



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Florida wade-ins to end racial segregation of public beach and pools (Civil Rights Movement) 1945-1964

- U.S. Civil Rights Movement (1950s-1960s)

Time period notes: *The campaign did not see much active protest between 1946 and 1952. The most eventful time period existed during the summer of 1964, up until the passage of the Civil Rights Act.*

May
1945
to: July 2nd
1964

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: Florida

Location Description: *Virginia Key Beach (Dade County), Fort Lauderdale (Broward County), Lido Beach (Sarasota), St. Augustine, Miami*

Goals:

To gain equal access and usage of safe public beaches and pools for African Americans.

Statement example: "A public bathing beach for colored people in Broward County"- the Negro Professional and Business Men's League, Inc., May 14th 1946.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 165. Wade-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 165. Wade-in

Methods in 4th segment:

- 165. Wade-in

Methods in 5th segment:

- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 165. Wade-in

Methods in 6th segment:

- 165. Wade-in

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 175. Overloading of facilities

Notes on Methods:

The arresting of protestors throughout the campaign was not discouraged, as mass arrests could flood the local jails and bring more attention to the issue at hand.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- local African Americans

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

African American community leaders (often held leadership in groups dedicated to African American advancement in Miami and Florida)

Partners:

NAACP, SCLC, the local African American community

External allies:

The Fort Lauderdale Hotel Association, white allies

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- local African Americans
- the Negro Service Council

- the Urban League of Greater Miami

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- local African Americans
- the Fort Lauderdale Hotel Association

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- NAACP
- local African Americans

Groups in 4th Segment:

- NAACP
- local African Americans

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and its President Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King
- local African Americans

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)
- local African Americans

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

While every demonstration shared one common goal, each segment of this campaign is primarily focused in a certain county of Florida. The local leadership and involvement of certain groups may vary by location.

Segment Length: *About 3 years*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Local police force, local judicial system, white separatists

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Marches, speeches

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Violence by local police officers, Ku Klux Klan members, and other white bystanders/beachgoers/separatists.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

4 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0.5 points out of 1 point

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Though the wade-ins were an important part of the movement that led to the banning of segregation in public spaces, the campaign itself cannot be fully accredited with the successful outcome. Instead, it worked as a small piece in nonviolent activism that worked alongside sit-ins, protests, marches, speeches, economic boycotts, and other campaigns for civil rights.

In a time that many considered the “post-Jim Crow” era, racial segregation of unequal public facilities remained the norm throughout Florida. First expressed in the Fort Lauderdale Daily News in 1927, African American communities were unhappy with being constrained to a single “colored leisure beach”; an uninhabited and inconvenient strip of land that was inferior to the “white beaches”. It was not until 1945 that African American leaders in Dade County began to plan action to challenge and draw attention to this injustice.

Under the Urban League of Greater Miami, Negro Service Council members Lawson Thomas and Ira P. Davis came up with the idea to put a spin on the popular civil rights lunch counter sit-ins that had drawn national attention. In order to gain access to swimming facilities, they proposed nonviolent “wade-ins” at Florida white beaches and pools, starting with Baker’s Haulover Beach. African Americans would simply enter and enjoy the public waters just as the white beachgoers did. They reasoned that if “waders” were arrested, the issue would be acknowledged by authorities, and they could finally challenge the segregation in court.

In Fort Lauderdale, the Negro Professional and Business Men’s League also began its attempt to make the concern over lack of public beaches a recognized issue. On 14 May, 1946, leaders brought a petition requesting “a public bathing beach for colored people” to the Broward County Commission. An integrated beach was desired, but they knew this proposal would be perceived as too radical. The county appointed a committee to work on the issue, but little came of the matter. The City of Fort Lauderdale tried again to address the request in 1949, similarly ending in disappointment.

The first act of support came in 1952 when the Fort Lauderdale Hotel Association publically supported the campaign for an African American recreational beach. The next year, the single existing “colored beach” was bought by developers and turned into the Galt Ocean Mile, leaving African Americans without any beach options. Broward County finally responded by purchasing a strip of land in the Everglades for African American use. To the activists’ dismay, there was no road to this isolated beach and people had to take long and unreliable ferry trips just to access it. There were no facilities, tables, shelter, or bathrooms constructed.

On 3 October, 1955, 100 African American Floridians finally responded to the lack of action by piling into cars to Lido Beach to stage wade-ins. The city of Sarasota first responded without violence by placing “no parking” signs to turn around the caravans and by simply closing parks altogether. The county even built a “colored swimming pool” to appeal to waders, but wade-ins continued.

By September of 1960, the wade-ins started gaining attention. Via a NAACP-filed lawsuit, a US federal court reiterated that Miami’s black residents should be allowed to use public swimming facilities. However, de facto-segregation persisted as police did not enforce the court order and facility owners continued to discriminate.

In the summer of 1961, local NAACP leaders Dr. Von Mizell and Eula Johnson organized frequent wade-ins on Fort Lauderdale beaches. Participants of all ages were recruited to join the campaign, where they were met at the beaches by a threatening police force, ax-wielding KKK members, and white beach-goers catcalling and holding weapons. Physical violence, however, did not occur.

The city filed a lawsuit against the NAACP, and police arrested black waders for “disturbing the peace” and “inciting chaos.” The NAACP sent its best lawyers and advocates, and by 1962, a state judge ruled against white-exclusive beaches.

On 17 June, 1964, the campaign had reached St. Augustine. A successful two-hour long wade-in by 35 people drew attention

and garnered some black and white support. On June 24th, however, white beachgoers did not allow waders to reach the water by physically blockading the shore. Due to the court-ordered desegregation, the police had no choice but to protect the black activists from the threat of violence by the white crowd, but they did not aid them in reaching their objective. That night, white groups, such as the National States Rights Party, conducted anti-black speeches, and 300 whites marched to protest integrating the beaches.

The next day, African Americans in St. Augustine famously planned to “beat the heat and segregation” by entering Monson Motor Lodge; an “integration testing ground” for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). As black swimmers enjoyed the pool, the hotel manager poured a bottle of acid into the water and an off-duty policeman eventually jumped into the pool to beat the noncooperative swimmers. The swimmers were arrested but photos of the injustice began to circulate around the world, infuriating many as a symbol of “barbaric racism.” The local Grand Jury asked Dr. King to leave St. Augustine.

On 22 June, police arrested 22 waders. State Senator Verle Pope offered himself as a mediator to a biracial committee to address the tensions. He was deemed by some an ally to the African American community, and local whites smashed the windows to his office. A Danish photographer who recorded the wade-ins was also brutally beaten.

In the most violent incident on 25 June, whites, including police, attacked 75 people during a wade-in. Later that night, 500 white people attacked demonstrators in St. Augustine, including SCLC leader C.T. Vivian, and hospitalized 19 people, many of whom were in severe condition.

In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed largely as a result of the Civil Rights Movement and the many campaigns it encompassed. Attempts to uphold segregation were more seriously criminalized under the Act, so facility owners and police could no longer promote segregation. It became possible for public swimming facilities throughout Florida and the country to finally be utilized fairly by African Americans.

Research Notes

Influences:

The "waders" were influenced by the widespread lunch counter sit-ins that were taking place all over the South to protest public segregation. (1)

The campaign influenced national wade-ins in other parts of the country where segregation existed, such as in Rainbow Beach, Chicago, throughout Mississippi, and South Africa (2)

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Links:

[1] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/wave-campaigns/us-civil-rights-movement-1950s-1960s>

[2] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-people-color>

[3] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/local-community-or-neighborhood-level-campaign>