a woman of many parts, who certainly knew what she was about.

My first encounter with Mississippi law came not too many weeks after my arrival in Vicksburg. Willie Johnson, a local young Black man, was the Vicksburg Project Leader (Johnny Ferguson was his deputy). Shel Stromquist, one of the volunteers, told me about the severe black and blue bruises Willie Johnson recently received on both his forearms when Mississippi Highway Patrolman Langford arrested him. With Willie seated in the back seat of his patrol car, Langford was driving and reaching over his seat striking Willie with a blackjack. He had both his arms raised to protect his head, receiving the blows to his forearms. (I do not remember if Willie Johnson was simply beaten or also fined for something.) I met Highway Patrolman Langford a few weeks after this. [For a description, apparently by Shel Stromquist, of the risks people from the Vicksburg Black community faced if they worked with the

volunteers, and some of their responses, see "[Project for Ten Students](#)," which is just over one page in length.<sup>6]</sup>

One of the initiatives of the Vicksburg Project was to publish a local newspaper for the colored community, the *Vicksburg Citizens' Appeal*. Several reasons for this were that the main Vicksburg newspaper neglected social news from the Black community, and when they did refer to a Negro person it was by first name only, "Ida May," or "Tommy," rarely using surnames or courtesy titles, as it did with white people. And of course, no local civil rights news. The *Citizens' Appeal* was the brainchild of two northern volunteers, Brian Dunlap and David Riley. They recruited and trained a local lady, Mrs. Aaron Shirley, to be the editor and whose name appears on the editorial page masthead on page 4. A weekly, it was printed in New Orleans, and sent in bulk by Greyhound Bus to Vicksburg. We sold the newspaper at cost through local colored businesses, mainly convenient stores and gas stations.



Top half of front page of my copy of the *Appeal*, Nov. 15, 1964 (8 pages). It and other editions can be read at <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/48644>

<sup>6</sup> "Project for Ten Students," Shelton Stromquist papers, WHS FSDC, Archives Main Stacks, Mss 641, Box 1, Folder 4, <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/34647/rec/17> (accessed June 2024).

One day in September I was running a load of papers up Highway 61 to a sympathetic store in Waterville, driving David Riley's very old VW beetle. On the way back to Vicksburg the muffler gave out completely with the car making a terrible noise. As I rounded a bend in the highway I saw up ahead, stopped in the gas station forecourt a big, mean looking highway patrol car. I eased off my foot on the gas hoping to glide past him with minimum banging but to no avail. Looking in my rearview mirror I saw this sleek, powerful Highway Patrol car pull out behind me with red flashing lights. I also could see that it was Highway Patrolman Langford, because the car license tag was MHP 246 (he knew all our license plates and we knew his). When I pulled over, Langford came to my driver's window and demanded my driver's license. Then he told me to exit the car and get into the passenger front seat of the patrol car, which I did, feeling extremely apprehensive. I was immediately aware of a shiny, new looking short barreled shotgun upright in a clamp lock between us and an equally large looking revolver in a holster on Langford's right hip. This was two or three weeks after Willie Johnson's beating, and maybe four months since the three Civil Rights workers, James Chaney, Andy Goodman and Mickey Schwerner were murdered by a deputy sheriff, local police and Klansmen in Neshoba County.

Langford addressed me as "William" when telling me to get into the car, but said nothing after that as we drove to the Vicksburg jail. Still, this was a very nerve-racking ride. At the jail he brought me in, stated my fine for a defective muffler was \$20, which I did not have, and turned me over to the charge desk. The duty policeman said I could have one phone call, which I made to the Project Office. Then he told me to empty my pockets, take off my belt, and hand over my eye glasses. I told him I was very near sighted and couldn't see well without my glasses. He said something like, "you hand them over 'cause someone might push them in your face." This of course did not help ease my sense of anxiety. Then he deposited all my possessions in a big paper envelope, tied it shut and led to me into a large stone room at the front of the jail.

As soon as the heavy steel door clanked shut, I was aware that I was in the "drunk tank." This was immediately clear because there were two white men in the room. One was fat, middle age and wearing only a pair of trousers, and so drunk he was reeling around the cell and periodically shouting and cursing. I immediately sat down on a wooden bench just inside the door and tried to look small and inconspicuous, because I was just waiting for one of the jailers to stick his head in and say "we got one of them nigger lovers here for you." And then the action might start. But no head appeared in the door.

The other inmate was a young man in his twenties who came over to me to strike up a conversation, saying he was on his way to Louisiana to work on the oil rigs, but he'd gotten stopped for speeding and had no money to pay his fine, so he was in for two weeks. I didn't offer my story and made it clear from my body language that I didn't want to talk. But he seemed peaceable enough and just lonely. The other inmate however kept up his reeling about and ranting. And about him I was very apprehensive. I had no idea what I would do if he came over and accosted me, and it was a very long two hours before Henry Hunter showed up with \$20 and got me out. I was so relieved to see Henry, but I was still shaking and feeling sick with anxiety, while trying hard not to show it. The duty officer gave me back my possessions, including the much-needed eyeglasses and we left. I can't remember what car Henry was driving or how we eventually got the old VW back to Vicksburg. But I certainly remember every minute of that highway and jail encounter.

Sometime around the beginning of November the project had another encounter with Highway Patrolman Langford and a group of more serious assailants. A voter registration information meeting was organized in Beechwood, a rural area near Vicksburg, at the China Grove Baptist Church. Although called for 7 o'clock, like most meetings in Mississippi it didn't actually get underway until about 8:00 p.m. with the audience slow to arrive. The church was a rectangular-shaped building with its main door at the roadside end, then rows of wooden benches, and the alter at the front, with a smaller side door near the first row of benches. I can remember the church being desperately hot even at the end of September and the ladies who had arrived vigorously fanning themselves. What particularly caught my attention was about a dozen huge wasps attracted to and flying around the three or four bare light bulbs that hung at intervals from the ceiling. I remember thinking that if one of these huge Mississippi wasps ever came down and stung you, you'd never survive. (At the time I couldn't help thinking that “Wasp” also stood for “white Anglo-Saxon protestant.”) However, the people were more concerned with the heat, possibly knowing that the wasps couldn't resist the light bulbs.

When the meeting finally got underway, I remember Shel Stromquist giving a lively and clear explanation of the voting process and why it was important for people to take the voter registration test down at the Vicksburg Courthouse. He explained that although the test was made so difficult that hardly anyone could pass, still all this would be recorded and sent to the federal Justice Department in Washington D.C. to prove that the state of Mississippi barred its Negro citizens from voting, which was illegal under the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

Towards the end of his talk a loud bang went off outside the church, and the fanning suddenly stopped as did Shel's talk. I remember thinking, "now why did any children set off a firecracker outside scaring the life out of everyone." Then suddenly, BANG! BANG! BANG! reports of high-powered rifles. Pandemonium broke out in the little church. Everyone hit the floor with the wooden benches overturning everywhere. I remember lying on the floor under my overturned bench, tense with my stomach tied in knots and watching the main door of the church. I fully expected it to burst open and a gang of white men to burst in. I didn't think they were going to kill us, only administer a savage beating, using the preferred instrument of the time, a headless ax handle that gave a good grip as a club. But the church door never opened. After several minutes, but which seemed like hours, the night went silent.

Waiting a few minutes more, we ensured that everyone was out of the church and had a ride to get them home. Then the project workers present at the meeting, Shel Stromquist, Mary Jo Cronin, Elaine Singer, Jesse Smith and myself got into my old 1954 Ford and set off to Vicksburg. A day or two later we learned that two men who had been outside the church during the shooting heard the squeal of tires as a car rapidly departed in the dirt road on the north side of the church about a minute after the last shot was fired. About a half hour earlier a couple coming late to the meeting passed a car just north of the church and on the wrong side of the road. They noticed that the occupants were white men who sped away as they passed. Minutes before the shooting started three young men saw a car with white men parked in the same place. It was clear that the shooters left their car and went into the fringe of woods north of the church. It was surmised that the first shot, that experienced hunters at the meeting later said sounded like a .22 small caliber weapon, was a signal shot for the big guns to open up.

The same hunters said that the loud reports must have come from a 33-33 or a 30-06 high powered rifle, and there was more than one, because the shots came too close together for just one gun. Yet only one bullet hit the church, passing through the north wall inches away from a window and passing over the heads of the sheltering people and exiting beside an opposite window near the church chimney. It was powerful enough to chip a chimney brick and shatter the window of a pickup truck parked just outside. At such close range with high powered rifles, the shooters could have riddled the church, so clearly their intention was only to scare the people and perhaps give notice to stop holding these voter registration meetings. (A week or so later a wooden frame building just down the road from the church and used for Masonic Lodge meetings, with nothing to do with Civil Rights, was mistakenly burned to the ground.) We also learned that during the shooting one man in the church named Elijah Washington started to go for the side door to get to his truck and his rifle, but his neighbor,



Clarence Higgins, grabbed his belt and held him back. [The *Vicksburg Citizens' Appeal* carried a [long article on the shooting](#) on its front page.<sup>7</sup> For a photograph of the top half of that front page see the fourth image in this document.]

Maybe a week or so later, I met Elijah Washington for the first time in his home. I remembered asking him, "were you really going to go out there at dusk against two or more white men with high powered rifles?" He only smiled with slightly crinkled eyes and said, "Well, I figured I had just as much chance of getting them as they had of getting me." I also learned that he was the organizer of the Elijah Washington hunting club and a very brave man. He and two other local men stayed outside the church all night guarding it for several nights after that. (Word very probably got around that armed guards were at the church, so the night-riders struck—again mistakenly—at the unguarded Masonic Lodge building instead.)

As we drove down the dirt road towards Highway 27 and Vicksburg the motor of my old 1954 Ford started to seriously overheat (which it was prone to do and then simply cut out). We just reached the highway where there happened to be a closed gas station, so I pulled into its forecourt to rest the motor. Also parked in the forecourt, and looming very large, was a Mississippi Highway Patrol car, and it turned out to be Highway Patrolman Langford again. I somewhat naively went over to him and told him about the shooting that had just taken place at the church. He just looked at me and said, "if you get back on the highway, I'm going to arrest you" and turned on his car's red flashing signal lights. Going back to my car, I told my companions what he said, and we just sat there trying to decide what to do.

While we were sitting there down a second side road that joined the highway three or four pick-up trucks and maybe a car came very slowly down the road and stopped at the junction. For all the world it looked like an organized convoy and the thought immediately crossed my mind that Langford had used his radio to call some of his segregationist friends. (Experienced SNCC staff referred to this type situation with gallows humor as "the comedy of terrors.") This was not too far from my own feelings of the moment, minus the "comedy" part. However, in a minute or two the line of vehicles just kept going, apparently having slowed down and stopped to see what the flashing police lights were all about. But we were still trapped there with Highway Patrolman Langford.

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<sup>7</sup> "Church Shot Into During FDP Meeting in Beechwood," *Vicksburg Citizens' Appeal*, vol. 1, no. 4, 15 Nov. 1964, WHS FSDC, Historical Society Library Microforms Room, N82-521, <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/48644/rec/1> (accessed June 2024).

Finally, I noticed there was a pay phone booth outside the gas station, and again perhaps somewhat naively I went over to it and placed a call to the Vicksburg Sherriff's office: well, he had told us that "I don't want any trouble here, and if you have any problems, give me a call." I told him what had happened at the church and how patrolman Langford had threatened to arrest us and ended by asking him to come out to the gas station and escort us back to town. I can't for the life of me remember what he said, but he did not come out to escort us back to town. So we just sat there for what seemed like a long time. The motor heat gauge on my simple dashboard had long since gone from red to normal, but we still just sat there. Finally, Langford must have gotten tired of this cat and mouse game. He turned off his flashing red light and drove off down the highway. We waited a few minutes to make sure he was gone and then made our way back to Vicksburg without further incident. [For more detail on this encounter with Langford, see the *Vicksburg Citizens' Appeal* article, "[COFO Meets the Highway Patrol](#)."<sup>8</sup>]

About a month later a more serious attack on the project took place. In the first week of December, as I recall, the Project Office and Freedom House was bombed. The night of the bombing was a cold, rainy Saturday night. Around midnight there were about fourteen people in the building, the four members of the Brown family asleep and about 10 project volunteers still engaged in various activities. I had long since gone home, not being a late-night person.

One or more men crept up the back of the hill through trees and foliage in the rain and planted sticks of dynamite well under the rear of the building under the large kitchen which was raised on brick pillars because of the steeply sloping hill top. Setting a fuse the assailant(s) escaped back down the secluded hillside. The blast tore off the rear of the building, however miraculously no one inside was hurt. The FBI agents who came over from their Jackson, Mississippi office the next day to investigate the bombing said the placing of the dynamite was clearly intended to destroy the entire building, but the bombers hadn't counted on the heavy wood supporting beams running under the raised kitchen that contained the blast and forced it outward rather than up. The result was the entire back of the house was blown off, but the rest remained standing.

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<sup>8</sup> "COFO Meets the Highway Patrol," *Vicksburg Citizens' Appeal*, 14 Dec. 1964, pages 2 and 8, <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/48661/rec/26>.



My father & myself at rear of bombed project building, 1964. (Photograph by Mary Jane Melish, my mother.)

My job the next day was to watch the local police and FBI agents as they searched through the debris at the back of the house looking for evidence amidst strewn papers, bedding and some clothing. The fact was there was no evidence other than several shattered dynamite wrappings, but they continued to look at other things relating to the project. When they picked up a voter registration list of local peoples' names my role was to prevent them from taking it away or reading it (you could lose your job or mortgage or suffer other recriminations for trying to vote at that time). I would repeatedly say. “I can confirm that paper was in the building before the bombing.” This was obviously annoying to at least some of the investigators because one of them using a stick picked up a pair of male jockey shorts and said, “Can you confirm this was in the building at the time?” And they all had a good laugh, including the FBI agents. But such was the nature of Mississippi law enforcement at the time, both local and Federal. (After I wrote this my son found online a [two-page letter](#) that I wrote home about the bombing and investigation, and a [one-page report](#) that was included with the letter, both of which give more detail and describe some things differently.<sup>9</sup>)

My parents came down to Vicksburg in the week before Christmas. Looking at the photograph I would say that part of the building had collapsed into the rear yard by this time, as immediately after the bombing there was a bed hanging into the wrecked kitchen, which is not

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<sup>9</sup> William B. Melish, “Letter to his family,” <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/63240/rec/6> and an unsigned “Bombing at the Vicksburg Freedom House,” <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll2/id/63242/rec/6>, 6 Oct. 1964, WHS FSDC, SAVF-Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) papers (Social Action vertical file, circa 1930-2002; Archives Main Stacks, Mss 577, Box 16, Folder 8). The documents are also available in multiple other locations on wisconsinhistory.org, as well as at [https://www.crmvet.org/lets/vicsburg\\_bomb64.pdf](https://www.crmvet.org/lets/vicsburg_bomb64.pdf).

in the photo. My parents stayed in a Vicksburg motel but they met everyone involved with the project and enjoyed one of Mrs. Garrett's sumptuous Sunday dinners. They stayed a few days before returning home. Later that winter they invited Mrs. Garrett and her sister up to New York City to stay at their house and see the sights for as long as they wanted.

Shortly after that myself, Henry Hunter, Dennis Brown and Wade Smith drove to New York City in my 1954 Ford non-stop, taking turns driving and sleeping in the car. Going through the mountains in eastern Tennessee near Byrdstown on the old state highway (no Inter-state at that time), I was driving through fairly heavy snow. We were all very hungry so I was looking for some place to stop for food. Up ahead lights appeared at a small store on a sharp curve. As I approached, I inadvertently crossed the solid white line in the road. Pulling into the store, we found a sheriff's car standing there. One of its occupants came over, shined a flashlight in one window and obviously did not like seeing a white male and three Negro males together in the car. He asked where we were from, then said I'm arresting you for reckless driving.

Taking us to the Byrdstown County jail, he asked me how much money I had, "\$25," which suddenly became our fine. He said he was locking us up in order to phone the Vicksburg sheriff in the morning to check out our story. Locked in a large stone room with a steel cage inside containing four beds, we discovered two heads looking down on us from atop the cage, two men looking for all the world like the stereotype of hillbilly moonshiners with long beards and gaunt bodies. Nothing was ever said between us. About 7 a.m. the steel door clanked open and the jailer said Vicksburg confirmed our story and we were free to go. He also handed me a scrap of paper with "\$25 for wreckless driving" written on it. Now with no money between us, we only got to New York City using a credit card for gas and otherwise very hungry. In the city the four of us talked to at least one SNCC fund-raising event while the three from Vicksburg did some sight-seeing and stayed at my parents' house. [For a picture of the Henry Hunter and Bill in NYC dressed up for a fund-raiser, see the second photograph given earlier in this file.] I don't recall how they got back to Vicksburg.

Sometime in the early New Year I sold the old Ford and bought a second-hand orange Volkswagen convertible that I named "Oscar." This I drove to Oberlin, Ohio where I had been talked into enrolling in Oberlin College's Masters in the Arts of Teaching program by friends at Radcliffe back in the previous April or May. On the way I stopped in Galion, Ohio to visit my uncle Robert and his wife, Rose. Uncle Robert was my father's older brother, and while he was a businessman and a conservative Republican, he spoke affirmatively of the Mississippi Voter Registration Program and we got along just fine. (He was the one who originally told me that our ancestor had fought under General Grant during the siege of Vicksburg during the Civil

War.) His life centered on his company and the local Golf Club where he took me for steak dinners with plenty of drinks, all of which was just fine with me.

After a short visit, I set out for Oberlin College, which turned out to be a not very happy experience. At the time the town of Oberlin, as I remember it, was tiny with one short shopping street and a residential area, both away from the college campus. After Cambridge, Massachusetts and Harvard it felt so small and I felt very isolated. Arriving at the beginning of the second semester didn't help either, as I didn't know anyone and friendships were already established. I tried to stick it out but only lasted about two months. Sometime in March I just left without telling anyone, which was not the responsible thing to do, but I was so miserable there. Back in Brooklyn my father picked up the pieces and paid my tuition for the semester.

In April 1965 I went up to New Haven, Connecticut, to visit my other brother, John and his new wife Marianne, both medical students at Yale. It was Marianne who told me that Yale had recently started an experimental Master in the Arts of Teaching program which only required two Education Courses and allowed participants to take any other courses in the Yale Graduate School. I applied and was accepted for the Fall, 1965.

Then in May or June I went back to the Vicksburg Project, which in one sense turned out to be a shadow of its former self. Sometime in early 1965 the S.N.C.C. black staff left to visit Africa, already disillusioned with liberal white America, even before Black Power hit in the summer of 1966. Some of the other project volunteers also returned and the same local people were involved, but in all honesty we really did very little. The journalist, Nicholas von Hoffman, visited the project for a few days and wrote a scathing article for *The Atlantic Monthly*, or some such national journal. In this piece he reversed his 1964 articles praising the Mississippi Summer Project and wrote sarcastically how the civil rights work in the state had fallen apart. Focusing on the Vicksburg Project he detailed how we would spend the day gathering up all the staff and driving to Anderson's Café (with him in tow) to eat delicious southern fried chicken, grits and iced tea in prolonged lunches. After several hours spent at the cafe, we would go back to the project office, but not very much canvassing or voter registration work got done. Of course, we had no idea he was gathering material for his hatchet job. However, I must admit that his portrait of the Vicksburg Project 1965 was largely accurate.

On the other hand, the one positive thing he could not know of was the life-long relationships that were being established between myself and members of the Vicksburg Black community. These included, in particular, Elijah, Ernestine and Mary Washington, and their extended family members (Lillian and Melvin Griffin, Alice and Britany, Bette Washington and Preacher),

then Tommy Wilson and Clarence Higgins, Mrs. Garrett, Henry Hunter, Wade Smith and Dennis Brown – and the hunting club, especially Tommy Lee and Otis Kemper. (I later even went out before sunrise with them several times, not to shoot a deer, just to be in the woods with them. It being a Black Members only club in the age of Black Power there might have been some objections, but Elijah, the Chairman of the Club, put them to rest by simply saying, “Bill came down here and helped us.”) Ilene and I, and later with our son, Jacob (and sometimes Jacob on his own) went back to visit Vicksburg every year or every other year, wherever in the U.S. or Europe we were living. For us Vicksburg was family.



Elijah and Ernestine Washington with Jacob on their front porch, about 1972 or 1973.  
(Photograph by Ilene Strelitz Melish.)



Front row, left to right: Melvin Griffin, Elijah Washington, his sister Mary Washington, and myself. Backrow: Family and friends, including Lillian (Leah) Griffin in the center with red scarf, Bette Washington behind her, then my son Jacob, in Elijah’s house, New Zion, just outside Vicksburg, Mississippi, Dec. 2017. (Photographer not noted.)

In addition to these life-long friendships, the Vicksburg experience changed me in other ways. I could no longer stand the underlying Harvard arrogance (“Harvard, the hub of the Universe”) and its elitism (“Give me a place to stand and I’ll move the universe,” Archimedes). I never mentioned I’d studied there (because I quickly discovered saying so to ordinary people instantly cut off the conversation, as though you were some kind of lofty being). Instead I always said I went to Boston College. (However, I do have to admit I received elements of a good education there, but perhaps most of all from what I came to call “the Adams House dinner table tutorials.” These were intense discussions over dinner between my friends who were all taking the first year Humanities 5 course – “great books from Plato to Existentialism.”) Furthermore, the Mississippi experience influenced my teaching from 1973 to retirement in an

American Studies Department in an English College of Education (eventually to become a small university, in Liverpool, England). The upper-level option course that I taught was devoted to the U.S. Civil Rights movement and included sound tapes of Fanny Lou Hamer and the SNCC Freedom Singers as well as video clips from the Civil Rights documentary, *Eyes on the Prize*. It included some of my own experiences in Mississippi and a broader history of 20<sup>th</sup> century Black American struggle.

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On a different level, another significant event took place that summer: I was called up for the U.S. Army draft in the summer of 1965. This was the time when President Lyndon Johnson was sending a half million conscripts to fight in the Vietnam War. Because I was no longer an enrolled student, which gave a student deferment, I suddenly received my Draft Board Notice to appear at Fort Dearborn, Mississippi for Induction into the Army. Possibly I should have thought of this before I left Oberlin College, but I did not. Now, faced with my Draft Notice, I had no idea what I should do, as I deeply opposed the war in Vietnam. People who felt this way faced the choice of refusing induction and being sentenced to a year in prison, going into the Army or fleeing to Canada or some other country.

With my required overnight bag packed, I set off to Fort Dearborn by Greyhound Bus, very unhappy and not knowing what I was going to do. At the Military Induction center a large group of all males, both Black and white, spent what was left of the morning taking various tests – reading, writing, arithmetic and general intelligence, plus any special skills you volunteered, such as touch typing. This was followed by a cursory physical examination, height, weight, heart and eye test. I think we then must have been given some kind of lunch, but I have no memory of this. The one scene I graphically remember is that at some point during the physicals, they had us all form two lines in a large hall wearing only our shoes and socks and underpants, nothing else. The Black guys all went to one side of the hall, the whites to the other facing each other. Then two doctors (or other medical staff) came out, one for each line, and told us to pull down our underpants so they could test for hernia. It was striking that when the Black guys pulled down their shorts, they all turned around and faced the wall behind them, so their medic had to walk behind their line to test each of them. To this day I do not know why they did this, but I imagine someone has some theories.

When all this testing was over, they sent us to locker rooms to get back into our clothes and then come into another large room with folding chairs to sit down and wait to be called up to the Induction table. At this point, near the finish line, I still had no idea what I was going to do.



Naturally, while waiting my turn I took a keen interest in what happened to those young men who were called up to the table ahead of me. A certain number of the Black guys were told they failed their tests and did not qualify for the Armed Forces, at which point, as I remember, virtually all of them pleaded with the three officers at the table to allow them to serve. My guess was that they saw the Armed Forces as their way out of impoverished, and low education and employment opportunities Mississippi. In any case, these young men were all turned away. Curiously, I have no memory of any white guys being turned away, but I imagine some of them must have been.

When my turn finally came, it may seem incredible, but I still had no idea what I was going to do – perhaps a sign of weakness or lack of character, I don’t know. As I stood at the desk and the three officers were looking over my results, I noticed that one was in a Navy uniform, one Army and one Airforce. It was the army guy who spoke first. He said to me in a broad Southern accent, “Boy, y’all have sick eye balls! ... You’re 4F, unfit for military service, ...ahm sorry.” It is hard to describe my reaction to this: I tried not to burst out in a broad grin of relief—I tried to suppress my joy as somehow not befitting the occasion. But the young Navy officer saw right through me. “He’s not disappointed at all. He’s happy,” the officer said. The result was I was sent back to Vicksburg. I have no idea how I got there that same night, but somehow, I did.

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The reasons I went to the Vicksburg Summer Project in 1964 were a little complicated. In the long term I was primed for it by my parents. They called themselves Christian Socialists with my father, the Rev. William Howard Melish, being a Protestant Episcopal minister at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Brooklyn Heights, New York City. While my mother came from a conservative Ohio family of successful real estate agents, she quickly adopted my father’s social action politics, and occasionally went beyond them. Early Civil Rights was on their agenda, and they both welcomed Black, white and Hispanics to the congregation. Negro History week was an annual event at the Church in the 1940’s and ’50’s long before it became an acceptable national event.

And my father was close friends with the notable Black American figures W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson. I can remember at age 10 or 11 sneaking out of bed to the top of the curving staircase that rather unusually connected to the ground floor hallway which was situated between the open plan living room and dining room at front and rear of the house. I can just remember the very scholarly and rather elderly Du Bois and particularly Paul Robeson, whose face and smile was like a burst of sunshine that lit up the entire room. When Dr Du Bois died in

Accra, Ghana in August 1963, he had requested that the Rev. William Howard Melish be one of the people asked to speak at his funeral service. President Nkrumah honored this request and invited Rev. Melish to Accra, which invitation he accepted.

The second reason my father was a close friend of these two prominent figures was due to his other great interest, peace and Soviet American friendship, both of which these two famous Black Americans espoused. During World War II the Reverend Melish supported Soviet War Relief along with Du Bois and Robeson (after all the Soviet Union was America's ally in the fight against fascism). When the Cold War started with Churchill's 1946 "Iron Curtain" speech in the U.S., the above three men continued to advocate Peaceful Coexistence, and my father went so far as to become the President of the Council of American Soviet Friendship. This, of course, brought the wrath of the McCarran Act and the 1950's McCarthy anti-Communism down on his head. He had, however, always said that he was not a Communist and that "my party was the American Labor Party."

The conservative *New York Post* pilloried him as a "com-symp" (their poetic term for a communist sympathizer) and his equally anti-Communist Bishop DeWolf of the Diocese of Long Island began a campaign to remove him from his church. Rev. Melish was hauled up for questioning by at least one Congressional committee and only escaped being declared in Contempt of Congress and prison because, as President of the Council of American Soviet Friendship, he was deemed to be more of a figurehead: it was the director, Dick Morford, who refused to give the Congressional Committee the council's membership lists who was declared in contempt and sent to prison for a year. However, after a long legal battle Bishop DeWolf finally succeeded in removing him from his church sometime around 1956-57, which also meant the family had to leave the Church rectory.

Now without a home, pastorship and salary, the family would have been in dire straits. Only the Soviet Union came to the rescue at this time by awarding him the Lenin Peace Prize. I have no memory of how much this was (and of course it only confirmed the anti-Communists' charges), but it allowed my parents to purchase a large three-story house on Kingston Ave. in the Bedford Stuyvesant district of Brooklyn. It was also about this time my father took me on a driving trip through Virginia to meet local and national leaders of the Southern Conference Education Fund (S.C.E.F.), a private foundation working in the South for educational improvements in Black schools and Civil Rights. I only remember sitting quietly in endless meetings listening to both Black and white adults talking, but I imagine this trip had some impact on me. I do recall that I could feel very passionately about racial discrimination. On the other hand, I could feel equally enthusiastic about a vanilla ice cream soda and a hamburger.

It was also about this time that my father was offered a permanent job with S.C.E.F. as the organization's New York representative. In the three or four years we lived on Kingston Ave., I remember my mother giving free accommodation to two early twenties, quite attractive Spanish women. I was somewhat overawed by these two young women who knew how to present themselves to best effect. However, I saw little of them because I was in high school during the day and grinding away with my homework at night. When these two young women got their lives sorted out and moved elsewhere a young Black woman from Birmingham, Alabama came to live with us and attend my high school in Manhattan.

Her name was Angela Davies. She had applied for a Friends Service Committee program that placed successful candidates with a northern family, white or black, who had access to a good high school. I suppose my parents' civil rights activities brought the Friends Service Committee in contact with them, and Angela was accepted to the program. She was about to begin the 11<sup>th</sup> grade while I was entering the 12<sup>th</sup>, but we took the long subway ride together every day, in part so I could help to show her the way and ease the introduction to The Elizabeth Irwin High School. She was a different person in that first year from the Angela Davis she became four or five years later. She was somewhat diffident, even bashful, but then the adjustment to New York City and this mainly white world must have been daunting after her life in Birmingham, Alabama. The next year I left New York for college in Massachusetts, so I did not get to know her very well. (For a very well written, nuanced and human account of her intellectual and political life, including her growing up in Birmingham and moving to New York City, see Angela Davis, *An Autobiography*.)

The short-term reason that I went late to the Mississippi Summer Project in the middle of August 1964 was my tendency to procrastination with starting my senior thesis as a history major at Harvard. I had chosen a topic in the Fall of 1963, The London Dock Strike of 1889, but had begun no work on it when the Christmas Vacation began. It being due about the end of March, this was really too late. But I was driven by the knowledge that my father, as a Harvard undergraduate, had washed out on his senior thesis, and for whatever (perhaps Freudian) reason(s), I was determined that I was going to complete this thing, and do it properly. Therefore, I spent the entire Christmas and New Year's holiday in the New York Public Library at 42 Street, but for Christmas and New Year's Day when it was closed.

The library had a massive collection of rare 19<sup>th</sup> century books, pamphlets and newspapers, and I quickly learned how to call up volumes and pamphlets for use only in the library. Here I read the memoirs of Tom Mann, John Burns, H.H. Champion and Herbert Burrows, the primary organizers of the strike, which represented the transition from organizing skilled workers to

organizing those who were casual and unskilled, in this case the London Dockers. Along the way I read the accounts of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, the "gas and water" Socialists, and many contemporary British newspaper accounts. Once the holiday was over, I made myself sit in one of several different university libraries eight hours a day to write up my extensive notes, whenever I didn't have a class to attend. All this time I had a girlfriend at Radcliffe but we only really saw each other late at night when the libraries closed. As the March deadline approached, I hired a professional typist for the main body of the manuscript, and while she worked, I typed the final chapter, and then wrote the conclusion staying up all night the day before it was due. A day or two after I submitted, I was stunned to learn that History Honors students, if they submitted a completed senior thesis, would have all their final history exams waived. With only one other non-history elective course and exam, I effectively finished the year sometime in mid-April.

With this news, I bombed out and effectively left the campus, except for my room at night, and took a job in Boston in a paint factory. This was in part due to a post-adolescent fantasy that I was for the moment "a proletarian" in my paint splattered blue jeans and work shirt, joining the London Dock Strike workers, and in part a reaction against the elitist overtones that I always felt the Harvard ethos tried to instill in us (e.g. the well-worn phrase, "Harvard, the center of the universe"). It also was the case that while I was burrowed away in the university libraries eight hours a day, I missed the publicity and recruiting meetings on campus for the Mississippi Summer Project which many of my friends, including three roommates and my girlfriend attended. Somewhat strangely I was almost unconscious of all this civil rights activity so hyped up and focused was I on my history research project. In any case, I paid a heavy emotional price for this oversight a short time later. Sometime in May two of my roommates and my girlfriend left Cambridge for the Oxford, Ohio training sessions for the Mississippi Summer Project. It was then that it hit me that I was alone and I felt emotionally bereft.

In early June I gave up my job in the paint factory, and living in a shared apartment in Cambridge, spent every day reading the *New York Times* front page (sometimes two pages) wall to wall coverage of Mississippi, which began when the three Civil Rights workers, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman, were murdered in Neshoba, County, Mississippi. Very much at loose ends, I first had a job painting some wealthy graduate's apartment along with two other ex-students. After that I took a job advertised by the university's Widener Library for a History graduate to find any and all materials in the archives relating to John F. Kennedy as a Harvard undergraduate. The only striking thing I found in this material was his history senior theses, "Why England Slept," exploring the lack of political and military preparedness on the part of the UK for Hitler and World War II. (Having a father who

was ambassador to the Court of Saint James's of course greatly facilitated his research.) But what struck me most of all was how careless the manuscript presentation was, with pen cross outs, ink blots and general messiness.

Whatever, by early August I could stand Cambridge no longer and got in touch with another of my undergraduate roommates with the idea of driving down to Mississippi. I bought the 1954 Ford for \$100 and we made contact with the Boston Friends of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (S.N.C.C.). They gave us a car load of books and donated clothes that they wanted delivered to the Jackson, Mississippi SNCC office, and we were on our way, covering our expenses with donations from our two sets of sympathetic parents. We drove straight through without stopping, only alternating one of us sleeping in the back seat among piles of the donated clothes and the other driving. Our destination was the Meridian Mississippi Project in Neshoba County where one of our former roommates and my ex-girlfriend ("ex" as she had effectively broken off the relationship) were posted. My co-driver and I intended to join them on the Meridian project, but after some discussion it was made clear to me by my ex-girlfriend that my staying there was not a good idea, so only my former roommate stayed. I drove to the Jackson COFO office and delivered the donated clothes and books.

It happened that there were several members of the Vicksburg project visiting the Jackson office that day, so in the end I joined them and went to their project. I have to admit that I was still feeling the emotional impact of the loss of my girlfriend, but the overwhelming presence of Vicksburg and Mississippi society in general, so different from anything I had ever experienced before, quickly took over my consciousness. Even today, 60 years later, I vividly remember my first day in Vicksburg, Mississippi.