

Introduction

The hard wooden pews of Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church teemed with people on March 4, 2007, as the crowd waited for Barack Obama to ascend the pulpit. It was early in the presidential campaign of 2008, and the African American senator from Illinois was facing New York senator and former first lady Hillary Clinton in a fight for the Democratic nomination. President Bill Clinton and his wife had earned much respect from black Americans during his years in office, and Senator Obama's success hung on his ability to convince black voters that he was a worthier candidate than his formidable opponent. He chose Selma, Alabama, as the place to make that claim.

Rewind the scene forty years to January 2, 1965. The throng inside Brown Chapel looked hauntingly similar. Martin Luther King Jr., standing above a sanctuary jammed with local black residents, described Selma as a symbol of bitter resistance to civil rights in the Deep South. On that dark winter night, he named the city the new national battleground for voting rights, and African American residents of the Black Belt tightened the laces of their marching shoes in agreement. Two months later,

shocking footage of white state troopers beating peaceful black marchers interrupted nightly television broadcasts. “Bloody Sunday,” as the horrific event became known, catapulted Selma and black demands for the ballot into the national spotlight. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 became law that August, finally guaranteeing all Americans the right to vote. The legislation was christened in Washington, but it had been born in the streets of Selma.

On the forty-second anniversary of Bloody Sunday, Obama endeavored to link his candidacy to the civil rights movement. Speaking from the same pulpit where King had spoken, he declared himself one of the Joshua generation—a biblical reference signaling the cohort of doers and creators who follow in the footsteps of the visionary Moses generation. He proclaimed, “I’m here because somebody marched. I’m here because y’all sacrificed for me. I stand on the shoulders of giants.” There in Selma, Obama sank his roots into the victorious legacy of the civil rights movement and positioned himself as the candidate who would continue its fight against injustice and oppression.¹

Decades before Obama mounted that pulpit, Selma had been consecrated as a pivotal milestone in the grand arc of U.S. history. In the collective memory of the nation, Selma represents the triumphal moment of black nonviolent protest and the fulfillment of the promises of American democracy.² But the city Obama visited, first as a senator in 2007 and then again eight years later as the nation’s first black president, bore little resemblance to this shining image.

As one drives westward from Montgomery, the four-lane Highway 80 is the freeway of the Black Belt, picking up the path of Interstate 85 after it comes to an end in Alabama’s capital city. The fifty-mile journey cuts through the gentle hills of Lowndes County, revealing lazily grazing cattle in fields that once sprouted cotton. Abandoned gas stations with barred windows, rusted industrial buildings, and empty, gutted houses on what used to be Craig Air Force Base dot the final miles to Selma. From the crest of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, high above the Alabama River, the downtown comes into view. The vacant Tepper’s building—once a thriving department store—towers over the surrounding businesses on Broad Street. The clothing stores and wholesale businesses that had made Selma the trading center of the western Black Belt closed up shop decades ago. Most of the bustle in downtown now centers around the intersection of Alabama Avenue and Broad Street, where the public library is one of the most integrated institutions in town. Across the street, the Downtowner, a classic meat-and-three restaurant, serves sweet tea and a catfish special on

Fridays, while the nearby Carter Drug Company still delivers prescriptions packaged in signature green bottles to the front doors of Selma's residents.³

To the north and east of downtown—in the historically blacker and poorer sections of the city—boarded-up buildings and abandoned houses mix with weary-looking homes whose porches have started to lose their struggle against gravity. Payday loan stores testify to how hard it is for poor people to scrape by, week after week. Meanwhile, the high school cashiers working the checkout lines at the Winn-Dixie grocery store are experts at Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) cards, the payment method for the federal food assistance program. Walmart is the best shopping option in town nowadays; the Dollar General or one of the other discount stores lining Highway 14 would be the next possibility. Employment is hard to come by, and good-paying jobs are even rarer. Meanwhile, the public schools, with the exception of one elementary school on the wealthier and whiter western side of town, are almost entirely black, while nearly every white child attends the private John T. Morgan Academy or Meadowview Christian School. The Selma Country Club, showcase of wealth and segregation during the twentieth century, still does not admit black members.

The Selma that Obama paid homage to visibly and unmistakably told a story at odds with the triumphal legacy of voting rights. The black mayor sitting in office and the other African Americans serving in local government were a testament to just how much voting rights had transformed Alabama politics. Black residents could trace the paved city streets, higher graduation rates, early childhood education programs, and indoor plumbing to their gradual inclusion into the city in the years after the movement. But the numbing unemployment, gutted houses, and SNAP cards attested to barriers left unbroken by the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In the symbolic birthplace of the voting rights movement, those very rights had failed to bring economic opportunities and justice for African Americans.

This is a story of how and why the celebrated political legacy of Selma appears worlds apart from the dismal economic realities of the Alabama Black Belt. The question at its center: why was the right to vote not enough to bring economic justice to African Americans in the Black Belt? The answer requires, most important, an understanding of Selma as a place, not just a moment in time. When Selma became a symbol of the voting rights movement, everything before and after those brief months in 1965 vanished as quickly as spilled lemonade on hot Alabama asphalt in August.

Making Selma a narrow story of voting rights erases how white supremacy and agricultural and industrial development operated hand in hand throughout the entire twentieth century to keep African Americans from the full citizenship they had fought for, one comprising political rights as well as economic opportunities. The story that follows begins in 1901, the year the newly passed Alabama constitution took the ballot away from black citizens, and ends in 2000, when Selma's residents elected their first black mayor. It traces political and economic changes in Dallas County and the wider Alabama Black Belt, changes that were both national and regional developments as well as intensely local stories shaped by white citizens' concerted attempts to maintain a status quo that, above all, preserved their power.

The fight that generations of African Americans waged for full citizenship and justice in Selma unfolded alongside a century-long transformation in the agricultural economy of the Black Belt. African Americans' demands for economic opportunity, self-sufficiency, quality education, and political representation reflected and responded to drastic changes in the economic realities that structured daily life.⁴ The civil rights movement came into its own at exactly the moment that cattle usurped cotton's reign over fields across the Alabama Black Belt, a takeover that sounded the death knell for the meager livings black tenant farmers had eked out on the land. The triumphal story of Selma, the one that emerged in the aftermath of the movement in 1965, rings true only if one focuses singularly on voting rights and ignores African Americans' parallel demands for economic opportunity and justice.

Placing the black freedom struggle and economic transformation side by side makes clear how voting rights could not counteract the vanishing of small farms and the arrival of low-wage jobs—and too few of them, at that—that replaced farmwork in the years after World War II. Meanwhile, local white officials fought tooth and nail to maintain political control in the wake of the civil rights movement. Their calculated intransigence effectively staved off meaningful participation by black residents in the economic and political life of Selma. The rise of the Sunbelt South and globalization further siphoned resources away from the struggling Black Belt in favor of the educated, skilled, and urban.⁵ Voting rights—or even black political power—could not remedy decades of unequal investment in black communities by local, state, and federal governments.

A hundred-year vantage point explains why the movement for voting rights, one that shook the rural Black Belt and nation alike, failed to

achieve the opportunity and justice local black residents had envisioned. The close-up lens of a local study reveals how local and national politics and enormous economic shifts played out in the lives of those who called the Alabama Black Belt home. Each of those people has stories that could fill pages of their own. What follows lays out the world within which they made their lives.