Alabama in the Civil Rights Movement

Alabama was the “Cradle of the Confederacy.” It is also the Birthplace of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

January 11, 1861: Alabama secedes from the United States

February 4, 1861: Seven states, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas form the Confederate States of America in Montgomery, Alabama. Arkansas, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia subsequently join the Confederate States of America.

February 11, 1861: Confederate Secretary of War Leroy Pope Walker sends telegram from the Winter Building in Montgomery to General P.G. T. Beauregard in Charleston, South Carolina ordering the attack on Fort Sumter

February 12, 1861: Shelling of Fort Sumter commences; the Civil War has begun

May 1861: Confederate Capitol moved to Richmond, Virginia

August 17, 1937: Senator Hugo Black (D. Ala.), a former member of the KKK, confirmed 63-16 to the United States Supreme Court

1940: E.D. Nixon leads 750 African Americans in unsuccessful voting rights march in Montgomery.

June 3, 1946: Morgan v. Virginia, Supreme Court rules unconstitutional Virginia statute requiring segregation on interstate buses.

September 1, 1954: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. assumes full time ministry in the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church (now the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Church) one block from the Alabama Capitol.

March 2, 1955: Claudette Colvin refuses to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus.

December 1, 1955: Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat on the Montgomery bus, triggering the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott (381 days, December 1, 1955 - December 20, 1956).

December 5, 1955: Montgomery Improvement Association created to support the Bus Boycott. Reverend King is elected Chair of the MIA. Much of the coordination of the bus boycott is done in Reverend King’s basement office.

1956-1957: KKK bombings

 January 30, 1956: Dr.. Martin Luther King’s house bombed.

 February 1, 1956: E. D. Nixon’s house bombed.

 December 25, 1956 Birmingham house and church of the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth were bombed.

 January 10, 1957: Reverend Ralph David Abernathy’s house bombed

June 1, 1956: Alabama Attorney General John Patterson seeks injunction shutting down the NAACP in Alabama. Judge Walter Jones promptly grants it. The NAACP does not return to Alabama until 1964.

June 5, 1956: Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) founded in Birmingham.

November 13/December 17, 1956: Browder v. Gayle, United States Supreme Court upholds lower court ruling that Montgomery’s bus segregation rules were unconstitutional (Claudette Colvin was one of the five plaintiffs). The Montgomery Bus Boycott ends as bus segregation is outlawed.

March 6, 1957: Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and his wife attempt to desegregate the waiting room of the Birmingham train station. Birmingham Public Safety Commissioner Robert Lindberg orders the police to obey the 1946 Supreme Court decision in Morgan v. Vermont. He is defeated for reelection.

June 1957: Eugene “Bull” Conner elected Public Safety Commissioner of Birmingham, Alabama, defeating the incumbent Robert Lindberg, who had followed the law.

1959-1963: Colonel Floyd Mann is the Director of the Alabama Department of Public Safety (Alabama State Patrol).

June 30, 1958: NAACP v. Alabama, Supreme Court holds Alabama has no right to access membership lists of the NAACP.

1960: Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. moves to Atlanta and the Ebenezer Baptist Church, where his father is the Pastor.

February 25, 1960 35 Alabama State students stage sit-in at the Montgomery County Courthouse cafeteria.

 Governor John Patterson orders Alabama State to expel the students.

 Alabama State President expels 9 and suspends 20 students.

 Montgomery Commissioner L. B. Sullivan recommended closing Alabama State, which he said provided only “graduates of hate and racial bitterness.”

 Students vote to boycott classes and exams.

 March 6, 1960: Rally at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.

 March 7, 1960: Over 1,000 students voted for mass strike during registration.

 Campaign failed.

 February 25, 2010: 9 students reinstated

November 14, 1960: Gomillion v. Lightfoot; United States Supreme Court strikes down the boundary adjustments to Tuskegee, Alabama, designed to disenfranchise African American voters.

1961: Freedom Rides sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) begin: Washington, D.C. to New Orleans – 2 busses, one Greyhound and one Trailways.

 March 4, 1961 First bus leaves D.C.

 May 14, 1961 Greyhound Bus attacked in Anniston, Alabama.

 KKK slashes tires.

 Crippled bus forced to stop.

 Bus firebombed; KKK tried to keep the passengers on the bus.

 Plainclothes trooper on bus uses gun to effectuate the rescue of the passengers from the burning bus

 Trailways bus arrives in Anniston.

 8 KKK members severely beat the riders.

Bus proceeds to Birmingham where Birmingham Commissioner of Public Safety Bull Connor gives the mob 15 minutes to attack the Freedom Riders. He sent the police home for Mother’s Day. One of the attackers was Gary Thomas Rowe, a FBI informant.

Freedom ride is called off, but Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) sends reinforcements from Tennessee.

Ride is scheduled to resume

John Seigenthaler, special representative of Attorney General Robert Kennedy, meets with Governor Patterson and Montgomery Commissioner L. B. Sullivan. They promise safe passage to the Freedom Riders.

Colonel Mann does not trust them; he stations Alabama State Troopers blocks from the Greyhound Bus Station.

 May 20, 1961: Freedom Ride resumes, arrives in Montgomery.

 No police present at the Greyhound Bus Station. Commissioner L. B. Sullivan promised the KKK several minutes to attack the riders. The mob attacks the riders. John Seigenthaler knocked unconscious, as is John Lewis (Now Congressman Lewis of Atlanta)

Colonel Mann pulls a gun to save the life of a Freedom Rider and calls in the troopers.

The riders (those not hospitalized) and a few federal marshals meet at Reverend Ralph David Abernathy’s First Baptist Church, where a mob of 3,000 surrounds the Church.

President Kennedy is forced to act - Scores of federal marshals protect the Freedom Riders on the continuation of the ride.

September 1962: Reverend Shuttlesworth, the ACHME and Birmingham Civic leaders agree to desegregate downtown water faucets and restrooms. The agreement was reneged on a few months later.

November 1962: Birmingham voters adopt the Mayor-Council form of government.

May 11, 1963: Bull Connor ordered to vacate office after Alabama Supreme Court decision.

April 3, 1963: The Birmingham Campaign Begins (Marches and sit-ins)

 April 10, 1963: Circuit Judge issues injunction.

 April 12, 1963: Reverend King and other leaders arrested for violating the court order.

 April 16, 1963: Reverend King pens his famous “Letter From Birmingham Jail.”

May 2, 1963: “Children’s Crusade” – children, including teenagers, march in Birmingham; 959 arrested, filling the jails.

May 3, 1963: Commissioner “Bull” Connor unleashes police dogs and fire hoses on the child marchers. A national outrage results, helping President Johnson pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

May 10, 1963: Birmingham business leaders and Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) agree to integrate Birmingham.

June 1963: Soldiers escort African American students Vivian Malone and James Hood into the University of Alabama, integrating the University. Vivian Malone is the sister-in-law of Eric Holder, Attorney General of the United States (2009-2014).

September 15, 1963: 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing in Birmingham: 4 African American girls killed (Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair and Carole Robertson); used by President Johnson to help pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, July 2, 1964.

March 9, 1964: New York Times v. Sullivan: Supreme Court adopts the First Amendment to preclude states using common law of defamation to prevent media coverage of the civil rights movement.

February 18, 1965: State troopers break up peaceful nighttime civil rights march in Marion, Alabama. Jimmie Lee Jackson, his mother and grandfather flee into Mack’s Café. Trooper James Fowler shoots Jackson, who dies 8 days later, leading to the Selma to Montgomery Marches.

 Fowler pled guilty to manslaughter in 2010.

March 1965: Three Selma to Montgomery (54 miles) Voting Rights Marches. Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark had viciously opposed voting rights for the African Americans.

March 7, 1965: Bloody Sunday in Selma. 600 marchers attacked with clubs, whips and tear gas by state troopers, sheriff deputies, and sheriff posse after crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge (named after a Confederate general and Grand Wizard of the KKK). John Lewis has a fractured skull.

March 9, 1965: Second march, Turnaround Tuesday, with 2,500, including white clergy from around the country. Reverend King kneeled on the bridge, prayed, and then turned back. James J. Reeb, a Unitarian Minister from Boston, was beaten to death that night by Birmingham racists.

March 15, 1965: President Johnson addressed a Joint Session of Congress to introduce the Voting Rights Bill.

March 21-25, 1965: 25,000 marchers, protected by federal soldiers, complete the march. Viola Liuzzo, a white volunteer from Detroit is murdered that night in neighboring Lowndes County while ferrying marchers back to Selma. One of the attackers was Gary Thomas Rowe, a FBI informant.

March 26, 1965: Dr. Marin Luther Kings, Jr. delivers his famous “How Long, Not Long” speech from the steps of the Alabama State Capitol.

August 20, 1965: Jonathan Daniels, Episcopal seminarian and SNCC member from New Hampshire, killed in “Bloody” Lowndes County after release from jail.

August 6, 1965: President Johnson signs the Voting Rights Bill

1966: Sheriff Jim Clark defeated for reelection by the newly enfranchised African American voters.

1970 African American activist John Hulett elected Sheriff of Lowndes County.

September 12, 1970: USC defeats Alabama 42-21 in Birmingham. Sam “The Bam” Cunningham, an African American fullback, is the star for USC. He gained 135 yards and 2 touchdowns on 12 carries. The story is that Alabama Coach Paul “Bear” Bryan brought Sam Cunningham into the Alabama locker room after the game and said: “This is what a football player looks like.”

Alabama Assistant Coach Jerry Claiborne said “Sam Cunningham did more to integrate Alabama in 60 minutes than Martin Luther King did in 20 years.”

Coach Bryant awards first scholarship to an African American football player.

1971: Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) founded in Montgomery

1989: SPLC Civil Rights Memorial.

1995: Greyhound Bus Station closed.

2001: SPLC Civil Rights Memorial Center.

2008: Former Governor John Patterson endorses Senator Barack Obama for President.

2011: Greyhound Bus Station reopens as the Freedom Rides Museum.