

Cleveland Civil Rights Movement and Black Power: Part III

The school desegregation fight dramatically changed civil rights activism in Cleveland, Ohio. Multiple factors coalesced into this moment, creating a river of change that inspired more militant approaches to attaining freedom for African Americans. Activists termed this transformation in style, tactics, and goals—Black Power.

Black Power nationally broke onto the scene with the [James Meredith March Against Fear](#) in June 1966. The phrase generated immediate opposition, support, and questions across the United States. Many wondered what Black Power meant and how did Black Power differ from the non-violent direct-action movement. Black Power advocates moved to define the term almost immediately, but its programmatic and strategic approach manifested in multiple ways, including: armed resistance and defense, cultural, political, religious, economic, educational, and anti-capitalist sentiment.

In Cleveland, all these categories materialized. However, black power's anti-capitalist, armed self-defense, political, educational, and economic forms took precedence. Additionally, the underpinnings of black power already existed within the city. Cleveland, Ohio had a strong presence of [black nationalism](#)—focus on self-help, cultural pride, militant styles or protest, and institution building. Early expressions came with the arrival of southern blacks and demonstrated itself in the large chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, attempts to create black institutions like Mercy Hospital, black business creation, and militant styles of protest reflected in groups like Future Outlook League.¹ Black Nationalism became the building blocks of 1960s Black Power, as the movement fully shifted away from an integration focus toward structural and holistic empowerment through means other than nonviolent direct action.

By the early 1960s, the origins of black power appeared in groups like the Afro-American Institute founded by [Don Freeman](#). The Afro-American Institute consisted of black male activists who called themselves the Soul Circle. The Soul Circle reflected early efforts by Freeman, [Muhammad Ahmad \(Max Stanford\)](#), [Arthur Evans](#) (CORE), Henry Glover, Nate Bryant, and Hanif Wahab (future creator of the [Harriet Tubman Museum and Cultural Association](#)) to politically educate and radicalize the black community. The Institute utilized leaflets, lectures, workshops, and protests to inspire black cultural pride and promote black economic independence.

Freeman was also a major leader in the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), along with Muhammad Ahmad. The Soul Circle was the public arm of Cleveland RAM. The Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) was a Black Nationalist organization with chapters in Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Los Angeles. RAM argued that the black community was a colonized nation within a colonial empire (U.S.), and that freedom was attained through common cause and collaboration with other colonized nations.

The movement atmosphere was further impacted by events like the [Mae Mallory](#) protests. RAM often participated in protest events with Cleveland CORE, and the two organizations became heavily involved in demonstrations over Mae Mallory's wrongful conviction. Mallory's case resulted from activism with [Robert Williams](#) in the Monroe, North Carolina NAACP chapter. Both Williams and Mallory were wrongly accused of holding a white couple hostage. Many believed white segregationists fabricated the case as retaliation against local NAACP members who determined to use armed self-defense to protect the black community from white nationalists. Williams evaded arrest, escaped to Cuba, and subsequently wrote his famous text,

Negroes With Guns, which argued for self-defense as a key strategy for freedom. Meanwhile, Mallory headed to Cleveland, Ohio.

In Cleveland, Mae Mallory's 1963 case became a cause célèbre for Cleveland organizations and indicated the degree to which Black Nationalist and armed self-defense sentiments underlined the philosophy of Black Cleveland leaders and organizations. Even the normally conservative Cleveland NAACP joined the fight and challenged Mallory's extradition back to North Carolina, arguing that the white supremacist police and court system intended to wrongly convict Mallory.

Mallory was only one event among RAM's activities. Its members also attended rallies and speeches given by [Malcolm X](#) and the famed black theologian [Albert Cleage](#), minister of the Shrine of the Black Madonna, and a frequent visitor to Cleveland. Cleage argued that nonviolent protest should not come at the expense of black people's harm or death. Thus, self-defense was a justified, normal response. Art Evans later recalled that Cleage was dynamic, ahead of his time, militant, and held in high regard. Evans further described Cleage as a leader who just made sense, though members of CORE initially were unwilling to change their organizational philosophy.

This perspective within CORE later changed, as Malcolm X and Cleage's ideas pushed local groups to embrace more militant strategies for freedom.² Fall 1963, CORE and the Freedom Fighters attended the regional conference of the Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference in Detroit, Michigan, the site for Malcolm X's speech "[Message to the Grassroots](#)." Cleveland CORE later invited [Malcolm X](#) and [Louis Lomax](#) to debate the rally theme - *The Negro Revolt – What Comes Next?* at Cory United Methodist Church. Malcolm X famously gave his speech, the "[Ballot or the Bullet](#)" during the height of the school

desegregation protests in Cleveland. The speech later inspired Freedom Fighter leader Lewis Robinson to create a gun-club for self-defense. Even Cleveland CORE, whose integrationist nonviolent philosophy defined the national organization, found themselves heavily involved in events and/or associations with Black Nationalist organizations.

By 1964, in many ways, local activism resided in two spaces – one half nonviolence and the other burgeoning black power. The school desegregation fight tipped the scales and pushed multiple groups into the direction of black power, even before it took the form of a galvanizing slogan. Among the first actions of post-1964, CORE dramatically enhanced focus on police brutality and black political empowerment. Cleveland CORE would get a unique chance to implement lesson two, and “begin organizing our own political machinery,” when [Carl B. Stokes](#) ran as the first black mayor of Cleveland, Ohio. Stokes lost his first bid for mayor, but the second run in 1967 led to his victory and status as the first black mayor of a major urban city.

Multiple local and national events in the United States facilitated Stokes’ mayoral rise. By Stokes’ second run, the United States had managed to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—but with little transformation of the structural elements that defined unfreedom for Black Americans. Additionally, the assassinations of Medgar Evers in 1963 and Malcolm X in 1965 rocked the black community, along with the deaths of many Black Americans and civil rights activists- from the murder of four little girls at [16th Baptist Street Church](#) to the [Freedom Summer](#) murders of [James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Micky Schwerner](#). The recalcitrance of the state to implement legislation, the failure to transform racial violence through nonviolent suffering, and the intractable nature of economic poverty forced many activists and lay person alike to rethink the effectiveness of nonviolent tactics and the focus on integration as a means to attain freedom.

Urban uprisings exacerbated these questions. In 1965, the [Watts Uprising](#) in Los Angeles was the first manifestation of these changing dynamics in the movement. Watts was the first among many rebellions during the 1960s, which caused leaders in Cleveland, Ohio to worry that their city would be next. [Ruth Turner](#), Cleveland CORE leader, said as much when she suggested that she feared that, “Hough was about to blow.”³

For six days, July 18-23, 1966, [Hough](#) did indeed explode. Urban rebellion and fire destroyed several blocks of Hough neighborhood. Four Black Americans died, before the state sent in 2,200 Ohio National Guardsmen to reestablish order. A grand jury investigation claimed that outside agitators and communist activities by Lewis Robinson and other black power advocates were responsible for the violence which took place.

However, Hough residents and black activists immediately challenged this accusation. Police investigated and harassed many civil rights groups, with particular attention focused on Lewis Robinson and the Freedom Fighters. Police surveillance intensified when Robinson decided to form the Medgar Evers Rifle Club, and then later, when he created the [Jomo Freedom Kenyatta \(JFK\) House](#) in the aftermath of the school desegregation fight. Robinson had formed the Hough based youth club to instill black pride and provide recreation, education, and employment for the neighborhood’s teenagers. The youths’ unwillingness to exhibit fear of the police in the midst of the rebellion further heightened the belief that JFK had prepped them to riot in the streets.

A citizens group immediately formed to counter the city’s assertion that JFK House or outside agitators were responsible for the Hough uprising. A study by the panel and later the [United States Commission on Civil Rights](#) determined that the underlying causes of the Hough uprising resulted from derelict economic and social conditions in Cleveland. Additionally, police

harassment and brutality had also created a condition of disproportionate arrest and excessive force which generated resentment that boiled over that summer night in July.

The circumstances, however, frightened Cleveland's business community. Many hoped the election of Stokes might provide the city with leadership to address economic deprivation and avoid future uprisings. The 1967 summer campaign was also aided by the black community mantra to "keep cool for Carl." Cleveland CORE lawyer [Stanley Tolliver](#) further noted these concerns and sardonically referred to Stokes as fire insurance. Meanwhile, Cleveland became a hot spot for black political action by civil rights groups from CORE and Urban League to the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](#) (SCLC) who galvanized to register voters. Martin Luther King also made multiple trips to the city to support the voter drive.

Stokes garnered a reputation as a star candidate. Charming, handsome, and visionary, Stokes steamed ahead to victory in 1967 and immediately launched an economic program, titled [Cleveland Now!](#) Cleveland Now! combined public, federal, local, and private funding to fund economic improvement projects, including: youth employment, community centers, development projects, housing, and health facilities. Clevelanders lauded the program as a great success. The Stokes administration touted its multiple successes arguing that they provided employment for over 10,000 residents, recreational centers, youth employment, community-based social service centers, industrial plants, and the start of major renovations downtown. Cleveland Now! received wide-support until news revealed that some funding had gone to black power activists involved in a shoot-out with the police.

The July 1968 [Glenville Shootout](#), as it became known, involved a number of activists from the early part of Cleveland's civil rights protest movement, along with new groups created at the start of black power. The conflict began with repeated harassment by police of [Fred](#)

[‘Ahmad’ Evans](#) bookstore and cultural center, New Libya. Fred Evans had become well-known for his philosophical style of Black Nationalism which include African cosmology, new age spiritualism, astrology, and strains of political Black Nationalism. In 1967, Evans created New Libya and opened the Africa Culture Shop. Evans heavily engaged black cultural nationalism, a style of black power which focused on reconnecting with African roots and empowering black identity through clothing, naming, and hair style.

Evans, like Lewis Robinson, experienced significant harassment from the police. Police raided New Libya’s book store multiple times, eventually forcing its closure. When it reopened again, police arrested over 21 people—including a journalist and national staff member of CORE. The constant police harassment led Evans to believe that his group needed armed protection. However, Evan’s use of Cleveland Now! funds for self-defense created a major issue for the Stokes administration. When police attacked New Libya again on July 23, tensions boiled over and the confrontation ended with four Black Clevelanders and three police officers killed. The event also set off an uprising for two days as the black community vented their frustration with police brutality and surveillance. In the process, informants revealed that the weaponry used by Evans and his New Libya members came from Cleveland Now! funds designated for youth programming. The shoot-out engendered the final closure of the bookstore and helped precipitate the decline of Cleveland Now!.

Two groups absorbed the vacuum left by Evan’s cultural center. The first was the Cleveland chapter of the [Black Panther Party](#). The Cleveland BPP was a late addition to Cleveland’s Black Power movement. However, its chapter was active among black power organizations that focused on community service. The Cleveland chapter provided health services, ran a breakfast program, and distributed free clothing at the African American

Catholic St. Adalbert's church. By 1970, the chapter started a liberation school. However, it too faced similar police violence as part of an ongoing national attack by local and federal forces—even drawing the ire of Congressman [Louis Stokes](#) who accused the Chicago police of open warfare against the Black Panther Party there.

The second group was [Afro-Set](#), Founded by [Harlell Jones](#), which heavily focused on ideals of self-defense, self-help, and black empowerment. The organization's activities similarly reflected the early work of the Soul Circle. Jones dedicated much of Afro-Set's activities to African cultural events, lectures, neighborhood clean-up projects, its African import shop, and work with [Operation Black Unity](#) (OBU)—the protest of arm of black power in Cleveland.

While Stokes worked to stymie the economic decline of Cleveland, groups like OBU took other pathways to black economic development. OBU was the black power version of United Freedom Movement. An umbrella organization for various militant black groups, OBU launched a major campaign that changed the face of black franchise ownership of fast-food restaurants.

OBU entered negotiations with McDonald's corporation to help black Clevelanders acquire franchises. However, McDonald's refused and claimed there were no black businessmen with enough acumen to run their franchises. The ridiculous assertion touched off a boycott of McDonald's in Cleveland, forcing the national company to the negotiating table. The Stokes administration mediated the sale of four restaurants in the black community to individual Black Clevelanders and organizations. The boycott precipitated a wholesale change within the McDonald's corporation and influenced the sale of franchises by other fast-food restaurants as well. The negotiation became a major victory for economic black power and validated Stokes as an important and key politician for the black power era.

Meanwhile, national CORE launched its second black power project in Cleveland, Ohio dubbing it [Harambee](#). Harambee began as a two-part component of CORE's black power program. The first focused on the election of Carl Stokes, but the second was far more dynamic and economically revolutionary than expected. CORE launched Harambee development projects designed to create cooperative ownership in business and build community wealth models in which all members of the black community could participate in business ownership. The framework for Harambee wound its way into multiple spin-offs including [Soul City](#) in North Carolina, The [Community Self-Determination Bill](#), and the local work of [Hough Area Development Corporation](#) (HADC).

HADC became a major community development corporation in Cleveland, Ohio. One of the few groups to receive federal funding—HADC crafted an agenda that included group ownership of its McDonald's franchise, unemployment training, housing and retail development, and employment of low-income and welfare mothers from Hough. HADC crafted development projects in the black community well into the 1980s, but ultimately aborted its activities with the loss of federal funding under the Reagan administration.

Not only did black power appear in cultural, economic, revolutionary, and political forms, the city also experienced a surge of black student activism which built higher education black studies programs. Students and faculty pushed Case Western Reserve University to provide black political courses for the surrounding community, and by the mid-1970s the university provided training for black librarians. Another group, the Afro-American Student Society, also emerged from Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) to observe black history week for its students. Simultaneously, future mayor Mike White led a similar fight for black studies as student body president at Ohio State University.

However, the most well-known [Black Studies program](#) came out of Cleveland State University. Sparked by black student activism (particularly student leaders like Ron Kisner), the black studies movement led to a college curriculum that was relevant to black history and culture. The Black Studies Program was established under the leadership of Dr. Ralph Pruitt in 1969 at Cleveland State University. The new degree offered courses in black religion, African languages, black history, black literature, and focused heavily on community engagement. Not only did Cleveland State University lead in the creation of a Black Studies program, but it joined regional institutions to form the Northeastern Ohio Consortium in Black and Afro-American Studies. The organization included over 31 representatives from 11 Ohio colleges and universities and 4 community agencies. The Consortium hoped to provide teacher training and education in black studies pedagogy, bring major leaders for lectures and workshops, and facilitate cooperative development among black studies programs in Ohio.

While college students led a movement for black studies education, [high schoolers](#) also joined the student rebellion. From Glenville High to the United Black Student Alliance at East High School, students advocated for community control of schools, the right to demonstrate black pride in clothing and hair styles, and curriculum changes that focused on black history and culture. Protests heightened in 1969 at John Hay High School over the school's punitive policies, inadequate facilities, and security/policing presence. In many cases, the high schooler demands reflected the more militant side of black power—particularly challenges regarding school control.

Stokes, too played a role in mediating the high school protests, demonstrating the key presence of black politicians in racial tensions. Although, Stokes had failed to stymie economic decline in Cleveland, the work of Black Political Power had lasting impact. Stokes became a

national figure in politics. His positioning gave rise to the election of his brother Louis Stokes, as congressman for the 21st district. The 21st Congressional District became the national power base for Carl and Louis Stokes. Its foundation help solidify a state-wide Democratic Party machine, and set both brothers up for national standing. Their roles intensified when Louis Stokes helped form the [Congressional Black Caucus](#) (CBC) in 1971. During this period, there were early rumors that Carl Stokes planned to utilize CBC as a base for a campaign run for the presidency after his departure as Cleveland mayor. Although the rumors proved unfounded or simply never came to fruition, Louis Stokes would continue to carry the baton of black political power.

By the mid-1970s black power activism began to dissipate in Cleveland, Ohio. A large portion of it was due to police harassment and arrest of radical black activists. However, other dynamics also picked apart the movement. Funding, for example, began to dry up as conservative forces in federal government began to redirect funds away from black economic projects. Additionally, the onslaught of economic depression, industrial decline, and the return of Vietnam War soldiers threw black communities further into disarray as many faced unemployment, housing and health inequities, and the decline of black political statesmanship. The energies of Black Power dissipated, but its legacy continued to live in the city through black studies programs, self-help organizations, and the underlying philosophy of Black Nationalism which reside within black communities.

¹ William Giffin, "The Mercy Hospital Controversy Among Cleveland's Afro-American Civic Leaders, 1927, *The Journal of Negro History* (61:4, 1976) 327-350.

² Nishani Frazier, *Harambee City: Congress of Racial Equality in Cleveland and the Rise of Black Power Populism* (Fayetteville: Univeristy of AK Press, 2017) 118-119.

³ *Ibid*, 153.