**Civil Rights and Social Movements in the Americas:**

**Civil Rights**

“Life is about the journey not the destination.” Many would say this statement can readily apply to the struggle for civil rights in the United States and that equality was not gained overnight but instead by achieving civil rights milestones over decades.

1. In reference to these milestones, begin by reading the Civil Rights article provided and while reading, identify at least four civil rights milestones in the struggle for equality in the United States.
2. You will then construct a museum that exhibits the four milestones that you identified in reference to the struggle for civil rights.
3. In your museum proposal you must include the following information in order to earn full credit:

* A visually depiction of your museum and milestone exhibits
* Identify four important milestones that will each be an exhibit
* For each milestone you must provide a written explanation of the milestone including: 1) what happened 2) what was the role of government in the milestone 3) how did this particular milestone contribute to the struggle for civil rights 4) how is this milestone applicable to today

**Article #1: Civil Rights Movement**

In the early 1960s, the fundamental prize sought by the civil rights movement was something that African Americans had never known: full legal equality. When John F. Kennedy became president in 1961, African Americans throughout much of the South were denied the right to vote, barred from public facilities, subjected to insults and violence, and could not expect justice from the courts. In the North, black Americans also faced discrimination in housing, employment, education, and many other areas. But the civil rights movement had made important progress, and change was on the way.

**Progress and Protests: 1954-1960**

In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously in *Brown v. Board of Education* that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. Many southern political leaders claimed the desegregation decision violated the rights of states to manage their systems of public education, and they responded with defiance, legal challenges, delays, or token compliance. As a result, school desegregation proceeded very slowly. By the end of the 1950s, less than 10 percent of black children in the South were attending integrated schools.

The pace of civil rights protests rose sharply in response to the Supreme Court's decision. Martin Luther King, Jr., led a boycott that ended segregated busing in Montgomery, Alabama. In 1957, National Guard troops under orders from President Dwight D. Eisenhower enforced the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas. But, even after Little Rock, school integration was painfully slow, and segregation in general remained largely untouched.

In February 1960, four black college students sat down at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, N.C., and asked to be served. They were refused service, and they refused to leave their seats. Within days, more than 50 students had volunteered to continue the sit-in, and within weeks the movement had spread to other college campuses. Sit‑ins and other protests swept across the South in early 1960, touching more than 65 cities in 12 states. Roughly 50,000 young people joined the protests that year.

**The Election of 1960**

By the 1960 presidential campaign, civil rights had emerged as a crucial issue. Just a few weeks before the election, Martin Luther King, Jr., was arrested while leading a protest in Atlanta, Georgia. John Kennedy phoned Coretta Scott King to express his concern while a call from Robert Kennedy to the judge helped secure her husband's safe release. The Kennedys' personal intervention led to a public endorsement by Martin Luther King, Sr., the influential father of the civil rights leader.

Across the nation, more than 70 percent of African Americans voted for Kennedy, and these votes provided the winning edge in several key states. When President Kennedy took office in January 1961, African Americans had high expectations for the new administration.

But Kennedy's narrow election victory and small working margin in Congress left him cautious. He was reluctant to lose southern support for legislation on many fronts by pushing too hard on civil rights legislation. Instead, he appointed unprecedented numbers of African Americans to high-level positions in the administration and strengthened the Civil Rights Commission. He spoke out in favor of school desegregation, praised a number of cities for integrating their schools, and put Vice President Lyndon Johnson in charge of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. Attorney General Robert Kennedy turned his attention to voting rights, initiating five times the number of suits brought during the previous administration.

**The Freedom Rides**

President Kennedy may have been reluctant to push ahead with civil rights legislation, but millions of African Americans would not wait. Eventually, the administration was compelled to act.

For decades, seating on buses in the South had been segregated, along with bus station waiting rooms, rest rooms, and restaurants. In May 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), led by James Farmer, organized integrated Freedom Rides to defy segregation in interstate transportation. Freedom riders were arrested in North Carolina and beaten in South Carolina. In Alabama, a bus was burned and the riders attacked with baseball bats and tire irons. Attorney General Robert Kennedy sent 400 federal marshals to protect the freedom riders and urged the Interstate Commerce Commission to order the desegregation of interstate travel.

**James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss**

In 1962, James H. Meredith, Jr., an African American Air Force veteran, was denied admission to the University of Mississippi, known as "Ole Miss." Meredith attempted to register four times without success.

Long telephone conversations between the president, the attorney general, and Governor Ross Barnett failed to produce a solution. When federal marshals accompanied Meredith to campus in another attempt to register for classes, rioting erupted. Two people died and dozens were injured. President Kennedy mobilized the National Guard and sent federal troops to the campus. Meredith registered the next day and attended his first class, and segregation ended at the University of Mississippi.

See [Integrating Old Miss](http://microsites.jfklibrary.org/olemiss/), an interactive website that tells the story of James Meredith and the tumultuous events surrounding his historic admission to the University of Mississippi.

**Martin Luther King, Jr., Bull Connor, and the Demonstrations in Birmingham**

In the spring of 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth launched a campaign of mass protests in Birmingham, Alabama, which King called the most segregated city in America. Initially, the demonstrations had little impact. Then, on Good Friday, King was arrested and spent a week behind bars, where he wrote one of his most famous meditations on racial injustice and civil disobedience, "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Meanwhile, James Bevel, one of King's young lieutenants, summoned black youths to march in the streets at the beginning of May. Birmingham City Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor used police dogs and high-pressure fire hoses to put down the demonstrations. Nearly a thousand young people were arrested. The violence was broadcast on television to the nation and the world.

Invoking federal authority, President Kennedy sent several thousand troops to an Alabama air base, and his administration responded by speeding up the drafting of a comprehensive civil rights bill.

**Integrating the University of Alabama**

Governor George Wallace had vowed at his inauguration to defend "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever." In June 1963, he upheld his promise to "stand in the schoolhouse door" to prevent two black students from enrolling at the University of Alabama. To protect the students and secure their admission, President Kennedy federalized the Alabama National Guard. And on June 11, the president addressed the nation.

Kennedy defined the civil rights crisis as moral, as well as constitutional and legal. He announced that major civil rights legislation would be submitted to the Congress to guarantee equal access to public facilities, to end segregation in education, and to provide federal protection of the right to vote.