# A Local Lens on National Struggles: The Fredericksburg Civil Rights Trail as a Microcosm of U.S. National Trends and Developments since 1865

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Fredericksburg, a city rich with history, put itself on the map both figuratively and literally in 2023 when the city unveiled its new downtown Civil Rights history trail dubbed "Freedom - A Work in Progress." Taking visitors from the Visitor Center to the Dorothy Hart Community Center in two parts, the city has executed a hands-on learning experience that addresses and educates the public on Fredericksburg's firsthand involvement in many aspects of the Civil Rights movement all the way from the beginning of Reconstruction to the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. Some parts of the trail show hauntingly recent his prevalence was – the 5th stop, detailing the old slave auction block that was only removed in 2020.[1] An example such as this is just one of many on the trail that demonstrate Fredericksburg's representativeness of national trends and developments following the Civil War, the impact it had on the town's residents, and vice versa. This essay will analyze the content of the Civil Rights trail and how it represents American history beginning in Reconstruction and continuing into the present day. Understanding this connection is important in fully contextualizing the city as a beacon of historical trends in the American historical canon, specifically that as it relates to the Civil Rights movement.

One significant era that the trail represents is in its namesake: the Civil Rights era. The trail specifically highlights the sit-ins at the corner of William and Caroline Streets, where in 1960, black teenagers participated in sit-ins at the segregated lunch counters of the various department stores located on the corner. The connection to national trends is evident, as the teenagers in Fredericksburg were directly inspired by the original sit-ins by the A&T Four in Greensboro, North Carolina earlier that year.[2] The Fredericksburg sit-ins were impactful enough

[1] "Freedom, a Work in Progress," ArcGIS StoryMaps, November 26, 2024, https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/1cf509b0721a44409a4582159913af94.
[2] "Freedom, a Work in Progress," ArcGIS StoryMaps, November 26, 2024

to make national news, further indicating how the city was not only representative of national history, but also how it affected the Civil Rights movement, regardless of how large or small it truly was.

Furthermore, on the national scale, the city of Fredericksburg was the first stop on the Freedom Rides of 1961 as organized by Dr. James Farmer. Farmer, aiming to challenge racial segregation in the United States, began a journey across the South with 12 other "Freedom Riders." They faced heavy discrimination from whites and the Ku Klux Klan, who in turned firebombed one of the Greyhound bus stations they utilized in Alabama.[3] Farmer's orchestration of such an event put Fredericksburg in the national discussion for Civil Rights once again. Fredericksburg arguably was the beginning of Southern segregation geographically, being so close to the nation's capital yet intrinsically tied to segregationist policies and thus further showcasing how Fredericksburg was characteristic of national history as it played out.

Fredericksburg also represented the nation in Civil Rights at the desegregation of Maury School by Robert Christian. In 1962, Christian desegregated Maury Middle School, which itself sat on the former site of a cemetery for enslaved and free black people. Christian recounts feeling extremely ostracized and discriminated against by his fellow classmates. He stated he had to learn to take the insults and discrimination that came his way, even from his own teachers.[4] Christian's experience is reflective of the direct result of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, and the slow start of such school integration in the South.[5] The national history the supreme court case made, most evident in the Little Rock Nine, is shown here in Fredericksburg. This is

[3] "Freedom, a Work in Progress," ArcGIS StoryMaps, November 26, 2024
[4] "Freedom, a Work in Progress," ArcGIS StoryMaps, November 26, 2024
[5] Edwin C. Breeden et al., "The Affluent Society," James McKay, ed., in *The American Yawp*, eds. Joseph Locke and Ben Wright (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

another example of how Fredericksburg was demonstrative of national trends. Its prime location near the heart of the south allows it to be so representative of these national trends from the Civil Rights era.

Fredericksburg's Civil Rights trail is not exclusively tied to the 1950s and 1960s, however. Many portions of the trail directly showcase the city's involvement in earlier postbellum periods in American history. One portion of the trail is especially characteristic of the "New South" ideology championed by Confederate sympathizers such as Henry Grady.[6] Liberty Town is a historically black neighborhood and stop on the trail located by Maury School. Henry Deane, a black freedman, was able to use undesirable land to create housing and property for the black citizens of Fredericksburg. In the 1890s, when Deane constructed Liberty Town, Jim Crow laws were extremely prevalent and restrictive of black citizens in the city.[7] While Jim Crow laws continued until the end of the Civil Rights era, this direct response to these laws, the scale at which it was executed, and the effect it had on the black community in the city shows how greatly the national trends were able to once again affect Fredericksburg.

The effects of Jim Crow laws are furthermore on display at the site of the Fredericksburg Jail, which during this time reflected the lynchings and unfair trials against black people happening across the nation. The trail regards two men who were significantly affected by this. The former, Paul Key, was falsely accused of assault and pursued by a mob before being taken into custody and convicted and executed by an all-white jury in 1889. The latter, Charles H. Blandford, was staying in the Fredericksburg jail in 1904 when a mob attempted to lynch him

[6] Jacob Betz et al., "Life in Industrial America," David Hochfelder, ed., in *The American Yawp,* eds. Joseph Locke and Ben Wright (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).
[7] "Freedom, a Work in Progress," ArcGIS StoryMaps, November 26, 2024

themselves to punish him.[8] While the mob was most likely unsuccessful after being dispersed, it still demonstrates how prevalent the national trends of the time were in Fredericksburg. These examples are just two of many that occurred in the city.

With a city as drenched in history as Fredericksburg, it is easy to see on their Civil Rights trail how their many stops showcase how the city was representative of the national Civil Rights movement, from the very beginning in Reconstruction, up until the very end in the mid-1960s. By characterizing Fredericksburg as demonstrative of the national trends of the Civil Rights era, it helps foster a greater understanding of both the city's history and how national history directly affected those who were not always at the forefront of peoples' minds when they think of Civil Rights. Having this local level understanding of this era is arguably crucial in fully realizing the effects of American history after 1865; not as just pages in a textbook an online encyclopedia entry, but as real experiences that were lived and able to be relived through preservation and discovery.

[8] "Freedom, a Work in Progress," ArcGIS StoryMaps, November 26, 2024

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