**Civil Rights Movement**

The civil rights movement can be defined as a mass popular movement to secure for African Americans equal access to and opportunities for the basic privileges and rights of U.S. citizenship. Although the roots of the civil rights movement go back to the 19th century, the movement peaked in the 1950s and 1960s. African American men and women, along with whites, organized and led the movement at national and local levels. They pursued their goals through legal means, negotiations, petitions, and nonviolent protest demonstrations. The largest social movement of the 20th century, the civil rights movement influenced the modern women's rights movement and the student movement of the 1960s.

The civil rights movement centered on the American South, where the African American population was concentrated and where racial inequality in education, economic opportunity, and the political and legal processes was most blatant. Beginning in the late 19th century, state and local governments passed segregation laws, known as Jim Crow laws, and mandated restrictions on voting qualifications that left the black population economically and politically powerless. The movement therefore addressed primarily three areas of discrimination: education, social segregation, and voting rights.

**The Brown Decision**

The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas ushered in a new era in the struggle for civil rights. This landmark decision outlawed racial segregation in public schools. Whites around the country condemned the decision, and in the South such white supremacist groups as the Ku Klux Klan and the Citizens' Council organized to resist desegregation, sometimes resorting to violence. A primary target of supremacist groups was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Over the course of decades the NAACP had filed a procession of court cases, including Brown, and had assumed the lead in the national struggle against segregated education. The oldest established national civil-rights organization, the NAACP also played an important role at the local level, where blacks across the South organized branches to combat discrimination in their communities.

Prompted in part by the work of the Arkansas NAACP and its president, Daisy Bates, one of the first attempts to comply with the Brown decision came in the capital city of >Little Rock in 1957. When the local school board admitted nine black students to the city's previously all-white Central High School, white protests escalated into violence, forcing President Dwight D. Eisenhower to dispatch federal troops to protect the black students. A later high-profile case involved Alabama governor George Wallace, who in 1963 attempted to block black students from enrolling at the University of Alabama.

**The Challenge to Social Segregation**

By the time of the Little Rock incident, the nation had already become aware of the heightened struggle in the South. In 1955 blacks in Montgomery, Ala., organized a boycott of city buses in protest of the policy of segregated seating. Lasting 381 days, the boycott, instigated by Rosa Parks, succeeded in integrating the seating. It also led to the formation in 1957 of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), in Atlanta, Ga., as a national organization presided over by a local black minister, Martin Luther King, Jr. As SCLC head, he would later become a central leader in the larger civil rights movement.

Soon thereafter, many SNCC members joined forces with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Founded in Chicago in the 1940s, CORE organized the Freedom Rides of 1961. Black and white Freedom Riders boarded commercial buses in Washington, D.C., and embarked on a route through the South to test the 1960 Supreme Court decision Boynton v. Virginia, which had outlawed segregation in interstate transportation terminals. Although riders were beaten, arrested, and in one instance had their bus burned, the Freedom Rides were ultimately successful, prompting the Interstate Commerce Commission to enforce the ruling in Boynton.

Following Kennedy's assassination, President Lyndon Johnson maneuvered the Civil Rights Act of 1964 through Congress. Representing a major victory for African Americans, the 1964 legislation outlawed segregation in public places and prohibited racial and gender discrimination in employment practices.