



Alabama Public Television Education

The Courageous Eight: Voting Rights Leadership in Selma-Dallas County, Alabama

The Courageous Eight were African American leaders who advocated for voting rights and equality and justice for all people, regardless of race, during the 1960s in Selma and Dallas County, Alabama. These eight individuals believed in the power of peaceful protests, and they worked within their communities to empower disenfranchised African American citizens of Selma to gain equal rights as citizens of the United States. These eight unsung heroes began the groundwork for the Selma to Montgomery March and made the collective decision to invite Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. to become a part of their fight for equality. These individuals were Rev. R. D. Reese, Ulysses Blackmon, Amelia Boynton-Robinson, Ernest Doyle, Marie Foster, James Gildersleeve, Rev. J. D. Hunter, and Rev. Henry Shannon.

In the early 1960s, only 300 African American citizens were registered to vote in Dallas County and Selma out of a total of over 10,000 African American citizens who were eligible to vote. Despite violence and intimidation, the Courageous Eight began to organize and educate the residents of Dallas County and Selma so that they could register to vote and participate in their government.

During the 1950s Amelia Boynton-Robinson and her husband, Sam Boynton, opened an insurance agency, which allowed them to be safe from job retaliation for their work with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP, formed in 1909) and the Dallas County Voters League (DCVL, formed in the mid-1920s). The DCVL specifically worked to help African Americans to register to vote. However, the membership was small due to the threat of losing employment if white employers discovered their participation. Meetings for the DCVL were held in the Boyntons' office. Dental hygienist Marie Foster and two teachers, James Gildersleeve

and Rev. F. D. Reese, were among the members. After the death of Mr. Boynton, Rev. Reese became the president of the DCVL.

Despite the passage of two federal laws, the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960, African Americans struggled to assert their rights to vote. When African Americans in Dallas County filed formal complaints, the county registrars refused to produce records. In 1962, Bernard LaFayette, a field worker for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) came to Selma to try to organize a voter registration drive for African Americans. Before the drive began, applications averaged three per month, but by May 1963, they had jumped to thirty-one. By July 1963, SNCC and the DCVL began preparing for nonviolent demonstrations and sit-ins to demand voting equality. October 7, 1963, was declared “Freedom Day” by SNCC, with the idea of bringing hundreds of people to register to vote in hopes that their numbers would decrease their fears of retaliation. After several hours, no one had been admitted into the courthouse to register to vote, and Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark began warning the crowd to disperse. More than 500 protestors, many of them students, were arrested during the voting rights demonstration.



Source: Jones, Ed. “Freedom Day” Marchers at the Dallas County Courthouse in Selma, Alabama, during a Voting Rights Demonstration. *The Alabama Department of Archives and History*, Alabama Department of Archives and History. Donated by Alabama Media Group/Photo by Ed Jones, Birmingham News. [Digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/amg/id/36208/rec/8](https://digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/amg/id/36208/rec/8).

Caption: "Freedom Day" marchers at the Dallas County Courthouse in Selma, Alabama, during a voting rights demonstration

Who Were the Courageous Eight?

Despite the many barriers, the Courageous Eight continued their work to ensure that African Americans in Dallas County and Selma would be able to vote. Their work began many years before "Bloody Sunday" and the Selma to Montgomery March, and it made the success of the march possible.

Rev. F. D. Reese

Rev. Reese was a graduate of Alabama State University in Montgomery, Alabama, and obtained a Doctor of Divinity degree from Selma University and Wartburg College, in Waverly, Ohio. He began his career as a teacher for Selma City School System before pastoring two churches. As the first black president of the Selma Education Association, he encouraged others to enter the field of education. He became the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church and joined the Dallas County Voters League in 1960. He served as its president in October 1964. Rev. Reese was instrumental in leading a teachers' march to register to vote in 1965. As the leader of the Courageous Eight, he wrote to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to urge him to come to Selma to lead the effort to register African American voters in the Black Belt. In later years he was one of the first five African American members to be elected to the Selma City Council. He served multiple terms.

Ulysses Blackmon

Mr. Blackmon was born in Orrville, Alabama, and he attended elementary and secondary at Alabama Lutheran School in Selma. He attended Immanuel Jr. College in Greensboro, North Carolina, and received a B.S. in Education from Knoxville College in Knoxville, Tennessee. He attended Alabama State University in Montgomery, Alabama, and other institutions in Indiana and Illinois for advanced studies. He taught at Alabama Lutheran Academy, now known as Concordia College, in Selma and at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama and was an active member of Trinity Lutheran Church in Selma. He was a veteran of Korean War and Joined the Dallas County Voters League and served as the treasurer of the Courageous Eight. As a lifelong member of the NAACP and worked for voting and equal rights for his entire life.

Amelia Boynton-Robinson

Mrs. Robinson completed her college education at Tuskegee University, earning a degree in home economics. She worked with the U.S. Department of

Agriculture (USDA) in Selma after teaching. She was the home demonstration agent for Dallas County and traveled throughout the county teaching about food production, nutrition, healthcare, and related subjects. After her marriage to her husband, Samuel Boynton, who served as the county extension agent, she worked with Rev. Reese and conducted voter registration drives in Selma. In 1964, she entered the Democratic race for a seat in U.S. Congress but was defeated. However, she was the first woman to run on the Democratic ticket in Alabama and the first African American woman to run for Congress in Alabama. She and Dr. Reese, as leaders of the Dallas County Voters League, invited Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to lead the work for voter registration. She marched and was attacked on “Bloody Sunday.” Throughout her life, she worked for civil and human rights.

Ernest Doyle

Ernest Doyle was born in Marengo County and entered public school for the first time at age 10. Doyle began Keith Junior High School in 1928 and attended the Dallas County Training Center in Orrville, Alabama. He enrolled in Alabama State University but was later drafted in the U.S. military, spending time in Europe before returning to Alabama in 1945. Doyle took up interior and exterior decorating and a carpentry and masonry business before becoming involved in the Dallas County Voters League. He was the longest-serving member of the DCVL and served as a Vice President and Acting President and the Vice President of the NAACP in Selma. After the White Citizens Council of Selma destroyed his carpentry business, he became a barber, insurance salesperson, and the managing distributor of an African American newspaper in Selma, *The Selma Mirror*. Mr. Doyle worked tirelessly throughout his life to encourage civic participation among African Americans in Selma and Dallas County. He ran for public office in 1972 and won a seat on the Selma City Council. He served as an inspiration for other African Americans to enter politics.

Marie Foster

Marie Foster was born in rural Wilcox County, Alabama, and worked as a dental hygienist for her brother, Dr. Sullivan Jackson, in Selma after completing high school and junior college. A widow and the mother of three young children, Mrs. Foster was an active member of the Dallas County Voters League. She tried to register to vote eight times before she was ultimately successful. Following this experience, she started teaching other African Americans how to pass the literacy tests put in place to bar them from voting. Known as “the mother of the

voting rights movement” by local organizers, she was one of the marchers attacked with billy clubs on “Bloody Sunday.” Two weeks later, Mrs. Foster, with injured knees and still recovering from her beating, walked 50 miles in five days as a part of the Selma to Montgomery March. Later, she was the first appointed African American member to the Dallas County Board of Registrars. She continued to work in politics and voter registration for her lifetime, and she actively worked in the campaign for the first African American mayor in Selma.

James Gildersleeve

The seventh of eleven children, Mr. Gildersleeve grew up in rural Marengo County, Alabama. His father, a blacksmith, was shot and killed by a white man in an argument at a gas station in Pine Hill, Alabama. The murder of his father and his time in the military during World War II encouraged him to fight for his civil rights and for the civil rights of others. He received a B.S. in Education from Miles College in Birmingham, Alabama, and a master’s degree and an AA Certificate in Administration from Alabama State University in Montgomery, Alabama. He joined the Dallas County Voters League and the NAACP in 1958 and was vice president and president of the DCVL for one year. He served as the principal of the Lutheran Church School and taught for 41 years in public and private schools in Alabama.

Rev. J. D. Hunter

Mr. Hunter was born in Macon County and graduated from Opelika High School in Opelika, Alabama. He obtained his Divinity Degree from Selma University. He was the editor of two African American newspapers in Selma, the *Selma Mirror*, and the *Selma Citizen*. As an outspoken Baptist minister, a newspaper editor, and president of the NAACP in Selma, Rev. Hunter and his family were often in peril of their lives. He traveled throughout the Black Belt delivering sermons to small rural churches and served Rocky Branch Baptist Church in Orrville, Rayman Church in Lowndes County, and Mount Carmel Baptist Church in Selma. He held Civil Rights meetings in the basement of the Tabernacle Baptist Church to educate and encourage African American citizens to register to vote. He was a two-term member of the Selma City Council.

Rev. Henry Shannon

Born in the small town of Tyler, Alabama, in Dallas County, Rev. Shannon completed his education through fifth grade. After serving in World War II, he graduated from Trenholm Technical College in Montgomery, Alabama, and started a barber business

in Selma. He continued his education in Ministry at Selma University. Rev. Shannon served as the pastor of the Oak Grove Baptist Church of Stanton and the St. Mary Missionary Baptist Church of Orrville. As a barber and a pastor, Rev. Shannon lived and worked to help his community understand the importance of voting. He also worked with youth to encourage their knowledge and participation in gaining their civil rights.

Think About It!

Directions: Read the selection above.

- Why do you think that these individuals were called “The Courageous Eight?”
- List five adjectives that could be used to describe these eight people rather than the word “courageous.”
- Choose one of your adjectives and explain why it would be an appropriate description for these civil rights heroes.
- Choose one of the Courageous Eight. Write one question for this person if you were able to meet him or her.

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