

How Democracy Travels: SNCC, Swarthmore Students, and the Growth of the Student Movement in the North, 1961-1964

Author(s): Wesley Hogan

Source: *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 126, No. 3 (Jul., 2002), pp. 437-470

Published by: University of Pennsylvania Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20093549>

Accessed: 12-12-2019 18:14 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*University of Pennsylvania Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*

# *How Democracy Travels: SNCC, Swarthmore Students, and the Growth of the Student Movement in the North, 1961–1964*

**I**N THE FALL OF 1961, black and white students launched a series of sit-ins on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. They targeted restaurants that refused to serve African Americans, precipitating a series of volatile confrontations. As Penny Patch, a student at Swarthmore College in southeastern Pennsylvania, recalled, “a mob of white people gathered, shouting at us, waving sticks. It was very threatening.”<sup>1</sup>

The 1961 clash in Maryland was not the first example of how civil rights agitation in the South generated by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had begun to affect northern students. For instance, in February 1960, when television news showed segregationists pouring ketchup and hot coffee on the heads of integrated groups sitting-in at southern restaurant counters, college students in the North and West set up sympathy pickets at northern branches of Woolworth’s and Kress. Newly formed groups like the Northern Student Movement (NSM) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) coordinated northern student action. Seeking to learn more about the movement, these northern students began to come south to see SNCC in action. For their part, SNCC workers began to travel outside of the South to draw publicity and funds. These contacts taught people in other regions of the country how to replicate SNCC’s pathbreaking democratic initiatives.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Judy Richardson, telephone interview by author, Aug. 20, 2000; Penny Patch, telephone interview by author, Nov. 19, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this piece, New Left movements include but are not limited to the Black Power movement, the student movement, the Latino movement, the draft resistance movement, the antiwar

The confrontation at the restaurant on Maryland's Eastern Shore was part of this activist education process. It was a newsworthy public impasse typical of movement strategies in the early 1960s. But the Eastern Shore sit-ins also constituted the building blocks of popular politics, an aspect of northern movement history that scholars routinely overlook. Prior accounts, particularly those by Clayborne Carson and James Miller, have provided invaluable intellectual histories of SNCC and SDS respectively. Kirkpatrick Sale, who has written the most comprehensive account of SDS to date, argued that SNCC influenced SDS a great deal, though Miller vehemently disagreed. Despite differences, these interpretations remain credible and authentic explanations. But these important studies leave unexplored the crucial question of precisely how democratic forms can develop in one locale and spread to other parts of the society.<sup>3</sup>

The history of movement growth in southeastern Pennsylvania, nearly astride the Mason-Dixon line, exposes these sequential dynamics to analysis. Swarthmore College, founded by Quakers in 1864 and located southwest of Philadelphia, became a significant point of contact between SNCC and the emerging student movement in the North. In fact, Swarthmore students' experience in Cambridge, Maryland, and Chester, Pennsylvania, laid out a

---

movement, the women's movement, the gay liberation movement, and the environmental movement. The sit-in that launched others across the South occurred in Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1, 1960. For northern support, see, for example, Boston's Emergency Public Integration Committee—a group combining the Ministerial Alliance of Greater Boston, CORE, NAACP-Boston Branch, ILGWU, IUE, United Packinghouse Workers, American Veterans Committee, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and student groups from Harvard, Brandeis, Boston University, Tufts, Emmanuel, Northeastern, MIT, Episcopal Theological School, and Holy Cross. EPIC, as it was called, launched a “Don't Buy In Northern Woolworth As Long As Southern Woolworth Discriminates Against Negroes,” n.d. [spring 1960], frame 909, reel 4, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, microfilm (Sanford, N.C., Microfilming Corp. of America, 1983; hereafter, SNCC Papers); originals are at the Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta. Early correspondence between SNCC and northern-based students can be found in the papers of SNCC's executive secretary. See, for example, Al Haber to Charles Jones, Charles McDew, Diane Nash, Charles Sherrod et al., Sept. 14, 1961, frame 1150, reel 4; James Forman to Al Haber, Oct. 17, 1961, frame 1149, reel 4; James Forman to Wayne Proudfoot, Nov. 15, 1961, frame 910, reel 7; James Forman to Dave Campbell, Dec. 7, 1961, frame 762, reel 5; all SNCC Papers.

<sup>3</sup> Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, 1981); James Miller, *'Democracy Is in the Streets': From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York, 1987); and Kirkpatrick Sale's *SDS* (New York, 1973). Both Miller and Sale treat SDS primarily as a creation of a group of young intellectuals under the influence of scholars such as Albert Camus, C. Wright Mills, and Paul Goodman. The role of the civil rights movement in generating SDS's move toward activism has been actively challenged by Miller.

blue-print for the Economic Research and Action Projects (ERAPs), the SDS's "first steps toward activism" in 1964. The ERAPs were the centerpiece of the outreach organizing efforts of SDS, the largest student group of the decade. After 1964, the ERAP projects became significant, if flawed, outposts of democratic movement culture. The group of people who supplied the initial experience, energy, and vision that fundamentally shaped these projects were students from Swarthmore who had worked with SNCC since 1960; many of them worked in Cambridge, Maryland, between the sit-ins of 1961 and the momentous summer of 1963.<sup>4</sup>

Swarthmore students became enmeshed in the South-North network that had sprung up around SNCC, SDS, and the northern student movement in ways that at first seem merely to replicate patterns elsewhere. Young people began to create personal links between South and North, as SNCC activists traveled around the country between 1961 and 1965, and many northerners went south to see what SNCC was doing. Mimi Feingold, a white New Yorker, joined the Freedom Rides in the summer of 1961. Started by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Freedom Rides involved blacks and whites riding together on interstate buses, testing the willingness of the federal government to enforce its own laws prohibiting segregation. The tactic drew enormous attention and, though nonviolent, it also drew violent retribution. When Feingold returned to Swarthmore in the fall of 1961, she took with her a thorough understanding of nonviolence as a tactic in the struggle gained from her participation in the Freedom Rides. Furthermore, over weeks spent in Mississippi's Parchman Prison with people of similar mind from around the country, she had acquired a new group of contacts nationwide. Seeing others beaten in prison and publicly humiliated for their

<sup>4</sup> Cambridge erupted in the summer of 1963: Governor Tawes called in the national guard after crowds of whites and blacks threatened one another. For more on Cambridge, see Peter Levy, "The Black Freedom Struggle and White Resistance: A Case Study of the Civil Rights Movement in Cambridge, Maryland," in *The New Left Reexamined*, ed. John McMillan and Paul Buhle (forthcoming, Temple Univ. Press). What follows is not a comprehensive history of the Cambridge movement; my purpose, rather, is to trace the experiences of those at Swarthmore who participated in that movement. SNCC people and those from the Northern Student Movement, Annette Brock has found, "played a big role in the beginning of the Cambridge movement." Students came from nearby Morgan State, Howard, Maryland State, and Swarthmore, as well as Skidmore, Brown, and Harvard. Annette K. Brock, "Gloria Richardson and the Cambridge Movement," in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965*, ed. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (Bloomington, 1990), 123-27. The quote "first steps toward activism" comes from an SDS pamphlet entitled "December Conference," n.d. [fall 1965], box 515, J. B. Matthews Collection, Duke University.

skin color, Feingold began to do something quite out of the ordinary for young white women in 1961. With considerable poise and authority, she began speaking at Swarthmore and at other area campuses about the southern struggle. She also looked for ways to stay active once she was back in the North.

Along with her friends in the Swarthmore Political Action Club (SPAC), she continued to develop contacts made in the spring with young black members of the NAACP Youth Group in Chester who were employed by the Swarthmore food service. Chester in 1963 was a depressed industrial city of 63,000 on the Delaware River, south of Philadelphia and two miles from Swarthmore. Forty percent of its population was black.<sup>5</sup>

After a series of initial meetings between the NAACP members and SPAC, Richard James, a young black man who worked in the Swarthmore food service and in the local NAACP, suggested that the two groups test a local roller rink reputed to have “white nights” and “black nights.” On a white night, two black youths tried to buy tickets and were told the rink was full. Then, two white Swarthmore students went up to the window. They were sold tickets. This became the basis of an NAACP lawsuit against the roller rink. After the rink integrated, the contingent from Chester and Swarthmore returned, in integrated groups, to skate together in the winter of 1961 and 1962. It was frightening, recalled Penny Patch, a freshman from New York. Hostile whites yelled at the group, threatened them, and tripped them up. But the Chester and Swarthmore groups continued to test local accommodations. Often these political actions would be followed by parties, turning political alliances into social friendships.<sup>6</sup>

During the 1961–62 school year, black SNCC students from Morgan State in Baltimore, Temple University in Philadelphia, and Howard University in Washington put out a call for white students to join them in sit-ins along the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Some of these black students—including Stokely Carmichael, Reggie Robinson, and Dion Diamond—were active members of SNCC’s national coordinating committee. A small group

<sup>5</sup> Miriam Feingold Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (hereafter, Feingold Papers); Judy Richardson interview; Oli Fein, telephone interview by author, May 19, 2002; Danny Pope, Alain Jehlen, and Evan Metcalf, with Cathy Wilkerson, “Chester, PA: A Case Study in Community Organization,” n.d., box 1, SDS Papers (coll. M96-081, unprocessed), State Historical Society of Wisconsin (hereafter, SHSW).

<sup>6</sup> Penny Patch interview; Judy Richardson interview; Oli Fein interview.

of students from Swarthmore, two hours from the Eastern Shore, were particularly responsive. Most of these students were white, and many came from parents with liberal or even Left backgrounds. "Contact with SNCC people, or simply hearing about the work SNCC people were doing in the Deep South, was totally inspiring," Penny Patch recalled. When she and others had the opportunity to work with SNCC in the sit-ins along the Eastern Shore, they jumped at it eagerly.<sup>7</sup>

Despite its proximity to several northern states, the Eastern Shore in 1861 resembled a pocket of the Deep South. Cambridge, Maryland, a small town of 12,000, became a key civil rights battleground in 1962 and 1963. All public facilities in Cambridge, including schools, housing, and health care, were segregated. Though the schools were officially desegregated from the fourth grade on, the three black students who enrolled in Cambridge High School in 1962 withdrew after a few days of intense harassment. The city refused to hire blacks for white-collar positions in the city government. Watching the 1960 sit-ins from Cambridge, local leader Gloria Richardson found the students brought "something direct, something real" to the local struggle in this nonviolent war. "This was the first time I saw a vehicle I could work with. With SNCC, there's not all this red tape—you just get it done." Richardson, a charismatic Howard University graduate a bit older than some other SNCC members, ultimately led the Cambridge Non-Violent Action Committee (CNAC), the local committee that emerged to challenge these conditions in March 1962. CNAC asked the Cambridge Board of Education to include commercial courses at the black high school to prepare more students for good jobs, and demanded that the city institute fair-housing practices and pave the streets in black neighborhoods.<sup>8</sup>

SNCC sent field secretaries to Cambridge to assist CNAC, but it remained independent. Richardson was, as SNCC chairman John Lewis later

<sup>7</sup> During that time SNCC worked both as an organization that enabled cooperation among local direct action movements, and as an organization that ran its own voter registration projects. While not all of the Swarthmore activists were Red Diaper babies, Carl Wittman, Jerry Geller, and Michael Manove were (Oli Fein interview). Penny Patch interview; Brock, "Gloria Richardson," 123; See also correspondence between James Forman, exec. sec. of SNCC, and Peter Countryman, head of the Northern Student Movement, frames 570–75, reel 8, SNCC Papers.

<sup>8</sup> Gloria Richardson, remarks, "'We Who Believe in Freedom Cannot Rest': Ella Baker and the Birth of SNCC," conference, April 15, 2000, Raleigh, N.C., notes in the author's possession; OCAC Summary of the Conditions in Cambridge, Maryland," [1963], Feingold Papers; Brock, "Gloria Richardson," 125; "Baltimore Civic Interest Group/Northern Student Movement Prospectus: Eastern Shore Project," frame 718, reel 8, SNCC Papers.

described her, “fiercely independent, very militant, and very articulate,” and her family had been part of the town’s black elite for generations. Students in the nearby SNCC affiliate at historically black Howard University, the Nonviolent Action Group (NAG), led by Stokely Carmichael, Bill Mahoney, and Ed Brown, came up from Washington, D.C.—sometimes on weekends, sometimes for longer—to participate in the Cambridge movement.

White students like Mimi Feingold, Penny Patch, and Carl Wittman from Swarthmore had participated intensely, if intermittently, in Eastern Shore sit-ins during 1962. These events attracted some of the few black Swarthmore students. Originally mobilized through the Swarthmore Political Action Club (SPAC), this group felt drawn to the SNCC project and its astute director, Gloria Richardson. Thus the Cambridge SNCC project provided the first sustained site of contact between full-time SNCC workers, university students affiliated with SNCC, and university students affiliated with SDS at Swarthmore.<sup>9</sup>

When Gloria Richardson went to jail, a young black SNCC field secretary, Reginald Robinson, served in her stead. Robinson had grown up in Baltimore and as an undergraduate at Morgan State in 1960–61 had worked with the Baltimore Civic Group to desegregate the city’s public accommodations. In 1962, a black Swarthmore undergraduate named Judy Richardson (no relation to Gloria Richardson) saw Robinson speak at a recruiting drive. He “was just moving mountains,” she recalled. It was important to Richardson that Robinson was a male. “Most of the [black] men that I knew did not have that kind of *political* strength,” Richardson recalled. “My mother’s brothers were very strong men to me,” and very protective. But Robinson possessed a willingness to confront injustice that was new. “Even the middle-class black guys that I saw when I first came up against the Urban League kids, were *nice* guys. They were raised to go into middle America and be assimilated, and not stand out, except in terms of academic excellence and how well they spoke,” Richardson recalled. “But when they said ‘how well they spoke,’ they meant it in a certain way, which was the way when white people said, ‘and you’re so articulate, you’re a credit

<sup>9</sup> In 1961, Al Haber tried to recruit SPAC people to become an SDS affiliate through Swarthmore contact Becky Adams. SPAC president Oli Fein remembered that SDS, at first, seemed a little too focused on intellectual debate and not enough on political action. It was not until 1962–63 that SPAC became an SDS affiliate. Fein interview. John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York, 1998), 85, 212; Carson, *In Struggle*, 90, 252.

to your race.” When Richardson saw Robinson speak for the first time, it was amazing “to see that kind of energy, no holds barred, speaking truth to power.” As one supporter would later note, “nothing builds support for SNCC like SNCC people who have been in the field.”<sup>10</sup>

It was not a coincidence that students at Swarthmore, a college located in the lower North, were the first large cohort from a historically white college to have sustained contact with the northernmost of SNCC’s southern projects. Students from Brown, Yale, and the University of Rhode Island, among others, all participated in the Eastern Shore sit-ins. But the practical limitations of travel allowed students from Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., colleges to engage in more sustained efforts on the Eastern Shore. Swarthmore, in particular, had an activist tradition stretching back to its beginnings. The student body had consistently maintained connections with larger peace and social justice movements since the Progressive era. Even in the 1950s, at the height of McCarthyism and the Cold War, students at Swarthmore had mobilized to protest nuclear proliferation and advocate disarmament.<sup>11</sup>

The Cambridge sit-ins had the same effect on the Swarthmore students as the sit-ins in Greensboro and Nashville had had on other young people: the actions people took subsequently forced them to think in new ways. It only took one bad experience—one poorly-organized sit-in, for example—for participants to see what not to do the next time out. In what would become a critical development for the Swarthmore group’s cohesion, Feingold’s circle of friends in the Swarthmore Political Action Club (SPAC) wrote and distributed reports on the Cambridge sit-ins to try and build collective knowledge about how to conduct such actions more effectively. Such early experiences would equip this cadre of students with the confidence and knowledge to set up direct action protests over the next two years, well before most other whites in the North began to gain similar experience protesting conditions on campus or the war in Vietnam.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Judy Richardson interview; Ron Dorfman to Julian Bond, July 25, 1963, frame 40, reel 7, SNCC Papers.

<sup>11</sup> On Swarthmore’s unique history, see Burton R. Clark, *The Distinctive College: Antioch, Reed, and Swarthmore* (Chicago, 1970), 171–230.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that such support work for civil rights activity was unique to Swarthmore. This was hardly the case, as significant “Friends of SNCC” groups formed in Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area, Detroit, Chicago, Boston, and New York. However, because of their physical proximity to southern activism and Swarthmore’s activist tradition, it was the people at Swarthmore who were able

It is necessary to spell out some details in order to illuminate exactly how direct action changed the Swarthmore group. The process of self-education had specific organizing components. To prepare for a sit-in, students notified police, press, and local blacks through the churches, had a call-in to gather support, and put someone in charge. They lined up picket groups in churches beforehand, gave a briefing on each restaurant, the town as a whole, and on the ideas and practices of nonviolence. Group leaders were chosen and met during the day to maintain their unity of approach. Once on the picket line, leaders had to stay put, the group had to stay together, and someone needed to keep counting to make sure everyone was there. Afterward, each group gave a report. Precise evaluations led to observations that increased their confidence and success. They learned that leaders had to be carefully chosen, with “an emphasis on experience” rather than seniority. Inexperienced leaders, they noted, “neglected to talk to their groups about conduct or to take the names of persons within the group.” Feingold and others decided a group meeting should be held before the picket, to set general plans and orient new participants as to what to expect. They recognized that picketers needed more information, both logistical—where the home church was in relation to the establishments being tested—and political—what was the present condition of negotiations between the civil rights organizations and the city. There was no chance for picketers to learn what else had happened during the day after all the groups came back, so they suggested a mass meeting to hear reports from group leaders.<sup>13</sup>

Swarthmore students’ experiences on the Eastern Shore had the potential to challenge fundamentally their perspectives on what constituted popular politics, as the same sit-in dynamics had done for African American students in Nashville, Atlanta, and throughout the South. When, for example, on March 30, 1963, nearly thirty Swarthmore students went to jail for sitting-in, Swarthmore junior Carl Wittman reported one of these transfiguring

---

most immediately to translate what they were learning from SNCC into their own community organizing project based at a northern college. Unlike the SNCC students in Nashville, those at Swarthmore had no institutional basis, such as James Lawson’s nonviolent workshops, within which these concerns could be talked out. They also lacked a mentor who might have provided guidance and support. It is also crucial to note that this article is not a historical endorsement of the Swarthmore students’ view of the Cambridge project. It is, instead, an analysis of how the Swarthmore group reacted to the Cambridge movement, and what the Swarthmore group did in the wake of these experiences. Richardson quoted in Brock, “Gloria Richardson,” 125; “Sit-in Report,” [1962], Feingold Papers.

<sup>13</sup> [Carl Wittman,] “Suggestions for Organization of Freedom Rides,” [1962–63], Feingold Papers.

experiences to his friend Mimi Feingold. Wittman, a white student from an Old Left family in New Jersey, had been drawn to SPAC for its broad progressive politics, not necessarily its civil rights programs. Now, he wrote from jail that he and other white Swarthmore men had bunked with black men from Cambridge, and the experience produced long conversations “about everything from morals to religion to the movement.” As he and the others listened to one man describe a lynching in the 1940s, Wittman found that the degree of candor that laced these conversations generated strong emotions. Just as in Mississippi and Georgia, long jail sentences allowed relationships of mutuality and solidarity to develop among activists unlikely to have met and gotten to know one another in their lives outside the movement. It broadened the sense of the possible for all involved.<sup>14</sup>

As the students got acquainted in jail in Cambridge, SNCC’s traveling “Freedom Singers”—most of whom were from the Albany, Georgia, movement—arrived in Chester to raise money for SNCC. Over the previous year in Georgia, SNCC had set up its second major voter registration project (after Mississippi), and engaged in direct action to desegregate the bus station and courthouse. Freedom songs had always been vital to the freedom struggle, but according to Clayborne Carson, “the Albany songs carried greater emotional force and were more often rooted in the Afro-American cultural heritage than was earlier the case.” Those in the Albany movement then carried these songs of triumph and struggle across the country through the Freedom Singers.<sup>15</sup>

When the group arrived in Chester in the wake of the mass arrests of Swarthmore students on the Eastern Shore, they received “an overwhelming and exciting” response from the audience. Their performance provided yet another occasion where, amid rising emotion sparked by the jailings, people developed an increasing sense of solidarity across racial and class lines. “St. Luke’s was filled to overflowing,” Charlotte Phillips, a Swarthmore senior, reported to Feingold, “there was much foot-stomping, cheering, audience participation.” It was all quite southern. Indeed, Phillips, who had attended

<sup>14</sup> Wittman’s letter was included in Feingold’s journal. Miriam Feingold, *Journal in Cambridge, Md., jail, March 30–April 2, 1963*, written on return to Swarthmore (hereafter, Feingold Journal), Feingold Papers.

<sup>15</sup> Carson, *In Struggle*, 63, 64. The initial Freedom Singers included Bernice Johnson Reagon, Rutha Harris, Bertha Gober, and Cordell Reagon. The songs helped people connect to the broader currents of the Black Freedom Church. On the latter, see James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, N.Y., 1991).

early SNCC conferences and spent part of her junior year at historically black Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi, noted that the experience made her feel “deeply at home again, so to speak.” Home in this sense served as a place where people were joined together in pursuit of what they felt to be real political life.<sup>16</sup>

Coming back to college after events like these seemed quite pointless for many of the students involved. Judy Richardson had come to Swarthmore from Tarrytown, New York, in 1962, one of eight black freshman. When she returned to school, it no longer seemed that important: “it’s not exciting, it’s not real. The *real* thing is Cambridge.” By the fall of 1963, she had put college on hold and joined the SNCC staff. Feingold fundamentally reevaluated her future plans as well. “The final question really is what I want to do with my life. If I really want to make a commitment to the movement, I shouldn’t worry about academics, but I should charge ahead in SNCC. . . . Where can I be most effective?” The process of working through the decision forged a bond of intimacy and trust among this generation of Swarthmore activists—a group which included Carl Wittman, Vernon Grizzard, Connie Brown, Charlotte Phillips, Oli Fein, and Nick Egleson. Each of them wrestled with the issue of remaining on course for a professional career in school, or continuing their “revolutionary involvement.”

This pattern echoed one that had developed within SNCC in 1961–62, as college-educated organizers like Bob Moses, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, Prathia Hall, and Charles Sherrod began to consider their involvement as the central work of their lives, rather than as a summer break from school. Some Swarthmore students, including Carl Wittman and a younger cohort including Connie Brown and Larry Gordon, decided to go into the SDS ERAP projects immediately after their graduation in 1964. Others such as Jerry Geller, Oli Fein, and Charlotte Phillips entered medical school to build skills useful to movement people. They supported one another’s decisions not to follow traditional career paths, and they reinforced for one another the idea of committing fully to the movement. As it had been for the students in Nashville and then throughout SNCC, people were able to sustain their insurgency against received cultural traditions by operating within a small, strong community of like-minded people.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Charlotte Phillips to Mimi Feingold, April 2, 1963, Feingold Papers.

<sup>17</sup> Two other members key to the development of SDS also worked with the Swarthmore group: Kathy Boudin from Bryn Mawr and Cathy Wilkerson from Swarthmore. They later became members

The vivid Maryland experiences not only drove the Swarthmore students to reevaluate their future plans and their personal relations with each other and their movement associates, it also provided some powerful (if often unwanted) insight into how power worked. The first-hand experience of the inflexibility of the city of Cambridge prompted Feingold to reconsider the possibilities for social change. Problems there seemed so intractable that she was given to moments of despair and apocalyptic speculation: "Only a revolution will do any good," she wrote Wittman upon her return from jail. "But—how do you develop the cooperative mentality" that such a revolution required, she wondered. Wittman pointed out that jail was one place to begin. "That might be a good way to gain adherents to the movement," he thought, since the people he was in jail with seemed eager to learn as much as they could about what they could safely do next. Aside from SNCC, the Swarthmore students had no models to follow of how this revolution might take place or what it might achieve. While Feingold noted that the "sophistication" of SNCC project leader Gloria Richardson's thinking was "unbelievable," and there were "at least ten other people like her" in Cambridge, Feingold still felt daunted by the challenges of organizing for permanent change. That spring, she and other SPAC members explored the solutions offered by the Nation of Islam and Black Nationalists in the wake of meeting Malcolm X at a Philadelphia speaking engagement. The Swarthmore students were not at all sure they knew what would cause change or how to act on that knowledge, but they were determined to find something to do. In the meantime, they would continue to work with SNCC people who were acting.<sup>18</sup>

The fears of family members worried about their safety also impeded and complicated students' involvement. Some parents actively opposed or physically prevented their children's involvement, just as parents had done during the earlier wave of sit-ins and Freedom Rides. Sophomore Vernon Grizzard got a phone call from his mother after he joined actions in

---

of the Weather Underground. Preliminary research on Wilkerson and Boudin indicates that their journey into Weather is much more a product of later experiences (for Wilkerson, with SDS-Chicago in 1966–68; for Boudin, with ERAP-Cleveland in 1964–68) than a direct result of their experiences at Swarthmore. Judy Richardson interview; Feingold Journal; Vernon Grizzard to Charlotte Phillips and Oli Fein, July 30, 1963, box 24, SDS Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (hereafter, SDS Papers); Carl Wittman, Broadmeadows Prison [Pa.], to Mimi Feingold, April 2, 1964, Feingold Papers; Oli Fein interview.

<sup>18</sup> Feingold Journal.

Cambridge. From their home in Florida, she told him she did not want him in Cambridge “with all this violence.” “After long consideration,” his friend Rachel Folsom reported to Feingold, “he told [his mother] he wouldn’t [go home] and he didn’t think she could make him.” At that point his mother threatened: she would send the Florida police to get him, force Swarthmore to cancel his scholarship, or get her psychiatrist to commit him to an institution. “So he went home. It really killed him.” “I still want like hell to depart for places of conflict,” Grizzard wrote Feingold. Two weeks after he returned home to Jacksonville, he wrote to Feingold of recent developments within the black community in St. Augustine, forty miles to the south. “Negro leaders there are saying that they will carry guns on their picket lines in case whites start any violence.” It seemed that no place in the South was free of conflict. After many long discussions, Grizzard persuaded his mother to allow him to work in SNCC’s Albany or Atlanta offices.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, following a large nonviolent demonstration in Cambridge on June 13, 1963, against segregation in schools and public facilities, a mob of 350 white men followed an equally large number of African Americans back into the black section of Cambridge. Maryland Governor J. Millard Tawes ordered in four hundred state troopers, outraging not only the city’s activists, but the black population generally. The next day, the governor declared martial law in Cambridge. The resulting escalation had ominous overtones. Swarthmore sophomore Mark Suckle wrote to Feingold, “I am sitting here with a rifle to the left of me. Last night, it was my turn to do phone duty at Gloria’s [Richardson’s]. I sat all alone in an arm chair with a shot gun across my lap. The community is an armed camp.”<sup>20</sup>

Angered by the presence of the state troopers and then the National Guard, Cambridge’s black citizens now joined the movement in large numbers, a development that considerably complicated SNCC’s organizing

<sup>19</sup> Grizzard’s mother’s reasons for asking him to come home were quite interesting. She felt that blacks deserved equal rights, but whites who participated with them in this quest were meddling and inciting passions that then resulted in violence, and that this was against her belief that everyone has a duty in life “to do no harm.” Somehow obscured from her view, it seems, was the harm done to African Americans by participating in the system of segregation. Mark Suckle to Feingold, “Dear M. The situation is extremely tense,” n.d. [summer 1963]; and Rachel Folsom to Feingold, June 16, 1963; both Feingold Papers; Vernon Grizzard to Charlotte Phillips and Oli Fein, July 30, 1963, box 24, SDS Papers; Vernon Grizzard to Feingold, April 4, 1963, Feingold Papers.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Suckle to Feingold, “Dear M. The situation is extremely tense,” n.d. [summer 1963], Feingold Papers.

task. "All elements of the community are now involved, most notably the guys I call the 'toughs,'" Grizzard wrote to Feingold. The larger number of people gave the movement more leverage with the city but also caused internal conflicts. Adopting the descriptive terminology of the European Left, Grizzard offered the thought that the new recruits were "not committed to the bourgeois means of the civil rights movement. Negro leaders are fast put in a position of holding back, of pleading for nonviolence, of calling off demonstrations for fear of the outcome." In essence, the problem was this: How could SNCC take this flood of new recruits rapidly through the time-consuming process of nonviolent workshops that had shaped the thinking of the SNCC students from Nashville? It took patience and persistence to convince any group of people that nonviolence was politically effective or spiritually transforming. The presence of the National Guard suddenly created a heightened danger for blacks in every part of Cambridge. To persuade members of the town's gangs that nonviolence was an adequate response to the Guard's presence was not only unlikely, it was—given the time pressures CNAC faced—impractical.<sup>21</sup>

The CNAC-SNCC group decided that their best path would be to negotiate a settlement before those in the Cambridge movement who were less committed to nonviolence reacted to the National Guard in untimely and self-destructive ways. Rather than securing concessions from city officials, any violence against the Guard or the white mobs, CNAC leaders knew, would only justify a crackdown on the black community. As Richardson said at the time, "unless something is achieved soon in Cambridge, then no one is going to be able to control these people who have been provoked by generations of segregation, by countless indignities—and now by uncontrollable white mobs in the streets."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the Nashville workshops, see David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York, 1998). Carl Wittman to Feingold, July 13, 1963; Mark Suckle to Feingold, "Dear M. I'm sure you've seen about the situation in Cambridge," n.d. [summer 1963]; Vernon Grizzard to Feingold, June 22, 1963; all Feingold Papers.

<sup>22</sup> These negotiations were extremely tense, reflective of the situation within Cambridge itself. The sessions, which were held in Washington under the aegis of the U.S. attorney general, included Robert Kennedy, Gloria Richardson, SNCC chairman John Lewis, Reginald Robinson, local NAACP leader Stanley Branche, Kennedy's assistant for civil rights Burke Marshall, Maryland state attorney general Thomas B. Finon and his deputy Robert C. Murphy, Brig. Gen. George M. Gelston, Governor Tawes's top aide Edmund C. Mester, and Robert Weaver, the head of the federal Housing and Home Finance Agency. Marshall declined to invite city officials in order to prevent a collapse of the talks, which lasted from 3 P.M. to midnight on July 22, 1963. Richardson later claimed that she agreed to the resulting

To end the immediate threat to the movement, Richardson and others signed the “Cambridge Accord,” which called off the demonstrations in exchange for a promise by local white leaders to further desegregate the public schools, build low-income public housing for blacks, and appoint a biracial commission. In such an environment, Wittman and Grizzard, having risked their lives to participate in the Cambridge demonstrations, began to generalize mistakenly—and perhaps even unfairly—about the country as a whole. The civil rights movement, “with its stated means and ends, is incapable of effecting any meaningful solution of the Negro’s problems,” they felt. As they saw it, oppression was rooted in economic inequalities that the Cambridge Accord had not addressed. The South, they wrote, was “on its way to becoming a tokenly desegregated society with poor housing, poor schools, and unemployment as the model, as the North now is.” Thus focused on economic inequality, they planned to devote their energies in the future to the urban North. Without an accumulated body of experience of the variety, intensity, and intractability of white terrorism, Grizzard speculated that “one problem with the South is that they can be satisfied so easily. Even militant CNAC is now demanding public accommodations and similar things which can be met without the whites having to give much at all.” In a few years, the South might be completely desegregated, Grizzard felt, “enough to satisfy civil rights organizations, but not enough to solve the problems of poor schools and unemployment.”<sup>23</sup>

Not having worked in direct action projects for an extended period of time, Grizzard and Wittman simply had not yet had the experiences which would have allowed them to understand the racial terror SNCC and other

---

Cambridge Accord because she “wanted to prove that the moral suasion of the federal government would not make local [white] leaders keep the promises they made”; Brock, “Gloria Richardson,” 130–36. Vernon Grizzard to Feingold, June 22, 1963, Feingold Papers. On the way the Cambridge situation intersected with national politics, propelling George Wallace’s presidential candidacy, see Stephan Leshner, *George Wallace: American Populist* (Reading, Mass., 1994), 298–301, and Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Kirkpatrick Sale notes that the Cambridge SNCC project had a considerable impact on Swarthmore SPAC students. He also points out that Cambridge and Chester generated much of the evidence that was fundamental to Wittman’s production of “An Interracial Movement of the Poor?” However, it was not just Wittman’s life trajectory that was crucially altered as a result. It was the *network* of activists that emerged as a result of this set of similar experiences which proved so influential on the directions subsequently taken by ERAP, and, as a result, SDS as a whole. Sale, *SDS*, 104. Vernon Grizzard to Charlotte Phillips and Oli Fein, July 30, 1963, box 24, SDS Papers; Vernon Grizzard to Feingold, April 4, 1963, Feingold Papers.

civil rights organizations faced. They did not yet know enough to understand what was occurring within SNCC projects, particularly in the context of the National Guard's arrival in Cambridge. While they had worked within the Cambridge movement, they were not privy to most of the direct discussions of strategy involving Richardson and other SNCC leaders. Nonetheless, they fashioned future plans for activism out of their summer experiences in Cambridge, producing ideas instrumental in the formation of ERAP in late 1963.

Despite their flawed conclusions, the accumulated experiences of this group of Swarthmore students gave them a sense of urgency and a workable model that other northern white campus groups lacked during 1962 and 1963. After the intense spring and summer of 1963, the first Swarthmore contingent of activists began to disperse throughout the country. By so doing, they formed some of the most important and solid building blocks of the South-to-North activist network. Judy Richardson, Penny Patch, and Mark Suckle joined SNCC; Charlotte Philips and Oli Fein moved to Cleveland, Ohio, to attend medical school at Case Western Reserve, later inviting an ERAP project to start in Cleveland. Mimi Feingold went to rural Clinton, Louisiana, where she and a group of seven other Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) members—six blacks and two whites—found that the list of registered voters had been purged, “reducing the number of [black] voters from 1500 to 82 in the whole parish.”<sup>24</sup>

Carl Wittman, now a senior, and returning to school dispirited over the course of the summer's events in Cambridge, looked for another place to get involved. Two miles away from campus, he carefully examined the depressed industrial city of Chester. Only two miles from campus, the Chester movement had begun in earnest after the arrest of Muhammed Kenyatta, a local black resident who had manned a lonely picket outside of Chester's downtown stores with a sign that read, “Don't buy where you can't work.” Despite having been beaten, Kenyatta resumed picketing once out of jail. Swarthmore students, led by Feingold, Phillips, and Fein, had joined sympathy pickets in 1960–61 at the Chester Woolworth's. As a result of these contacts and SPAC's earlier connection with Richard James from the Chester NAACP youth group, Swarthmore students began to work more closely at this point with Stanley Branche, the executive secretary of the

<sup>24</sup> Feingold to “Family,” July 31, 1863 [sic], Feingold Papers.

Chester NAACP. At a meeting Wittman facilitated between Branche and the rest of the Swarthmore activists, Branche outlined the history of civil rights activity in the city as he understood it. Then together they discussed what steps the Swarthmore students might take to participate in the Chester civil rights movement. A "Committee for Freedom Now" (CFFN) had existed in skeleton form. Branche and the students decided to mobilize people through this group, choosing as their first target the Franklin School, a local elementary school that local residents believed to be unsanitary and dangerous. CFFN wrote a letter to the Board of Education demanding a new facility, and started a picket and boycott of the school.<sup>25</sup>

The following week a group of about one hundred people, including many from Swarthmore, blocked the doors to the school, which closed for the day. The demonstrators moved on, marching downtown. The boycott itself was about 60 percent effective. Two hundred and fifty demonstrators were arrested for sitting in at City Hall, and the School Board agreed to all of CFFN's demands. Fatefully, the group failed to secure this pledge in writing.

The School Board later reneged on most of its promises. In analyzing the action a year later, SPAC students felt five factors had contributed to the measured success of their first activity in Chester. First, the Franklin School was the worst school in Chester, making it a good, clear initial target. Second, the surrounding neighborhood included a housing project, which formed "a fairly tight knit community." Third, the proximity of the protestors' housing to the school facilitated high attendance at demonstrations. Fourth, the militance of the demonstrations, their "very specific demands," and confident attitude "apparently convinced people that things were finally going to change." Fifth, SPAC felt that the initial success was due to catching the School Board and the city off guard. If the police had arrived early on the first day of protests at the school and arrested people, they surmised, fewer residents would have joined the demonstrations.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Lauter later commented that "One of the lessons, I think, for people who were involved in that group was the possibility of taking that individual action that really moved people and that gave people the freedom and the sense of possibility to break out of what people call apathy." Quoted in Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick, 1998), 30. Oli Fein interview; Larry Gordon and Vernon Grizzard, "Notes on Developing Organization in the Ghetto: Chester, PA.," [summer 1964], box 44, SDS Papers; Danny Pope, Alain Jehlen, Evan Metcalf with Cathy Wilkerson, "Chester, PA: A Case Study in Community Organization," n.d., box 1, SDS Papers (coll. M96-081, unprocessed), SHSW; Wittman to Feingold, Oct. 31, 1963, Feingold Papers.

Momentum, and the subsequent building up of mass meetings each night, would have been impossible. But the central question the group did not answer was why, initially, so many Swarthmore students got involved in Chester.<sup>26</sup>

The answer was fairly simple: the movement in the South, and Cambridge in particular, had primed Swarthmore students for greater involvement. Miriam Feingold's letters from rural Louisiana may well have played an important role in galvanizing Wittman and others at Swarthmore. In Louisiana, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) project had been enjoined that fall from engaging in direct action protests against segregated facilities. But local high school students had not been so restricted, and Feingold reported that they were "raising hell," demanding total integration of all schools, the rehiring of staff fired for demonstrating, and the firing of a superintendent who had slapped a black girl during a demonstration. "For four days straight, demonstrations were broken up with tear gas and billy clubs, and the church that was mutilated before was broken into again with the gas." The account of the tenacity and courage of these high school students in Feingold's letters generated great excitement at Swarthmore during the winter of 1963–64, where SPAC students had an intense sense that they were "not in the real world" and were eager to get involved with the burgeoning developments in the nearby black area of Chester as a result.<sup>27</sup>

Second, Swarthmore students' exposure to the Cambridge project—and their clear understanding that it was not a place where all of their efforts and energies would be appreciated—gave them additional incentive to get involved in their own projects locally. Once engaged in Chester, many went to jail. The jail experience itself was important, the Swarthmore students later found, because the intensity of the experience brought forward local leaders.

Moreover, many contacts were made in jail between students and residents which were later very valuable when the group took on its second issue: poor housing conditions. Wittman would take the lead in the housing fight, helping to organize three Chester neighborhoods that surrounded the Franklin School. In other words, the jail experience gave people time to build stronger relationships. When they were released from jail, these

<sup>26</sup> Pope et al., "Chester, PA."

<sup>27</sup> Feingold to Parents, Oct. 15, 1963, Feingold Papers.

relationships became the key factor in the Swarthmore students' ability to build what they began to call "block organizations."<sup>28</sup>

Why did the group decide on block organizing? The Swarthmore students would be doing work that had few precedents. Civil rights activity could be organized largely on the basis of racial identity. Union organizing had a clear constituency in those who worked in the same factory or held the same kind of job. Block organizing emerged as a way to build collective identity in geographic communities of people, all of whom might have multiple interests. It was only a temporary solution; the question of how to find and bring together a geographic constituency would remain a problem in urban organizing for the next four decades.<sup>29</sup>

Wittman and other SPAC members assigned specific streets to each organizer. To organize blocks, the students went house-to-house. They followed up previous contacts from the Franklin School boycott to find community people who might be interested and to find places where they could meet. They printed leaflets to remind people of the time and place of each meeting, but found that "the crucial thing is to spend as much time talking, and listening, to each person as possible." They talked to residents about problems they thought the residents might face, trying to create interest and commitment rather than just making an announcement for a meeting. Each resident, they noted, should be reminded the afternoon before the meeting, "so there is little time to forget."<sup>30</sup> It is clear that the Swarthmore students, in little more than a year, had learned some important fundamentals of popular politics.

On the one hand, the students recognized the vital importance of building relationships through one-on-one conversations. While they did not know how to develop this skill into a technique or institutionalize it as a cornerstone of democratic politics, they knew that this kind of personal engagement brought people out to meetings. On the other hand, they did not let issues emerge from the residents themselves, nor did they know how

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.; Wittman to Feingold, Oct. 31, 1963, Feingold Papers.

<sup>29</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s, a new group of studies of community organizing emerged, helping to create a new vocabulary for civic participation movements. For some examples, see Mary Beth Rogers, *Cold Anger: A Story of Faith and Power Politics* (Denton, Texas, 1990); Gary Delgado, *Beyond the Politics of Place: New Directions in Community Organizing* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997); J. Ross Gittel and Avis Vidal, *Community Organizing: Building Social Capital As a Development Strategy* (Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Pope et al., "Chester, PA."

to help activate the leadership that was already present in the neighborhood. This prevented them from stimulating indigenous leaders to bring in their friends, and therefore getting a wider group of people to meetings. In contrast to the SNCC workers, the Swarthmore students lacked mentors of the caliber of James Lawson or Ella Baker. Baker, besides providing a steadying, long-range viewpoint, had also introduced SNCC organizer Bob Moses to Amzie Moore, his most important initial contact in the Mississippi voter registration project. With no one to provide the same entree for Wittman in Chester, it would prove extremely difficult for the Swarthmore students to hook into older networks of Chester activists.<sup>31</sup>

But the students' focus on geographic area did take advantage of people's own neighborhood networks. They debated whether to organize "ten square blocks" or do "intensive" organizing in a smaller area, allowing organizers to "spend more time with each family" and foster "a sense of being a unit" that might then expand to include others. Early meetings were led by a Swarthmore student until there had been "a chance for leadership to emerge" from the group. Though this might "not [have been] the most efficient short-term structure," the students tried initially to stay true to the SNCC understanding that the way to build organizations was to support leaders already engaged in the community. They hoped that block leaders would bring popular issues to the executive committee of the CFFN, creating a structure of block organizations large enough to mobilize the entire community.<sup>32</sup>

Soon, however, a series of small incidents revealed to the students that the executive committee of CFFN did not function "with complete regularity." The students came to see CFFN as a top-down organization led by Stanley Branche rather than as a body that practiced democratic dialogue.<sup>33</sup> Despite Branche's tight grip on the CFFN, the Swarthmore students kept working with the block organizations. These groups became much more than just a means to keep the movement going. Students recognized block organizations as "the basis of any continuing organization in the city, for it became apparent that there was a tremendous difference between mobilizing people for a mass demonstration, and deeply involving them in an organization in

<sup>31</sup> On Ella Baker and Amzie Moore, see Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, Calif., 1995), chaps. 3, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Pope et al., "Chester, PA."

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

which they are drawn into decision-making and strategic planning.”<sup>34</sup>

The student organizers wanted to work in ways that would undermine a social structure they saw as corrupt by picketing landlords and boycotting bad schools, but they recognized that sometimes the issues that did not fundamentally challenge the social structure—such as setting up a playground or establishing a baby-sitting pool—were “more easily accomplished initially and allowed people to have the experience of working together.” These small successes also encouraged people to feel they could be successful. It was not only Branche who struggled, then, to allow leadership to emerge from the grassroots. The Swarthmore organizers felt a constant tension between trying to organize Chester residents to fight battles Swarthmore students felt should be waged and organizing residents to take on issues that were most important to the residents themselves.<sup>35</sup>

Through their work with the Cambridge project and later the Chester block organizations, Swarthmore students internalized a considerable amount of knowledge about community organizing between 1962 and the spring of 1964. However, while they tried to reflect on what was working and what had failed, they had no ongoing or institutionalized format for reflection. Thus much of the inner knowledge they had gained through experience was retained in their own persons. They were not able to self-consciously and methodically spread the model to other organizers, nor did they adapt or fine-tune this model for use in Chester or in other projects. Two remarkable facets of their work stand out, however. First, is the degree to which they were able to sustain a commitment to reflect on their experiences, despite heavy demands on their time both from their activism and their schoolwork. Second, their significant commitment to the civil rights activities in the eastern Pennsylvania-Delaware-Maryland corridor surpassed any other efforts emerging from majority-white campuses also located on the cusp of the Mason-Dixon line, such as the University of Pennsylvania, Bryn Mawr, Haverford, or Johns Hopkins.

The Chester-Swarthmore example proved powerful for those further north as well, especially to people in SDS who still had little familiarity with community organizing. The national SDS organization, which by decade’s end would become the largest student organization of the 1960s, was still

<sup>34</sup> Larry Gordon and Vernon Grizzard, “Notes on Developing Organization in the Ghetto: Chester, PA,” [summer 1964], box 44, SDS Papers; Pope et al., “Chester, PA.”

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

struggling in the spring of 1963 without a plan of action. The group had produced a voluminous literature and was known throughout the Left for its high-caliber young intellectuals, but, as SDS president Todd Gitlin later noted, it “was not known for *doing* anything on its own, either as a national group or (with few exceptions) in its chapters.” Many of the central figures of the group were in graduate school at Michigan and Harvard. However, the degrees they sought increasingly seemed unrelated to the work they wanted to be doing. They struggled to find “some way to live that would not violate the way they believed.” The university, Gitlin said, “begins to feel like a cage.” Michigan student and SNCC-supporter Tom Hayden had co-authored the “Port Huron Statement,” SDS’s earnest, landmark manifesto that called for a revolution in values toward a more humane society. Hayden was a northerner, but after graduating from the University of Michigan he had married one of the few white southerners in SNCC, Sandra “Casey” Cason, and spent a year in the South. His southern experiences led him to the conclusion that SDS could not advocate grass-roots organizing and participatory democracy—as they had in the Port Huron Statement—unless they could point to specific examples of how this would work in action. “Otherwise,” he noted, “our criticisms of the labor unions and other groups for not organizing the poor were merely academic.”<sup>36</sup>

SNCC staff member and Howard University student Stokely Carmichael approached SDS members at the Bloomington, Indiana, National Student Association meeting in the summer of 1963. Carmichael had been a Freedom Rider and active in the Cambridge and Mississippi SNCC projects. He had also grown up in New York and knew many of the northern students from the National Student Association as well as from civil rights activities in New York. Having organized blacks in Mississippi that summer, he suggested that SDS needed to go out and organize poor whites. SDS president Todd Gitlin had gone to high school with Carmichael. Gitlin felt that Carmichael’s comment was the “direct impetus” to setting up a pilot project for organizing whites in Chicago. The United

<sup>36</sup> Those in graduate school were Robb Burlage, Rennie Davis, Richard Flacks, Todd Gitlin, Tom Hayden, Al Haber, Ken McEldowney, Paul Potter, Bob Ross, and Richard Rothstein. Al Haber to Mike Miller, n.d. [Sept. 1963], box 16, SDS Papers; Sale, *SDS*, 102; Tom Hayden, *Reunion: A Memoir* (New York, 1988), 126; Carl Wittman, *SDS Bulletin* (March 1964), quoted in Sale, *SDS*, 104; Steven V. Roberts, “Will Tom Hayden Overcome?” *Esquire*, Dec. 1968; Todd Gitlin, interview by Bret Eynon, Sept. 16, 1978, Berkeley, Calif., transcript, Bentley Library, University of Michigan, courtesy of Bret Eynon.

Automobile Workers' union donated \$5,000 to SDS for "an education and action program around economic issues," in August 1963, and SDS used those funds to start. But now that they had set up a structure, they would need to find people to organize.<sup>37</sup>

Swarthmore students' activity in Chester in the fall of 1963 attracted the attention of newly elected SDS National Secretary Lee Webb, who spent many weekends with the Swarthmore students in Chester's low-income neighborhoods. He worked with them, was arrested and jailed with them, witnessed "firsthand what a community-organizing project might look like," and fed his insights back to others in SDS. Webb took Wittman to Ann Arbor, where they enlisted the support of Tom Hayden to expand the Chester project under SDS leadership. Hayden was persuaded by the stories Wittman related from Chester and by the prospect of finally bringing the work of SNCC to the North. The three men emerged from their intense discussions determined to promote expansion of SDS's nascent Economic and Research Action Project (ERAP), based on the Chester model, to the rest of SDS at the next national council meeting in December 1963.<sup>38</sup>

Al Haber, a University of Michigan graduate student and the driving visionary behind the early formation of SDS, felt that the Cambridge model would also be useful. It might help students design an action plan that could lead to, in his words, "a recognition of the kind of labor-liberal-Negro coalition that is needed in the area as the vehicle of a comprehensive civil rights program." Rather than focus on specific, small projects like a food and clothing drive for the South, or a tutorial program, which "other people can and will do," Haber felt SDS students should work to direct their energies toward developing "a specific program of economic, political and social demands to meet fully the problems/needs of the particular Negro com-

<sup>37</sup> At their fall 1963 national council meeting, SDS used the \$5,000 donated by the UAW to support a University of Michigan dropout, Joe Chabot, as their first organizer. He asked how he would find people to recruit in Chicago. No one in the national SDS leadership had community organizing experience—with the exception of Sharon Jeffrey, who was now working with Northern Student Movement in Philadelphia. The grant also paid Al Haber to support Chabot from a central office at Ann Arbor. Haber would turn Chabot's reports into a newsletter and circulate these to a "small group of people for comment and advice." Haber, in other words, would provide some intellectual scaffolding and entice liberal allies to the project. The Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP) officially began that September, but Chabot had little success and soon disappeared. Sale, *SDS*, 97, 98, 102; Gitlin, interview by Bret Eynon.

<sup>38</sup> Sale, *SDS*, 105. Gitlin, interview by Bret Eynon.

munity in the vicinity of the school” they attended.<sup>39</sup>

At the December 1963 meeting, however, it became clear how far Haber’s vision was from the ideas of Wittman and Hayden. The SDS national council “met in New York with a sense that big things were going to happen,” sympathetic New York-based journalist Kirkpatrick Sale reported. The leadership felt, in SDSer Paul Booth’s words, that they “were it. We were the wave of the future.” Webb had “staged” the meeting, bringing in many people from Swarthmore whom he had met that fall—people involved in the Cambridge and Chester movements. The Swarthmore students’ commitment to organizing in Chester while still attending school amazed and impressed many of those present. “We had been involved in a little bit of community [organizing] in Ann Arbor,” remembered New Yorker Dickie Magidoff, “but they were really immersed in it. Really energetic.” The members present then discussed to what degree SDS should organize the poor versus organize other students, a debate others remembered as the “Hayden-Haber Debate.” Haber felt the ERAP program should continue with an academic tilt: it would design programs that other people could then implement. The group’s strength as students, he believed, was research and writing; he warned them against becoming proponents of a “cult of the ghetto.” He felt that the latter direction was linked to an “anti-intellectualism, a disparagement of research and study, an urging of students to leave the university, a moral superiority for those who ‘give their bodies.’” He feared that working “‘in the world’ ha[d] come to mean ‘in the slum.’”<sup>40</sup>

But for at least two years, another vision had been slowly circulating within and around the organization—one that cohered with the ideas presented by Wittman and Hayden. At the December 1962 SDS national council meeting in Boston, Peter Countryman, head of the Northern Student Movement (NSM), had talked about his internal conflict, the feeling of being “torn constantly between infrequent exposure to SDS and consistent constant exposure to the SNCC people, to the people in Roxbury

<sup>39</sup> Al Haber to Robb Burlage, Dec. 6, 1963, box 16, SDS Papers, SHSW.

<sup>40</sup> At least one thoughtful ERAPER, Helen Garvy, felt that the anti-intellectualist label did not describe the ERAP staff. Also present were Harlem organizer Jesse Gray, and Stanley Aronowitz from the newly formed National Committee for Full Employment, both of whom would serve ERAP in an advisory capacity in the future. Paul Booth and Lee Webb, quoted in Sale, *SDS*, 106. Dickie Magidoff, telephone interview by author, Nov. 17, 1999; Sale, *SDS*, 107; Al Haber, *SDS Bulletin*, March/April 1964, quoted in Sale, *SDS*, 110; Helen Garvy, interview by author, June 14, 1998, Los Gatos, Calif.

[and] New Haven, people with immediate problems.” Countryman, a white Yale student who was part of the Student Christian Movement, set up the NSM in late 1961 to provide money and publicity for the then-tiny and vulnerable SNCC. He toured New England and the mid-Atlantic states tirelessly over 1962, explaining SNCC’s activities to campus groups and encouraging them to run fund drives. Countryman was extremely close with Tim Jenkins, a black Yale law student involved with both SNCC and the National Student Association. The two decided that NSM should not just raise money for SNCC, but should also set up tutorial programs in the North.<sup>41</sup>

By the end of 1962, however, NSM had “drawn people in,” but then people in the organization could not “see the relations of [this] technical work to [the] basic problems of alienation and economic and political institutions which reinforce this alienation.” In the NSM tutorials, Countryman felt, they had been engaged in “student social work rather than student social change.” Conversations with Jenkins from SNCC had led Countryman to envision “another answer, another technique. There is the possibility of students working in the North with technical problems and with basic democratic problems at the same time.” If Jenkins could find a group of people to work with him, Countryman said, who would “for two months live in one room apartments and eat hamburgers and develop the very necessary close personal relationships that sustain SNCC, and sustain the necessary sacrifice, and go into that community, and talk the language of the people and be sensitive to their problems, and not be compromised by outside people,” students and other young people “could produce radical change.” This is where the “Northern civil rights movement is going to have to go,” he argued. “It’s really going to be a powerful force in society.”<sup>42</sup>

An unidentified southern male participant agreed, but also noted that SDS lacked the kind of concrete basis on which to proceed. “How do we get theory without some sense of context,” some experience on which to base that theory? “It’s only through *being* with people who are experiencing

<sup>41</sup> Peter Countryman, remarks at SDS Convention, Dec. 1 and 2, 1962, side 1, tape 8, SDS Tapes, SHSW. Countryman to Jim Forman, Jan. 22, 1962, frame 570, reel 8; Countryman to Jim Forman, Feb. 6, 1962, frame 568, reel 8; Countryman to Gentlemen, Feb. 10, 1962, frames 571–72, reel 8; Countryman to [James] Forman and [James] Monsonis, Feb. 28, 1962, frame 573, reel 8; Countryman to Forman, McDew, Monsonis, March 13, 1962, frame 575, reel 8; all SNCC Papers.

<sup>42</sup> Peter Countryman, remarks at SDS Convention, Dec. 1 and 2, 1962, side 1, tape 8, SDS Tapes, SHSW.

conflict that we can develop theory," he added. Students are irrelevant, this young man claimed, "until we are the movement, not just supporting the southern movement."<sup>43</sup>

Throughout 1963, SDSers had been intensely aware of the sacrifice and hardship endured by activists in the South. This was "the time of mass arrests in a dozen southern cities, and long jail sentences," SDS president Todd Gitlin recalled. Dion Diamond, Bob Zellner, and SNCC chairman Charles McDew had been arrested in Louisiana in February 1962 for "criminal anarchy," a charge that carried a sentence of ten years of hard labor with little chance of parole. Black high school students involved in direct action continued to suffer under conditions of torture in Parchman Prison. In Greenwood, Mississippi, SNCC had been so effective in mobilizing black citizens to claim their rights that the local welfare office had cut off black recipients en masse in the winter of 1962–63, causing starvation and prompting a large-scale northern food and clothing drive. In addition to feeling they should "be out there with the real people," Gitlin noted that there was also "a very strong feeling of wanting to be active in comradeship with civil rights organizers. They wanted us to be doing stuff and they were organizing the poor, so we should." A more accurate description of what SNCC was doing at the time would be registering people to vote and getting people to claim their full citizenship. Nonetheless, the solidarity SDS people felt toward SNCC workers extended at some points to an "imitativeness which went so far as SDS people imitating the gestures and the speech patterns of SNCC people."<sup>44</sup>

Tom Hayden articulated this emergent vision in his debate with Haber in 1963. Meeting SNCC people in McComb, Mississippi, in 1961 and Albany, Georgia, in 1962, Hayden later recalled, "was a key turning point, the moment my political identity began to take shape." He found he was changed by the experience; he began to see "proof there [in the South] that ordinary people can change conditions." Hayden thus insisted that the students had to experience organizing to write about it; their action would make SDS relevant to the struggle for social justice and real in a way that the university model of education had not. Throughout the previous year, Hayden and others had been thinking about ways to transform Haber's idea

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., unknown male voice, perhaps Robb Burlage, in the "Questions" section.

<sup>44</sup> Gitlin, interview by Bret Eynon. For more on Parchman, see David M. Oshinsky, *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York, 1996).

of an organization which made plans that others, such as NSM, would carry out, into an organization which would both generate ideas *and* try them out through “our own groups, our own people.” After the debate, the national council voted 20 to 6 that the principal energies of the young organization should henceforth go into ERAP. Haber resigned and Rennie Davis took over as director of the project.<sup>45</sup>

Following the 1963 national council meeting, Carl Wittman made a six-week road trip, a style that would become increasingly common as SDSers began to adopt SNCC’s mobile, nonstop work style. Wittman spent two days in Cambridge, Massachusetts, three days in Washington, D.C., four days at historically black West Virginia State College, and ten days in Chicago. In each location he assessed what was happening and how people were organizing, trying to determine the quality of the local leadership. His presence also energized people he met. He rode with a fellow-SDSer from Radcliffe, Helen Garvy, back to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Garvy kept “poking at him. I really wanted to know more of what they were doing [in Chester], because this was *the* model, this was the only model. The kind of organizing SNCC was doing was different, so [it] had less immediate relevance to me.” Garvy wanted to know everything she could about Chester, and it reinforced her own sense that she needed to be moving out of NSM and into an organization that addressed a wider series of concerns than tutoring alone.<sup>46</sup>

As Wittman traveled, he was doing work another organizer has aptly described as “carrying ideas and contacts, connecting folks to each other, welding, one by one, those crucial linkages.” He was in intermittent contact with the twenty to thirty Swarthmore students who spent that January of

<sup>45</sup> Todd Gitlin noted five reasons for the tilt toward ERAP. First, Carmichael suggested SDS organize whites as the natural allies for the civil rights movement. Second, by organizing the poor, SDS might rejuvenate a coalition of church, labor, and liberal forces. Third, students had to connect with others beside themselves, and poor people were the most angry and deprived constituency. Fourth, nobody else would do it, and thus it was SDS’s duty. Fifth, “was a very strong feeling within SDS, and, on the part of black organizers, in both SNCC and NSM, that SDS was this bullshit talk organization that put out a lot of smart working papers and talked a lot, but didn’t do anything. SDS had to do something . . . And this was something to do: send people out. Send them out there, a hundred people, get them in community projects, and that will constitute action. We’d be taken seriously.” Sale, *SDS*, 107; Tom Hayden, interview by Bret Eynon, Sept. 29, 1978, Los Angeles, Calif., transcript, Bentley Library, University of Michigan, courtesy of Bret Eynon; Tom Hayden, Ann Arbor, to Steve Johnson, Cambridge, [Mass.], May 10, 1963, box 6, SDS Papers. Gitlin, interview by Bret Eynon.

<sup>46</sup> Helen Garvy interview.

1964—Swarthmore's intercession—working full-time in Chester to start a voter-registration campaign and increase publicity for a city-wide school boycott in February. With their experiences in mind, Wittman wrote up a prospectus for a summer ERAP project in Chester while in Ann Arbor "talking to Hayden and Co. about next year." Thus, while he planned for the following summer, he was deeply enmeshed in several communities: the Swarthmore SPAC group, the Chester community organizing effort, and the national SDS leadership in Ann Arbor.<sup>47</sup>

In the early part of 1964, Webb, Hayden, and Wittman recruited people to write proposals for each of ten proposed ERAP projects.<sup>48</sup> This first sign of a real opportunity to work in local communities in the North galvanized several key groups within SDS. In Ann Arbor that January, Hayden and Wittman's conversations had generated a great deal of energy and movement. Rennie Davis, Dickie Magidoff, and seniors Carol and Ken McEldowney, among others, began to be interested in the prospective ERAP projects. Sharon Jeffrey, a former Michigan student working on an NSM project in Philadelphia, agreed to take part. Hayden and Wittman decided that they would work together in the coming year. They considered Chicago, Detroit, and Baltimore, but settled on Newark, the only major city with a black majority. "Like Carl," Hayden later recalled, "I wanted to prove in action that an integrationist perspective stressing common economic interests could still work. So when Carl suggested that I join the budding Newark ERAP project, I was interested."<sup>49</sup>

Wittman's vision nearly matched what Hayden had been searching for since 1962, a way for northern students to be *activists* as well as theorists of social change. Both men were certainly buoyed by the response of people in Ann Arbor to the ERAP idea. Nonetheless, they felt that most people within SDS would need to be convinced before the organization institutionalized a commitment to community organizing projects like Chester. They decided to write up an intellectual justification for the change. Based on Hayden's experiences with SNCC in Georgia and Mississippi and Wittman's experiences in Cambridge and Chester, the two young men wrote

<sup>47</sup> Casey Hayden, "Fields of Blue," in Connie Curry et al., *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens, Ga., 2000), 342; Pope et al., "Chester, PA.," Wittman to Feingold, Jan. 30, 1964, Feingold Papers.

<sup>48</sup> Wittman to Feingold, Jan. 30, 1964, Feingold Papers.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*; Hayden, *Reunion*, 126.

“An Interracial Movement of the Poor?” as an exploratory, “incomplete and unpolished” set of working notes. Living in communities with local people, they stated, was a new “organizational form” for SDS which would “permit the natural beginnings of a people-centered, instead of a student-centered, movement.” The document would be the guiding rationale of the early ERAPs.<sup>50</sup>

These “working notes” oscillated between experimental open-ended questions and authoritative pronouncements, embodying within the text the tensions Hayden and Wittman experienced between notions of participatory democracy and a more authoritarian leadership style. Hayden and Wittman took for granted that the South would soon be desegregated, and argued that as this process proceeded, they wanted to organize to enlist low-income whites as the allies of low-income blacks, rather than as agents of a backlash based on a perceived loss of white status or economic opportunity. The document shows the degree to which the black freedom struggle’s tactics had fundamentally shaped both Wittman and Hayden’s own approach to democratic practice; a single-spaced, eight-page analysis of the civil rights struggle provided the base on which they built the rest of their strategy. “Any discussion of the prospects for an interracial class movement should begin with an assessment of what people in the Negro movement are doing and care to do,” they began. They listed four effects of the black movement which were important to them. First, it “provides impetus for Negroes elsewhere, and precipitates action” in other parts of the country. Second, it “awakens conscientious individuals to the possibility of doing something right and effective . . . providing a model of commitment and action which challenges those who are taking it easy.” Third, “the movement dramatically raises political and economic issues of a fundamental importance for the whole society . . . forcing Americans to return to an examination of their way of life after many Cold War years of foreign pre-occupations.” Finally, as “organizations like SNCC are already talking and programming on economic issues which are of deep concern to poor whites as well as most Southern Negroes. . . . It is certainly possible to begin experiments in organizing whites into political alliance with the Negro community today.”<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Carl Wittman and Tom Hayden, “An Interracial Movement of the Poor?,” June 1964, Feingold Papers.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Whites would have to be organized around class and economic hardships rather than around racial injustice. Industrial automation was the key, displacing hundreds of thousands of workers who could form the nucleus of a movement for fundamental societal change. Wittman and Hayden recognized that some blacks might not support an interracial populist movement, seeing it as “a direct threat to the Negro organization to the extent that the organization is a means of finding and expressing a Negro identity.” But they proceeded with their plans, only warning of the “immense difficulties” such a populist movement might encounter.<sup>52</sup>

Clearly the experiences that Hayden and Wittman had within the civil rights movement in the South, and particularly with SNCC, were central to the thinking embodied in “An Interracial Movement of the Poor?” Wittman envisioned ERAPs as joint SDS-NSM neighborhood organizations in all the major cities of the North, working in concert, when feasible, with the black freedom struggle in the South. Once the basic rights of citizenship—namely the vote and access to public accommodations—were won in the South, SDSers reasoned that organizers in both the South and the North would turn to questions of economic justice, hardships shared by poor blacks and poor whites alike. Behind ERAP lay the basic idea that “poor whites might be [the civil right’s movement’s] natural allies if a common approach could be worked out to counter the centrifugal force of racism.”<sup>53</sup>

After finishing the working notes, Wittman returned to Swarthmore. Throughout the spring of 1964, he continued to develop close personal ties with Tom Hayden and Rennie Davis, the new national director of ERAP, to prepare for the summer projects. He sent reports back to Ann Arbor on possible cities, organizations, and potential staffers. His winter analysis culminating in “An Interracial Movement of the Poor?” seemed confirmed by the events of the spring in Chester. SDSers interested in ERAP continued to visit Swarthmore throughout this period: the Chester-Swarthmore operation became the dominant model for people considering how to set up

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Harriet Stulman to Tom Levin, May 17, 1965, box 16, SDS Papers; Wittman to Feingold, Jan. 30, 1964, Feingold Papers; Todd Gitlin and Nanci Hollander, *Uptown: Poor Whites in Chicago* (New York, 1970), xxi. Jim Monsonis, a Yale seminary student involved in early SNCC and in SDS, asked as early as the fall of 1963 for SNCC to set up political projects in the North, in addition to fundraising activity that was taking place there. Jim Monsonis to SNCC Executive Committee, n.d. [fall 1963], frames 289–90, reel 3, SNCC Papers.

their own ERAP projects in communities near a university campus.<sup>54</sup>

In Chester, Wittman and other Swarthmore people brought to the movement a new capacity for engaged reflection, grounded in shared experiences. After the small victories in November 1963, Swarthmore students noted that city officials began to “harden their attitude” toward local activists in Chester, as well as toward Swarthmore students, “apparently finally convinced that it was not a one-shot affair.” Long-dormant ordinances against leafleting without a permit were enforced and the police refused to let demonstrators march in the street, herding them up on the sidewalks or arresting them. Five Swarthmore students, including Wittman, were arrested for pamphleteering in February and fined \$34 each. The Chester activists responded by holding more demonstrations in late March. When the protestors blocked intersections, police came out with riot sticks, resulting in six hospitalizations. After this, Gloria Richardson from Cambridge and Philip Savage, tri-state secretary of the NAACP, participated in another sit-in at the Chester Board of Education. In April, Wittman and 106 Swarthmore students were jailed in demonstrations demanding an end to inadequate and segregated schools, charged with affray, illegal assembly, and refusing to move on orders of an officer. The city created a barrier to making bail by refusing to accept property equity after 3:00 P.M. on Fridays.<sup>55</sup> Students found the city unresponsive, while the resulting long jailings were “financially highly burdensome and discouraging.” They looked for “a safer but equally effective tactic . . . to evolve a deeper commitment” to the struggle. Their success at raising issues but failure to bring home victories foreshadowed problems faced by all ERAP projects in later years. Yet Wittman and others within SPAC felt they had begun to develop—partly by exposure to SNCC, partly by their own instinct, and partly due to their interaction with SDS—a fairly effective model for organizing a community.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Wittman to Rennie Davis, [Feb. 1964], box 24; Johnny Bancroft to Rennie, Paul, Clark, and Roxane Neal, Aug. 4, 1964, box 15; both SDS Papers.

<sup>55</sup> Pope et al., “Chester, PA”; Carl Wittman, Broadmeadows Prison [Pa.], to Feingold, April 2, 1964, Feingold Papers.

<sup>56</sup> Grizzard explained that after a “marathon meeting” a few nights earlier, the Swarthmore group decided to go ahead with the Chester summer project. They debated four issues: would they have enough time in the fall to continue to participate in organizing a rent strike? Could they overcome their vulnerability as white students who lacked a power base in the community, without seeming to “cause trouble”? Where would they find the money to support themselves? And finally, would they be able to

Later ERAP workers found that trying to apply the SNCC model of popular politics to this urban situation “was sort of mind-breaking.” ERAP work was effective in encouraging a number of local people to develop their capacities as leaders. But as in the southern civil rights movement, those in ERAP projects never found acts people could perform at the local level that addressed in a dramatic and effective way the inequalities of the economic system. As each method failed, people tried to find new ways and could not. After much frustration, people noted simply that their individual projects had disbanded.<sup>57</sup>

When the last ERAP projects collapsed in 1968, many organizers felt it necessary to contract their hopes for a democratically functioning society. Some retreated to lesser objectives—“by and large now we can only raise questions about who decides.” In 1964, they had gone in to poor areas in anticipation of a growing unemployment crisis, which offered the possibility of making unemployed people the agents of change. The depression never came, and the activists who remained were never able to articulate why they were there. From that point forward their program tended to be to confront any institution that “controlled the lives of those who had no voice in preparing them.”<sup>58</sup>

The collapse of a national ERAP network nevertheless left in place some viable local organizations. Though now lacking an organizing plan, the original intent remained. Local groups still worked to help average citizens participate more substantively in the body politic. In short, ERAP projects were institutional sites where people who wanted a say in their local government could find support and training. While this was certainly useful, it was a far cry from the grand aspirations of 1964.<sup>59</sup>

---

have a full time person to continue organizing in the fall? After lengthy debate and discussion, the SPAC group decided they could work on getting a full time person and more money. They would accept the time commitment. They knew of no way to address the race issue. As white organizers in a predominantly black neighborhood, they noted they would simply be “praying about the vulnerability.” The last would prove to be an unpromising strategy. Vernon Grizzard, Swarthmore, Pa., to “Everybody” [SDS National Office], May 2, 1964, box 25, SDS Papers.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Potter, *A Name for Ourselves*, 150; Leni Wildflower, interview by Ron Grele, June 7, 1988, Santa Monica, Calif., transcript, Columbia Oral History Project, Columbia University.

<sup>58</sup> Casey Hayden, “Raising the Question of Who Decides,” *New Republic*, Jan. 22, 1966, 10; Richard Rothstein to Robb Burlage, March 16, 1965, box 19, SDS Papers.

<sup>59</sup> Carol Brightman, interview by Ronald Grele, Dec. 12, 1984, transcript, p. 79, Columbia Oral History Project, Columbia University; Paul Potter, *A Name for Ourselves: Feelings About Authentic Identity, Love, Intuitive Politics, Us* (Boston, 1971), 152–53.

Subsequent observers therefore have been content to view ERAP as a failure. Kirkpatrick Sale, the first to study SDS in its entirety, stated that it failed because it “was never able to escape the fact that the poor are not ‘the agents of change’ in American society, whether there be massive unemployment or not. The poor, as the ERAPers found out to their sorrow, want leaders, they do not want to lead; the poor are myth-ridden, enervated, cynical, and historically the least likely to rebel; the poor are powerless . . .”<sup>60</sup> This sentence is sweeping and ambitious in its intent, but it is simply wrong. Without question some poor people wanted leaders, just as some middle-class and rich wanted leaders. But many smart and energetic leaders came from the ranks of the poor, just as among other classes of people. Some, of course, were lazy and cynical, just as among other classes of people.

James Miller’s account echoed Sale. He observed that the projects were inconsistent, fluctuating “between alliances with liberal institutions such as the Office of Economic Opportunity and hostile attacks on them.” While their most tangible victories, Miller believed, involved winning concrete concessions from these institutions, he stated that they also tried “to build ‘counter-societies’ and ‘counter institutions.’”<sup>61</sup>

There is always a danger of distortion when viewing these movements from afar. Sale and Miller, among other commentators, set up a false dichotomy between strategic and prefigurative politics. In fact, ERAP projects were trying to live both in the world as it should be and in the world as it was.<sup>62</sup>

ERAPers ultimately failed to create a union of the black and white poor. One piece of the problem, it must be said, is that in the climate of the counterculture, patience was not a virtue. When SNCC, SDS, or ERAP encountered problems, their posture of militance and action discouraged and denied cultural sanction to cautious reflection. Furthermore, their collective commitment to carrying out participatory democracy on every level led some people within ERAP and SDS to “utilize participatory democracy inappropriately, unintentionally producing elitism and making it almost impossible to make decisions.”<sup>63</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Sale, *SDS*, 143–44.

<sup>61</sup> James Miller, ‘*Democracy Is in the Streets*,’ 212–13.

<sup>62</sup> Sale, *SDS*, 143–44; Miller, ‘*Democracy Is in the Streets*,’ 212–13.

<sup>63</sup> Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962–1968: The Great Refusal* (New York, 1982), 62.

These failures, however, enriched the nation's democratic heritage, providing a map of roads not to take for future organizers. On the one hand, ERAP people did not perfect forms for making participatory democracy a reality in a large-scale organization. But this does not seem to indicate, as James Miller concludes in a curiously resigned manner, that participatory democracy was unsuitable "even for a relatively small national group." As scholars such as Jane Mansbridge and Carmen Sirianni have shown, other movements, most notably the women's movement, would go on "to confront issues of democratic representativeness, informal tyranny, imposed sisterly virtue, distorted communication, forced consensus, democratic accountability, and strategic efficacy"—all problems which SNCC, ERAP, and SDS had faced—with significantly improved results. People within such voluntary social formations had to figure out how to hold people in their own structures accountable, so that essential democratic morale could not only be maintained but grow over time. Though its flaws were fundamental, ERAP created a space wherein people could work out such questions in real-life situations. This was its most significant legacy.<sup>64</sup>

Where does all this leave us with respect to how democracy travels? What worked down south, and what traveled north? The civil rights movement developed a series of civic actions that people could perform at the local level that had the tactical result of dramatizing the insanity of segregation. Such acts transformed the people who engaged in them—giving them a sense that they could end it. The phrase we have developed to explain this is nonviolent direct action. But this is not what traveled north. Instead, those who had been south brought back to their homes in Michigan, California, or Pennsylvania an understanding of how to have a sit-in, or how to react when hostile opposition forces opposed you. They figured out how to explain to other people who had never gone to jail that it was okay to do so. In fact, by participating, people began to understand they would become better citizens, active citizens in a way they had always wanted to be and never had been. This idea and set of actions—what we might call a democratic understanding of how to be a citizen—is what traveled north.

<sup>64</sup> Miller, *Democracy Is in the Streets*, 214; Carmen Sirianni, "Democracy and Diversity in Feminist Organizations: Learning from Three Decades of Practice," 1995, Available online: << [http://www.cpn.org/cpn/sections/topics/family-intergen/civic\\_perspectives/feminist\\_democracy1.html](http://www.cpn.org/cpn/sections/topics/family-intergen/civic_perspectives/feminist_democracy1.html) >> March 21, 2000.

The story of the Swarthmore student activists makes it possible to specify precisely when and how innovative democratic practices that developed within the SNCC affiliate in Cambridge, Maryland, were adapted by SDSers—first through the Eastern Shore sit-ins, then through the Cambridge project, and finally in Chester. Moreover, the Swarthmore story indicates how Swarthmore's tight-knit activist network attracted the attention of national SDS leaders. Carl Wittman's work in Cambridge and subsequently in Chester gave him the experiential authority to draw up a blueprint for northern urban organizing, which he then laid out with Tom Hayden, whose political vision had also been fundamentally refocused as a result of his experiences with SNCC in Georgia and Mississippi. Swarthmore students such as Nick Egleson and Connie Brown, who had been involved intensely in Chester in 1963 and 1964, had a full year of experience as community organizers prior to the launching of ERAP. They would form the backbone of several ERAP staffs in the years to come.

ERAP then was created by a combination of external pressure generated from SDS members' experiences with SNCC people, and internal pressure coming from the need to justify SDS's expanded commitment to community organizing. The first ERAP project in Chester emerged directly out of Swarthmore's exposure to SNCC in Cambridge, and the transforming experience that their own movement generated. Thus altered, they moved to export their own model to Newark, Chicago, Cleveland, and other locales. The experiences SDSers generated for themselves created a new body of knowledge that built on the lessons emerging out of the SNCC projects in the South. In this way, democratic ideas and practices that originated within SNCC traveled north, providing new blueprints of political possibility.

*Miamiville, Ohio*

WESLEY HOGAN