

Civil Rights Movement in Florida



Mary McLeod Bethune
(1875–1955)

The Civil Rights Movement began when black Americans were not treated with the same fairness and equality as white Americans. This is called discrimination. Even after the Civil War ended and slaves were freed by President Lincoln, it would take black Americans (African Americans) many years and a long, difficult fight to get what Abraham Lincoln had intended them to have: equality.

As early as 1904, Florida's African Americans were working to improve their lives. Segregation forced blacks and whites to attend different schools and the quality of education was not as good for black children. As a result, African Americans often needed to supplement their education by creating their own schools. In Florida, Mary McLeod Bethune opened the Daytona Literacy and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls.

In 1909, on the hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's birth, the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) was formed. Its founders consisted of both black and white leaders. Since its creation, the NAACP has continued to fight for equal rights and the end of racial discrimination through the use of legal actions and publicity.

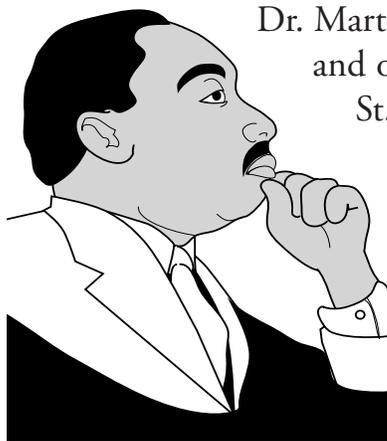
In the 1940s, word began to spread across Florida that racial changes would occur soon. World War II was being fought in Europe and one focus was to stop Hitler's racist treatment of the Jews. African Americans were excited by this movement because if the United States was fighting racism abroad, then it would definitely want to end racism in its own backyard. The NAACP in Florida started a campaign called the "Double V": victory against racism overseas and against racism at home. This campaign focused Florida's attention on the policy of southern segregation.

After the war ended, Florida lawmakers created the Minimum Foundations Program for public schools, which had two purposes. First, the program was designed to strengthen the education system in Florida. This made Florida more competitive in attracting new businesses that could create more jobs and help the economy grow. Second, the program would upgrade black schools in Florida so that the federal courts would not accuse Florida of having an unfair, unequal public education system.

There were groups of white men who resented changes and did not want blacks to have equal rights. The Ku Klux Klan was one group that lashed out at blacks, and many of its members were responsible for crimes against African Americans. African Americans who complained or spoke out about unfair wages or work conditions were sometimes jailed.

African Americans such as T. Thomas Fortune and Harry T. Moore continued to fight for civil rights. They did this by forming groups that publicly objected to laws that prevented fair treatment. On December 24, 1950, members of the Ku Klux Klan killed Moore and his wife because of their development of an NAACP chapter in Brevard County and their campaign to register blacks to vote in Florida. Although an investigation uncovered a network of local officials, police, and Klan members who were suppressing the rights of the blacks, no legal action was ever taken. Moore's killers were never brought to trial.

In 1954, the Supreme Court decided to end school segregation. This decision brought with it changes that swept across Florida. In 1956, two black women were arrested in Tallahassee for sitting in the front seats of a bus when they were expected to sit in the back. The entire African American community began a boycott. This resulted in the revision of many laws and policies. Separate water fountains, bathrooms, restaurant seating, and hotel rooms disappeared. African Americans began to see the changes that they had worked for all their lives.



Martin Luther King Jr.
(1929–1968)

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. visited Florida in 1964. He advocated peaceful protest and organized groups to march in protest. One of these marches took place in St. Augustine. There were many violent outbursts and confrontations between the marchers and bystanders who were against integration. This event led the way for more marches. Eventually, the United States passed a law called the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed segregation.

The advances of the Civil Rights Movement influenced other groups as well. The Seminole Indians developed a Constitution designed to protect their civil rights and land ownership in Florida. This process helped to make Floridians aware of Native Americans' unique background and contributions to Florida history.

In the 1960s, Florida's large Hispanic community worked for equal rights. They pushed for higher education and greater involvement in politics and government. In 1979, Robert "Bob" Martinez became mayor of Tampa, and in 1987 he became our state's first Hispanic governor.

Women also worked to increase their opportunities and establish equal rights with men. Because many people involved with Florida politics did not take women seriously, this proved to be a difficult task. Throughout the years, however, many women played important roles in Florida politics. Among them are: May Mann Jennings, Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Marjorie Carr, Gwen Margolis, Gwen Sawyer Cherry, Toni Jennings, Betty Castor, and Paula Hawkins.

The Civil Rights Movement in Florida continues to move forward. Whenever discrimination creates situations where some Floridians are not treated with fairness and equality, they use the legal process. Public opinion is sometimes mobilized. The courts consider and resolve the issue. In this way, Floridians are assured their civil rights as Americans.