

Cleveland Civil Rights 1950s-1964

Ohio, like other states, underwent massive social and economic transformation. Cleveland was particularly susceptible to these changes, as it entered a period of urban industrial decline which further distressed Black communities. However, it's early history of Black activism, concentrated and racially segregated population, active civil rights organizations, and extensive Black political power set the stage for mass direct action response to these varied oppressions. From the 1950s to 1960s, among the city's many demonstrations, school desegregation remained at the heart of Black activism.

The racial and economic inequity that plagued Black Cleveland for the first half of the 20th century continued into the second half. By 1960, it had spread from the [Central Avenue](#) area to [Hough](#) and [Glenville](#). The two communities underwent dramatic racial, economic, and social turns. In Hough alone, the black population increased from 3.9 percent in 1950 to 73 percent in 1960. Additionally, a 1963 study by the [Urban League](#) deemed 99 percent of housing in these areas as dilapidated. Unemployment exacerbated housing inequity, as labor unions blocked African American industrial workers from skilled positions, and discrimination impeded employment or relegated Black workers to unskilled positions.

Urban renewal further concentrated black residents into the neighborhoods of Central, Glenville, and Hough. After the post WWII period, multiple cities embarked on a city clean up designed to "renew" communities laden with deteriorated housing. Cleveland attempted urban renewal projects that demolished houses to create new, but badly, constructed homes and commercial buildings in [Longwood](#), Garden Valley, and St. Vincent communities. These urban renewal projects displaced thousands of Black Clevelanders, while those who were re-housed

encountered mismanagement, repair issues, and vermin. The resulting problems led to an early tenant strikes in 1958 and again during the early 1960s.

Residential segregation not only clustered black populations geographically, but also worsened concentrated poverty in some areas. Notable differences were reflected in the efforts of middle-class groups like the [Ludlow Community Association](#). Ludlow was adjacent to [Mt. Pleasant](#), a middle-class black community whose origins date back to the 1920s. As overcrowding pushed into Mt. Pleasant, some feared that the spill over would find its way into the all-white Ludlow community. These fears resulted in the 1956 bombing of Black homeowner [John and Dorothy Pegg's](#) house. The bombing mirrored [similar bombings](#) in other cities where middle class black residents attempted to purchase a home in white neighborhoods.

Ludlow's residents responded to the bombing and the increase in black home ownership by creating an interracial home association in 1957. Organization members aimed to halt white flight from the neighborhood and support integration in the community. Much of Ludlow's methods centered on community get togethers, welcomes, and challenging realtors who only sold homes to black families. Ludlow's efforts were noticed, and other Cleveland communities followed their model.

Working-class black residents, however, continued to struggle. Discriminatory policies in education further held the black community back by cutting school hours, facilitating overcrowding, denying proper teaching resources and school facilities, and underfunding black schools compared with white schools. Though Black parents began to confront the city's racist school system during the 1950s, there was relatively few direct-action protests.

Most activism in the pre-1960s period centered on organizational petitions and letter campaigns to the mayor, city council, and school board of education. Additionally, the black

newspaper [Call and Post](#) initiated a weekly column to document civil rights activities locally, state and region-wide, and nationally. The column, written by [Cleveland NAACP](#) executive secretary [Charles Lucas](#), became an important method for informing the black community on social justice related issues. Meanwhile, Black Ohioans across the state, pushed the state legislature to pass the [Ohio Civil Rights Act of 1959](#). The Act replaced the [1884 Ohio Public Accommodations Law](#) and bolstered the [1894 Ohio Civil Rights Law](#). The 1959 Act substantially focused on employment discrimination and reified prohibition of discrimination in public accommodation. Further, the Ohio Civil Rights Law established the Ohio Civil Rights Commission, a crucial instrument for monitoring cases of discrimination and enforcing the 1959 Act.

Black Clevelanders slowly turned to mass direct action in the early 1960s after the start of the [national sit-in movement](#). Many black and white Clevelanders risked their lives to join protests in the South. Civil rights activism, specific to the concerns of Black Clevelanders, were few. However, there were multiple cases of protest over police brutality, housing segregation, and employment discrimination, and attempts to force the city council to address housing standards and employment discrimination. Most direct-action activities centered on sympathy protests, forums, and fundraising action in the south. Among the largest early events was a sympathy protest of 3,000 students and other participants who marched from Public Square to Euclid Ave. Baptist Church to raise thousands for jailed students in the south.

Cleveland's black youth particularly played a central role in the shift to civil rights activism in Cleveland. The Freedom Fighters, a civil rights coalition formed in 1960 by Lewis Robinson, emerged from a protest-inclined youth wing of the Cleveland NAACP. Among the most active groups, the Freedom Fighters became a leading organization in the first half of the

60s decade. The group's composition markedly differed from the NAACP with its grassroots working class Black membership, becoming Cleveland's first major youth organization. The Freedom Fighters' political philosophy reflected a mix-bag of non-violent direct action and black nationalist sentiment. Although its style of protest resembled the 1930s [Future Outlook League](#), its early actions focused on Southern sympathy protests. Still, famed [Atty Richard Gunn](#) believed the formation of Freedom Fighters held great promise for Cleveland to form "a common purpose...which the Negro community can solidify into united action."

The Freedom Fighters' first major protest took place at Central Cadillac. The protest lasted over a year and overlapped the formation of the [United Freedom Movement](#), an umbrella organization of Cleveland civil rights groups. Various segments of the black community supported the protest, but the demonstrations dragged on longer than expected. The Freedom Fighters gradually increased their demand from one black salesman to multiple positions including: mechanics, office clerks, and salesmen. The Central Cadillac demonstration was eventually successful, but not without increased radical responses to the dealership.

Freedom Fighters attracted other militant local groups with its Central Cadillac protests as well. The most well-known among them was the Cleveland Chapter of the [Congress of Racial Equality](#) (CORE). Cleveland CORE dissipated in the late 1950s but reorganized in 1962. Like most groups, its earliest forays into civil rights activism centered on sympathy protests. CORE also regularly reported discrimination cases to the newly created [Ohio Civil Rights Commission](#). Its first Cleveland-focused protest was a joint demonstration of Central Cadillac with the Freedom Fighters. However, the small chapter soon operated independently and branched into rent strikes, unfair housing demonstrations, and labor discrimination protests. In fact, the rent strikes were among its earliest successful demonstrations. Cleveland CORE crafted a platform

for multiple rental strikes in the Central Avenue and Hough areas, including the Longwood public housing projects. The chapter successfully challenged slum housing, but also inspired residents to further participate in other civil rights demonstrations.

As civil rights activism heated up in Cleveland, the community institutions undergirding the black community played a central role in providing planning space, speakers, resources, and community gathering spaces. [Cory United Methodist Church](#) was among the most active institutions, and famously hosted the [Malcolm X](#) and [Louis Lomax](#) debate where Malcolm X gave his famous “Ballot or the Bullet” speech. Glenville United Presbyterian Church’s minister, David Zuverik, Rev. Isaiah Pogue, Jr. of St. Mark's Presbyterian Church, and Rev. Paul Younger of Fidelity Baptist Church were among the leaders of the United Freedom Movement; [Reverend Eaton Whitehead](#) of Pine Grove Baptist Church ran Operation Breakfast on behalf of the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](#) (SCLC); and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. regularly spoke at Cleveland’s Greater Abyssinia Baptist Church. Abyssinia also served as the headquarters for United Freedom Movement, while St. James Church was the site for the formation of the [Domestic Workers of America](#). These churches, established at the turn of the century, had defined black Cleveland life for nearly fifty years and now served as a hotbed for black activism.

Although civil rights organizing including multiple groups, the Cleveland movement did not galvanize until the formation of the United Freedom Movement (UFM). UFM was created under the leadership of the NAACP in early summer 1963, and included over 50 civic, fraternal, and civil rights groups. Although most of the organizations shied away from demonstrations, more radical organizations, like Freedom Fighters and CORE, pushed the organization toward nonviolent direct action. UFM’s first event became the largest protest in Cleveland- to date.

Over 25,000 activists and supporters marched and attended a rally at the Cleveland Municipal Stadium, headlined by [Roy Wilkins](#), Executive Secretary for the national NAACP and National Director of CORE, [James Farmer](#). By fall, the United Freedom Movement shifted from employment inequality and public accommodation discrimination to the most significant civil rights event in Cleveland, Ohio- school desegregation.

Black parents, who'd pressed the school board of education in the late 1950s, sprang into action again in 1960. In the first years of the decade, de facto segregation in Cleveland schools impacted 93 percent of children in elementary schools, 78 percent in junior high schools, and 83 percent in high schools. In Hough, 5,000 children were on relay classes. Black parents initially focused on school parity to address this inequity. However, when the school board stubbornly refused to meet their demands, Black parents changed tactics to include a full desegregation of the Cleveland school system.

Under intense pressure from parent protestors, the School Board of Education transferred over 1,500 black children to white schools of Murray Hill, Brett, and Longfellow in the 1962 fall semester. However, the receiving schools divided black children into separate classrooms and barred them from extracurricular activities. During winter 1963, tensions worsened when reports detailed the egregious circumstances faced by black students at receiving schools. School officials prohibited students from leaving their classrooms. The only exception was a once-a-day bathroom break. Children, disallowed from sitting in the school cafeteria, ate lunch at desks in their assigned classrooms. At all the schools, administrators confined playground time to one period for all transferred black students or closed down any play time at all. Murray Hill Elementary additionally forbade by black students from use of the pool.

In the early summer, frustrated black parents asked for Cleveland CORE's support. CORE took the matter before the United Freedom Movement for additional help. The [Hazeldell Parent Association](#) led by Eddie Gill combined multiple parent groups and neighborhood council associations together to join UFM in a fall fight for school equality. At the end of August 1963, the United Freedom Movement submitted a proposal of seven demands for integration. For weeks, the United Freedom Movement and the school board met in closed door meetings. UFM eventually called a mass rally of 400 people at St. Mark's Presbyterian Church in preparation to picket the school board of education building (now Druid Hotel). Fearful of protest, the school board appeared to accept UFM demands, claiming it would implement the new integrated rules January 1964. However, backlash from white parents led the school board to renege on its promises to black parents.

When UFM received the Cleveland school board's plan of integration, it failed to meet the requirements of the agreed deal. Further, school board members failed to attend a meeting to address the unagreed changes. The combination of circumstances led UFM to lead a multi-pronged protest at the school board of education building and receiving schools. On January 30, 1964, protests reached a crescendo at Murray Hill elementary, a school located in the Italian ethnic neighborhood known as Little Italy. White residents of Murray Hill gathered around the school and attacked journalists and two civil rights activists who missed the march meeting point. The police ignored the mob until the violence temporarily dissipated. However, by the afternoon, police were forced to prevent the mob from entering the school and assaulting black children.

Activists decided to cancel the protest after it received word that the Board promised to integrate. The board then added that it would begin in September 1964, but civil rights activists

viewed it as another stall tactic. UFM immediately followed with another protest at the school board building, filling up its hallways up to the third floor. In the following days, UFM planned a full school boycott at Cleveland's Antioch Baptist Church. Meanwhile, the Freedom Fighters and CORE heightened direct-action protest by blocking hallways and elevators, plus obstructing doorways prohibiting 40 school board staff members from entering their offices. The police response was brutal, and many condemned the attacks against protestors.

The school board capitulated once again to UFM after the demonstrations and public embarrassment over police brutality. The new plan included integration in early March and new school buildings. UFM agreed to the above stipulations, but added that the settlement did not include re-segregation of black children in the new schools, nor relay classes, overcrowding, substandard classrooms and schools, rented spaces, or any other temporary educational spaces. Nevertheless, the school board intended to re-segregate schools by building 3 new structures that it previously rejected as substandard.

The school board authorized Lakeview (Later called [Stephen Howe School](#)) as the first school to be built, despite the City Planning Commission designating the lot as substandard. UFM asked for a moratorium, but the school board refused. CORE called for a picket of Lakeview, and inaugurated the school site demonstrations with a rally at Cory United Methodist Church on April 3, 1964. The rally, *The Negro Revolt – What Comes Next?*, featured a debate between Louis E. Lomax and Malcolm X. Listeners packed the inside and outside of Cory Methodist to hear what became one of Malcolm X's most famous speeches, "[Ballot or the Bullet](#)".

Three days later picketing began at Lakeview. The first day protestors managed to break through the line and block bulldozers and other construction equipment. Six demonstrators laid

face down in a trench while construction workers dumped dirt on them. Three others stopped a cement truck and refused to move until police carted them off. Police lifted activists out the ditch and arrested them. They returned again April 7, 1964. Again, protestors managed to break through the police line and block construction machinery. Among the protestors, was the Vice Chairman of CORE and an original founding member, [Reverend Bruce Klunder](#). Several demonstrators threw themselves into the ditch to stop the bulldozer. Bruce Klunder, alone, lay on the ground behind the bulldozer. Within seconds, the bulldozer drove over Bruce Klunder's body until the weight crushed him into the ground, killing him instantly.

While Black activists mourned Klunder's death, the city temporarily halted school construction. However, UFM led a mass boycott in response to the killing of Klunder and the school board's refusal to end building Lakeview. The organization also announced a boycott at Cory Methodist church. On April 20, the school boycott began with over 90 percent of Cleveland's black students boycotting the schools.

Meanwhile, the NAACP filed a temporary injunction to halt construction on Lakewood. It was denied. The NAACP followed the school desegregation fight with lawsuits on behalf of [Charles Craggett](#) and twenty one black children against the Cleveland Board of Education on May 22, 1964. However, over the summer. The Craggett case ended when courts claimed that the NAACP had not proven that the school board deliberately attempted to segregate schools or that the neighborhood schools were discriminatory in nature. Despite efforts to organize during the summer and a 75 percent protest student abstentia in the fall, the Craggett case officially ended the school desegregation direct action movement in Cleveland, Ohio.

It did not, however, end NAACP's legal action against Cleveland schools. In 1973, the NAACP once again brought a case against the school board and its neighborhood school

assignment policy. After three years, the NAACP case of [Reed v. Rhode](#) proved that the school board of education deliberately maintained segregation as evidenced by the school system's history of racialized separation, special transfers to allow white students to leave black schools, Cleveland's history of housing segregation, and the Board's own recalcitrance during the 1960s school protest. The state supreme court sided with the NAACP, and uniquely added the caveat that the school system was not just responsible for integration of schools. It also was responsible for proving how it improved equitable access to education across the board- despite the location of black students. The case was far reaching and far more dynamic in scope than even *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Still, the Rhode case did not guarantee compliance by white parents. Cities like [Boston](#) had devolved into violence over desegregation plans that included busing. Cleveland school board initiated a similar desegregation process, and immediately faced issues. Citizens Opposed to Re-Arranging Kids (CORK) protested the busing plan of placing black children in white schools, and intended to challenge desegregation on the first day of student arrivals. Fearful of a Boston episode, another group called West and East Siders Let's Come Together (WELCOME) organized as a counter to CORK. Many believe their presence played an important role in easing student fears, and dampened the potential of violence. The Rhodes case temporarily changed the racial dynamics of the school population in Cleveland. However, in the mid-1980s, the school board won its claim that it had fulfilled court requirements despite opposition from black parents and the NAACP.

While organizations like the NAACP fought into the mid-1970s utilizing the practices of nonviolent protest and legal action, direct action organizations like the Freedom Fighters, Hazeldell Parent Association, and Cleveland CORE had a different response to the school board

desegregation loss. Cleveland CORE's Ruth Turner laid out the lessons learned from the school desegregation fight after the death of Bruce Klunder.

“The passing of the school levy (which we wanted to defeat) taught us these lessons:

Lesson I – Just because we had a successful boycott does not mean other projects automatically will succeed....Lesson II – We can not rely on the existing political machines to get our message across. If we want the job done well, we must begin organizing our own political machinery.”¹

Turner's reference to “organizing our own political machinery” reflected a growing transformation in civil rights strategy- both locally and nationally. Multiple events were driving civil rights organizations across the nation to change tactics away from direct action protest and focus on segregation in public accommodation. The changes portended an increase in militancy among local and national organizations.

Although black radicalism emerged early in Cleveland, Ohio, civil rights activities continued after the advent of black power. The Domestic Workers of America (DWA) was among the organizations to focus on working class economic inequality. Formed in 1965, the organization was led by CORE member Geraldine Roberts. With early financial support from Cleveland CORE, DWA located its headquarters at the Bruce Klunder Freedom House. The organization lasted well into the 1990s and successfully advocated for unemployment expenses, worker's compensation, minimum wage standards, and social security benefits. Composed mostly of older black women, DWA also illustrated the turn from direct action protest to community organizing.

This was particularly demonstrated through their connections with the [National Welfare Rights Organization](#) (NWRO) founded by Clevelander Lillian Craig. Not only did the focus turn

to community organizing, but protest tactics transformed drastically as well. Similar to the days of Future Outlook League, movement strategies became far more forceful and aggressive, including challenging the police. Clevelanders like [Maude Hill](#), wife of activist [Baxter Hill](#) demonstrated the differing changes in the movement.

Community organizing reflected a dramatic change in the civil rights movement. Many groups became frustrated with the limits of direct action to respond to structural racism. Worker organizations was one response to these issues. However, there were others in Cleveland as well. [Students for a Democratic Society](#) (SDS) joined with CORE to establish the [Economic Research and Action Project](#) (ERAP). SDS established the ERAP programs in multiple cities, but Cleveland and Newark notably focused on community-based organizing. Cleveland ERAP centered what it called a "GROIN" approach (garbage removal or income now) projects. Additionally, it was primarily influenced by black mothers seeking assistance to access Johnson's War on Poverty Programs, particularly Head Start. ERAP was a short lived project in Cleveland, lasting only a couple of years. However, its focus and style would reappear again in the future activities of economic and community development organizations.

These transformations in style, tactic, and goal marked dramatic changes in the civil rights movement. In many ways, the frustrations of Klunder's death and the failure to end school desegregation laid the groundwork for newer organizations and new strategies to change Cleveland in a different way. In the process, Cleveland would become symbolic of both the impact of urban decline and the forces which drove the civil rights movement in a different direction. Still, the spirit of the civil rights movement remained, finding its way into a new movement for freedom. It would be called [Black Power](#).

¹Nishani Frazier, *Harambee City: Congress of Racial Equality in Cleveland and the Rise of Black Power Populism* (Fayetteville: University of AK Press, 2017), 105.