

Marching Across Milwaukee's 16th Street Bridge

Goals

Students begin to understand the fair housing marches of 1967-68, examine the motivations of participants, and investigate what fair housing means.

Central Questions

Why did civil rights leaders organize the marches and what happened? What is the Fair Housing law of 1968? What happens when civil rights and property rights conflict? What are some benefits and challenges of a diverse community?

Background Information

In 1967, Milwaukee neighborhoods had been segregated by law for decades. The Menominee River industrial district, just south of today's I-94, separated the African American neighborhood on the north from the exclusively white neighborhoods of South Milwaukee. The 16th Street Bridge (sometimes called the 16th Street Viaduct) connected the two.

On August 29, 1967, roughly 250 protesters led by Father James Groppi marched across the 16th Street Bridge toward a park on the south side to protest segregation and demand fair housing laws. While a similar march the night before had remained peaceful, the August 29 protest was greeted by 13,000 white residents carrying clubs, hurling glass bottles, and shouting racial slurs and profanities.

When police introduced tear gas, the 250 protesters returned north only to find their headquarters, the NAACP Freedom House, ablaze. Milwaukee Police claimed they heard shots fired inside and tear-gassed the building, which caught fire. No shooters or weapons were found, and today it is widely believed that police officers purposefully caused the fire.

Civil rights activists organized daily marches for 200 consecutive nights to demand a fair housing law. After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., in April 1968, the US Congress passed a national fair housing law. On April 30, 1968, the Milwaukee Common Council followed with its own ordinance.

After the Fair Housing Act passed, many white residents moved out of the city to the suburbs. Milwaukee remains one of the most segregated cities in the nation today. See the lesson plan, "Segregation in Milwaukee Today," (p. 43) for related content.

Documents Used in This Lesson:

1. Two-minute news film clip of the housing march, likely the night of August 29, 1967.
<http://wihist.org/1yuot15>
(This clip has no audio track; a newscaster would have been talking over it.)
2. Excerpt from the Fair Housing Act passed in 1968.
<http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/hce/title8.php>

Document 1: Two-minute news film clip of the housing march, likely the night of August 29, 1967.
<http://wihist.org/1yuot15>

This short clip has no sound; a newscaster would have been talking over it.



Example of hate mail sent to Father Groppi that summer: <http://wihist.org/1wL2JQx>

GROPPI,
YOU BETTER NOT TRY
TO COME DOWN TO THE
SOUTH SIDE OR WE'LL
MAKE THINGS HOT FOR
YOU IF YOU CROSS THAT
GULLY. WE DONT WANT
ANY NIGGERS DOWN
HERE. THE SOUTH SIDE
IS FOR WHITES ONLY &
WE INTEND TO KEEP
IT THAT WAY & THERE'S
NOTHING YOU CAN DO
ABOUT IT SO DONT EVEN
TRY.
A SOUTH SIDER

Questions

Document 1: Two-minute news film clip of the housing march, likely the night of August 29, 1967.

On August 29, 1967, 250 protesters led by Father James Groppi marched across the 16th Street Bridge toward a park on the south side to protest segregation and demand fair housing laws. They were met by 13,000 white residents carrying clubs, hurling glass bottles, and shouting racial slurs and profanities. This video from that night has no sound track. Watch it with a partner and answer the following questions.

1. List the different types of people you see in the first thirty seconds. Where do you think they are? What is happening?
2. Look closely at the people shown between the 15- and 30-second marks. What do you think they are saying, based on their actions and facial features?
3. From what you can see in the video, did the police act properly or improperly? Why do you say that?
4. Imagine you are one of the marchers in the video. Write Tweets or text messages to your friends about what is happening to you. Write one from each scene in the video and assume they are happening a few minutes apart.

Sec. 804. [42 U.S.C. 3604] Discrimination in sale or rental of housing and other prohibited practices

As made applicable by section 803 of this title and except as exempted by sections 803(b) and 807 of this title, it shall be unlawful--

- (a) To refuse to sell or rent after the making of a bona fide offer, or to refuse to negotiate for the sale or rental of, or otherwise make unavailable or deny, a dwelling to any person because of race, color, religion, sex, familial status, or national origin.
- (b) To discriminate against any person in the terms, conditions, or privileges of sale or rental of a dwelling, or in the provision of services or facilities in connection therewith, because of race, color, religion, sex, familial status, or national origin.
- (c) To make, print, or publish, or cause to be made, printed, or published any notice, statement, or advertisement, with respect to the sale or rental of a dwelling that indicates any preference, limitation, or discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, handicap, familial status, or national origin, or an intention to make any such preference, limitation, or discrimination.
- (d) To represent to any person because of race, color, religion, sex, handicap, familial status, or national origin that any dwelling is not available for inspection, sale, or rental when such dwelling is in fact so available.
- (e) For profit, to induce or attempt to induce any person to sell or rent any dwelling by representations regarding the entry or prospective entry into the neighborhood of a person or persons of a particular race, color, religion, sex, handicap, familial status, or national origin.

Questions

Document 2: excerpt from the Fair Housing law (Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968).

With a partner, investigate these questions, come up with an answer that you both agree upon, and be ready to discuss them with the class.

1. What's the most important phrase in the opening four lines?
2. Choose two of the sections (a through e) and rewrite them in simpler, shorter ways that somebody younger than you could understand.
3. Should people be able to live wherever they want if they can afford it? Why? Should landlords be able to reject anybody they want, for any reason they want? Why? Do these two ideas conflict? How could you resolve any conflict that you see?
4. Think about your school, your neighborhood, and your community. Do you see people from many different racial and ethnic backgrounds? List three good things about living in a racially diverse community. List three hard things about living in a diverse community.