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Triumph of courage

It is not really a memorial, just a small plaque rising from the ground a few miles outside Philadelphia in Neshoba County, Miss. The young men it honors largely are forgotten now. But 40 years ago, their names were front-page news across the nation -- civil rights heroes who were murdered because they were helping black Americans to vote.

James Cheney, who was black, and Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, both white, were in Neshoba County during what became known as Mississippi Freedom Summer -- the summer of 1964. They were part of a large contingent of mostly student volunteers determined to break the back of segregation in the South -- in particular, intimidation of black Americans who wanted to vote. Neshoba County had the reputation of being among the most brutal in Mississippi. Black people there literally risked their lives to exercise a basic American right.

On June 17, the Mt. Zion Church not far from Philadelphia was burned to the ground -- one of 20 black churches to be firebombed across the state that summer. The FBI began a massive inquiry into the bombings, code-named MIBURN, Mississippi Burning. On June 21, Messrs. Cheney, Goodman and Schwerner drove to the site of the burned church to investigate and to express sympathy with the congregation. On the way back to Meridian, they disappeared. Their bodies were found in August buried in shallow ground. It was determined later that they were murdered as a result of a conspiracy between elements of Neshoba County law enforcement and the Ku Klux Klan.

But if segregationists had hoped to deter the civil rights movement, they were mistaken. The crime electrified efforts to register black Americans to vote all over the South, and national indignation over the murders helped then-President

Johnson pass the 1964 Civil Rights Act less than a month after the murders occurred. This legislation, together with the Voting Rights Act passed the following year, was arguably the most important of the 20th century. It ended legally mandated segregation in the South and helped transform race relations throughout the country. Seven persons were eventually convicted of federal civil rights charges relating to the murders and served prison sentences ranging from three to 10 years. There were no murder convictions in the state at the time. But Mississippi Attorney General Jim Hood recently asked the Justice Department for help -- with a view to possibly reopening the case.

On a visit to Philadelphia a few summers ago, I found no visible indications of the violent struggle that took place 40 years ago. But evidence of the change that was wrought there was everywhere. I saw black Americans in positions of authority, including on the police force -- unthinkable during segregation. At the county courthouse, black and white employees mixed easily in a way that would not have been possible in the Old Mississippi. And at the local library, black and white schoolchildren studied together beside a display showcasing black American history and role models. Both librarians on duty the day I was there were black.

Everyone asked in Philadelphia knew about the three civil rights workers and what happened in Neshoba County during Mississippi Freedom Summer, but most were reluctant to talk about it, perhaps preferring to forget the season of hate that forever marked their town. Instead, most wanted to talk -- to an outsider at least -- about Neshoba County and Mississippi today and the state's record of electing more black officials than any other in the nation.

The most frequent complaint -- made mostly by black Americans I spoke to -- was about the lack of equal economic opportunity. In this respect, the racial dynamic of this small Delta town is now little different than that of the rest of the state and the nation. The goal of achieving full racial equality is a work in progress. The civil rights revolution remains unfinished. But Philadelphia bears no resemblance to the hate-filled town of 40 years ago, thanks in no small measure to the courage of three young men who gave their lives for a cause that could not wait.

There is no memorial in Philadelphia honoring their courage during Mississippi Freedom Summer. But 10 miles out of town -- just a few yards from the Mt. Zion Church that was rebuilt in part to honor their memory -- a small, simple plaque rises from the ground. It says:

"Freedom Summer Murders: On June 21, 1964, voting rights activists James Cheney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, who had come here to investigate the burning of Mt. Zion Church, were murdered. Victims of a Klan conspiracy, their deaths provoked national outrage and led to the first successful prosecution of a civil rights case in Mississippi."

David Pitts writes about civil rights issues.