African American Settlement

The first African Americans came to Wisconsin in the fur-trade era. Later, during the 1820s lead rush, southern U.S. Army officers and lead miners brought in enslaved African Americans. After Wisconsin became a territory in 1836, Governor Henry Dodge freed his slaves and gave them each a piece of land.

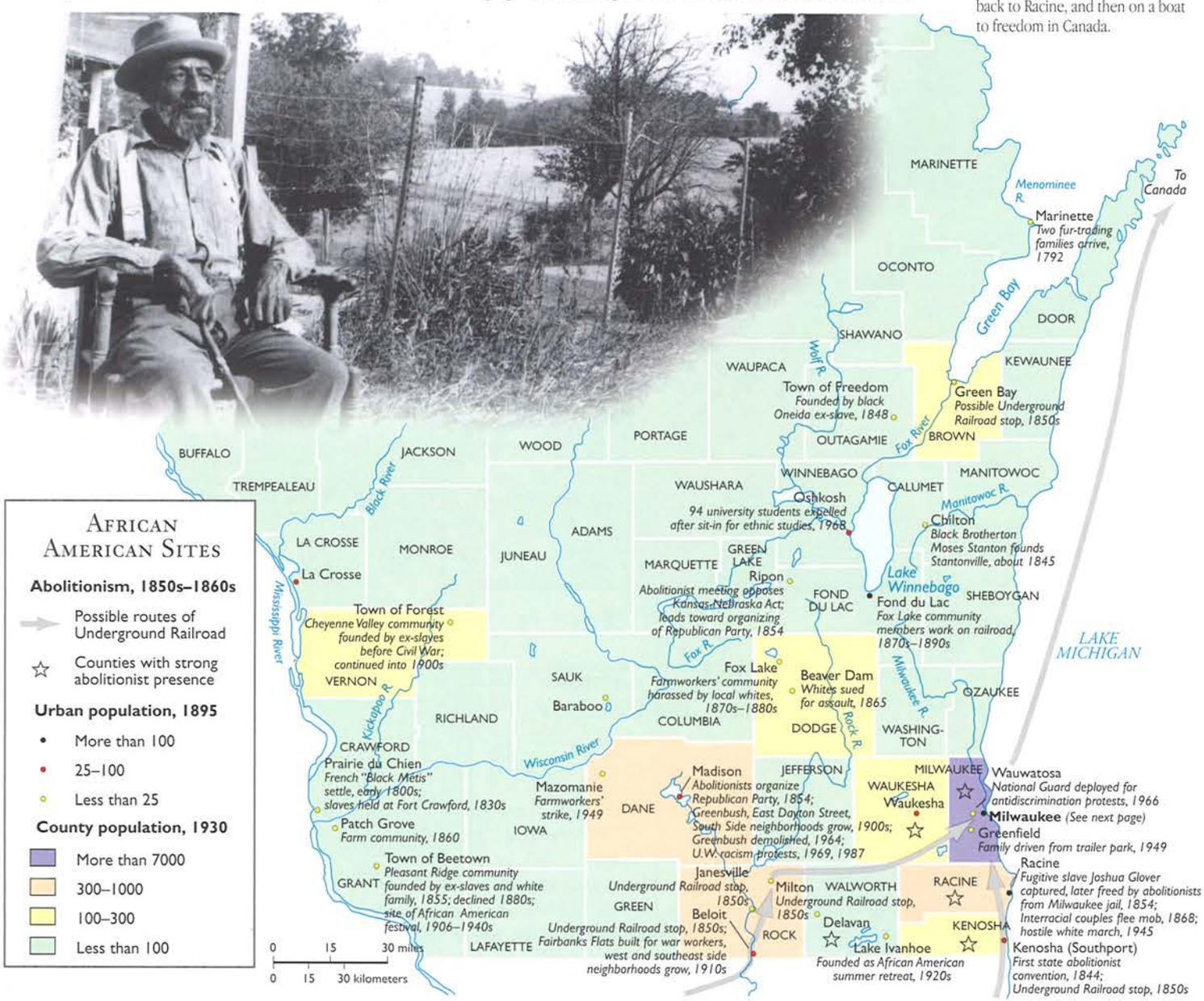
By the 1850s, Wisconsin had become known for its support for the abolition of slavery and its opposition to the 1850 federal Fugitive Slave Law (see column at right). Some fugitives from the slave states passed through Wisconsin on the "Underground Railroad" to freedom in Canada or took refuge in the state. A network of sympathetic whites supported them. Wisconsin abolitionists helped found the Republican Party in 1854 to bring their fight into the political arena. An 1857 state Supreme Court ruling made Wisconsin the first state to defy the fugitive law.

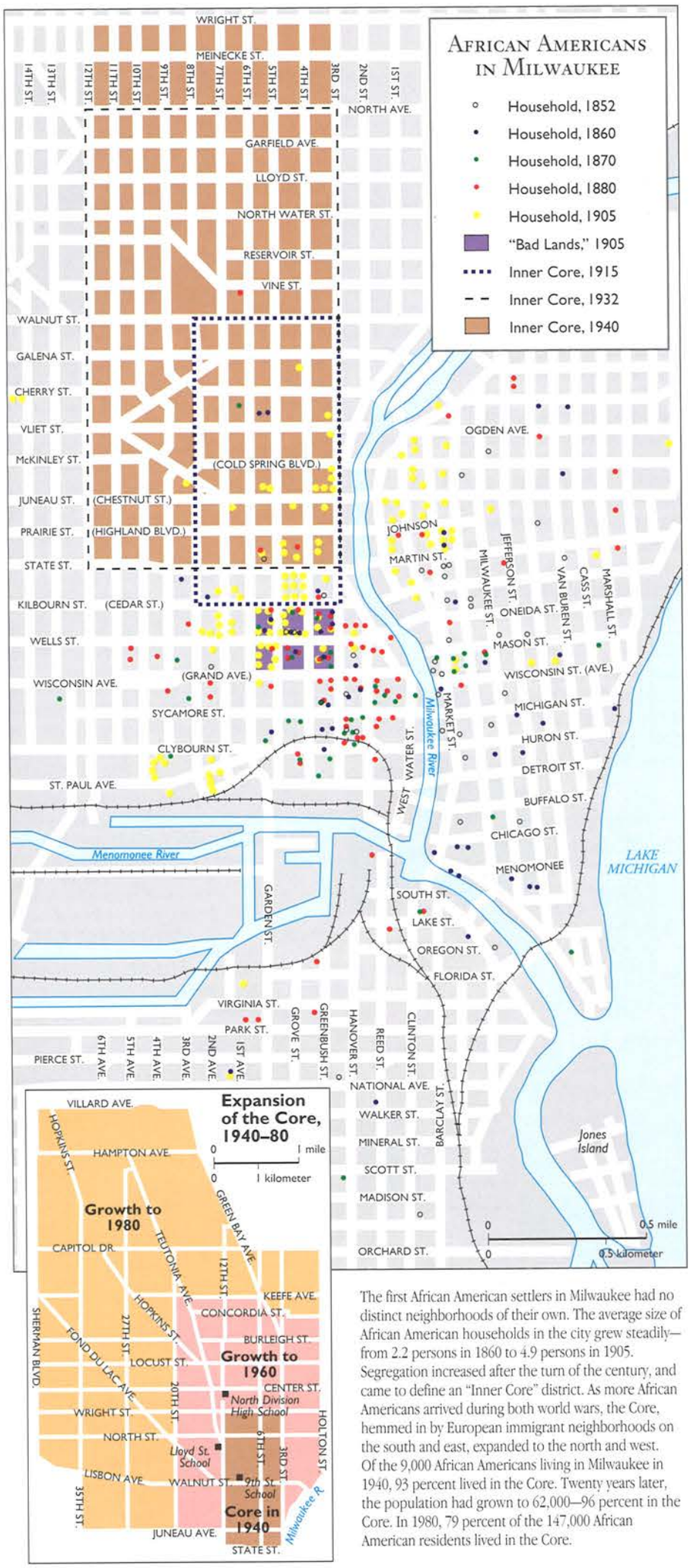
The question of black *suffrage* (voting rights) was not easily settled in Wisconsin (see *Statehood*). Referenda in 1849, 1857, and 1865 failed to enact suffrage. In 1866, however, the state Supreme Court enacted suffrage by reinterpreting the 1849 vote.

Although most African Americans settled in cities, some had established rural communities before the Civil War (1861–65). The best known were Pleasant Ridge in Grant County—home to the prosperous farmer Thomas Greene (below)—and Cheyenne Valley in Vernon County. Education was a priority for many of the settlers. Although youths began to look for jobs elsewhere in the 1880s, the communities lasted until after World War II. Other Wisconsin African Americans worked as farm laborers.

Despite the state's 1895 Civil Rights Act and the 1906 election of the first black assemblyman, economic conditions worsened in black communities throughout much of the 20th century. In 2000, African Americans made up 6 percent of the state's population; 80 percent of them lived in Milwaukee.

Joshua Glover escaped from slavery in Missouri and fled to Wisconsin. In March 1854, a deputy federal marshal in Racine bludgeoned Glover, arrested him under the U.S. Fugitive Slave Law, and transported him to a Milwaukee jail. Alerted to the arrest, abolitionist leader Sherman Booth and the Racine County sheriff led a crowd that demanded his release on a writ of habeas corpus. The crowd stormed the jail and freed Glover, spiriting him away to Waukesha, back to Racine, and then on a boat to freedom in Canada.





The first African American settlers in Milwaukee had no distinct neighborhoods of their own. The average size of African American households in the city grew steadily—from 2.2 persons in 1860 to 4.9 persons in 1905. Segregation increased after the turn of the century, and came to define an "Inner Core" district. As more African Americans arrived during both world wars, the Core, hemmed in by European immigrant neighborhoods on the south and east, expanded to the north and west. Of the 9,000 African Americans living in Milwaukee in 1940, 93 percent lived in the Core. Twenty years later, the population had grown to 62,000—96 percent in the Core. In 1980, 79 percent of the 147,000 African American residents lived in the Core.

AFRICAN AMERICANS IN MILWAUKEE

Milwaukee's first recorded African American citizens arrived in 1835. Before the Civil War, the city was a stop on the Underground Railroad, and newcomers could live wherever their circumstances allowed. The 1840s influx of European immigrants, however, turned the tide against African Americans (see *Ethnic Milwaukee*). Some immigrants saw freed slaves as a threat to their livelihood and feared they would take away jobs. Tensions boiled over during the Civil War when an Irish mob lynched an African American man.

Milwaukee began its long road to segregation after the Civil War. African Americans grouped together for security and formed their own churches and social institutions. As industrialization attracted more immigrants in the 1880s, black residency was restricted to a few neighborhoods, and black employment opportunities became limited to mostly service jobs. The resulting unemployment fed the growth of the "Bad Lands"—a downtown district known for its dens of vice, but also for its thriving, black-owned businesses. African Americans opposed discrimination by boycotting segregated theaters and establishing self-improvement groups.

Between 1890 and 1915 the African American population tripled to 1,500 as new industries attracted unskilled black laborers. Many were laid off in a 1908 recession, however, and replaced with machinery or immigrant labor. The city razed the "Bad Lands," eliminating many African American businesses and driving most African Americans into a new "Inner Core." The Core became notorious for its old, unsafe housing and high infant mortality rates.

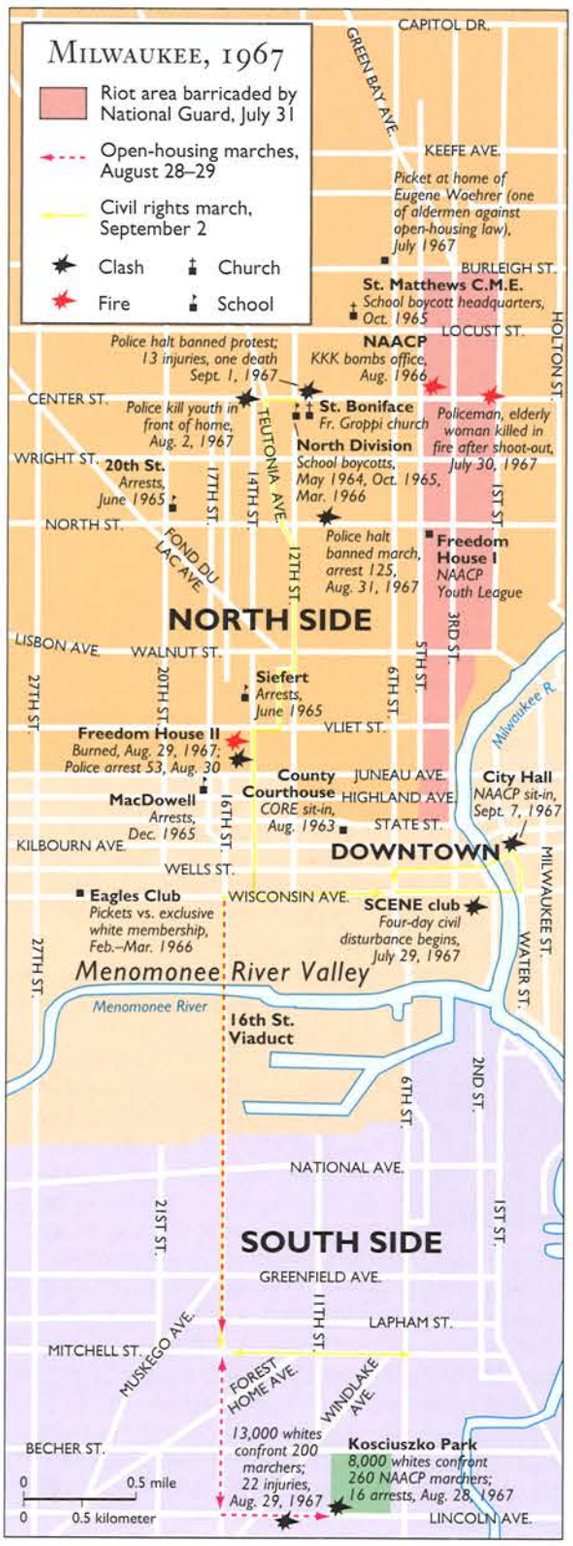
The growth of Milwaukee industries in World War I drew many African American men from the South, including skilled and unskilled workers, educators, and church leaders. Their families joined them after the war, and the Inner Core expanded. The 1920s were also marked by Ku Klux Klan rallies, and the growth of African American rights groups. The Great Depression of the 1930s ravaged the community economically; it did not recover until new hiring laws affected war industries in World War II.

Postwar lawsuits forced open some white-collar jobs, which helped the growth of a black middle class. A large new influx of southern African Americans, however, was again met with discrimination in the skilled trades, housing discrimination turned much of the Core into exclusively black areas, and nearly all the whites transferred out of Core schools. In 1960, two-thirds of Milwaukee's African Americans had been born elsewhere, and three-fourths were blue-collar workers or unemployed.

Sit-ins and boycotts in the mid-1960s focused public attention on segregated schools. Marches for open housing in 1967 were confronted by angry white crowds and police (see *1960s*). The fight for school desegregation, often resulting in high school walk-outs, lasted into the early 1980s. Marches in the 1980s also opposed police brutality and substandard housing; Milwaukee's housing was the most segregated of any major U.S. city. In the 1990s African Americans worked toward "empowering" their community by establishing their own development plans, antigang programs, schools, and other institutions.

The 1960s: Time of Turmoil & Change

The movement for black equality was not born in the 1960s (see *African Americans*). The 1960s civil rights movement, however, profoundly affected U.S. society. The first Milwaukee sit-in by the Congress On Racial Equality (CORE) coincided with the 1963 "March on Washington," where the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his "I Have a Dream" speech. The local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) introduced his vision into schools, clubs, government, and neighborhoods.



Schools. In 1964–66, the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC) held a series of boycotts of segregated schools, one of which lasted 35 days. Some clergymen were arrested for symbolically blockading the schools. Clergy also set up temporary "Freedom Schools" in their churches. It was not until the 1980s that large-scale school integration took place in the Milwaukee metropolitan area.

Social discrimination. In 1966, the NAACP Youth League, joined by Father James Groppi, picketed the all-white Eagles Club and homes of public officials who were club members. The picketing of a Wauwatosa judge in August created a violent local reaction, and the National Guard was sent in for nine days. A few prominent club members resigned. The Ku Klux Klan then bombed NAACP headquarters, causing the Youth League to set up its own Freedom Houses.

Police brutality. African Americans had long objected to the unwarranted use of force by local police under the command of Chief Harold Breier. In July 1967, a few days after U.S. Army troops had quelled a large civil disturbance in Detroit, the resentment boiled over at a Milwaukee nightclub where police broke up a fight. Many youths marched north on 3rd Street, burning and looting some shops. Police used tear gas and battled snipers. Mayor Henry Maier began a 10-day curfew and called in 4,800 National Guard troops with armored vehicles. The disturbance resulted in 3 deaths, 70 injuries, nearly 200 arrests, and worsened interracial relations.

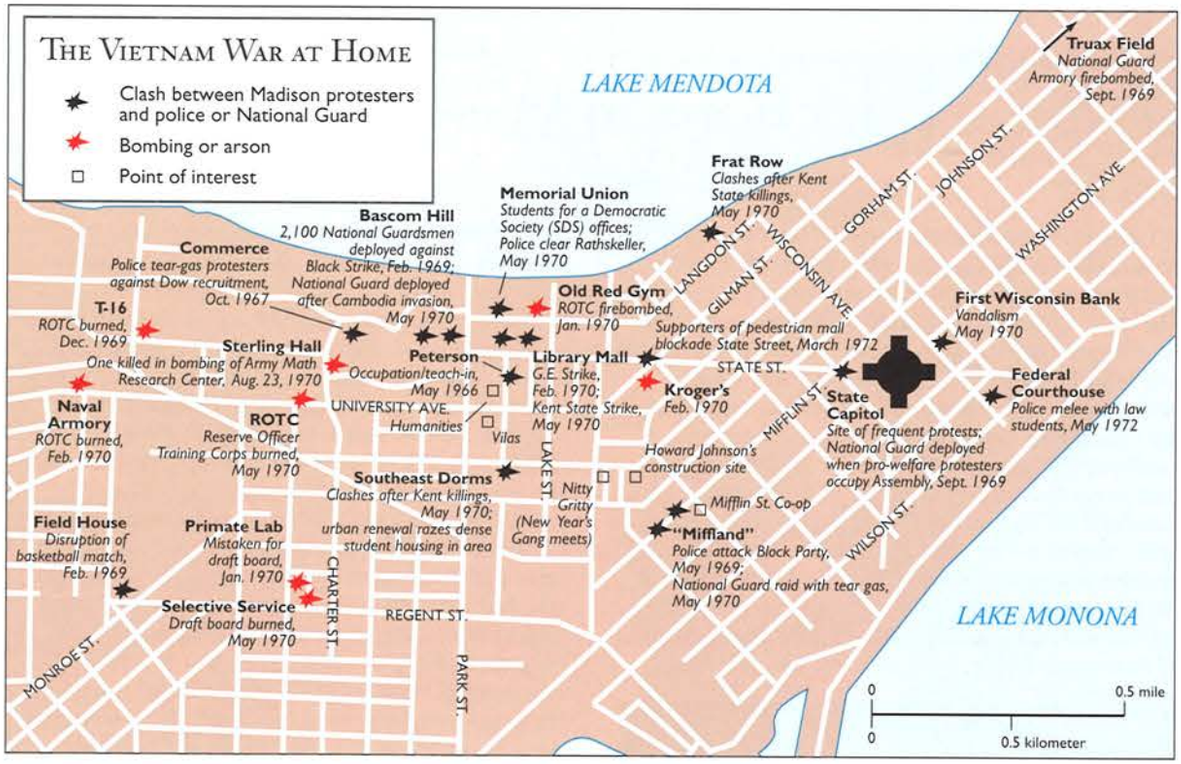
Housing. In 1967, after four attempts by Alderman Vel Phillips to pass a city open-housing law failed, the Youth League held a series of daily marches protesting housing discrimination. Many whites reacted violently to marches through the South Side (see column at right). Instead of calling in the National Guard to protect the marchers, Maier issued a three-day ban on all protests. Many of those who defied the ban were arrested or clubbed. The open-housing law passed in April 1968, only after Reverend King was killed and 15,000 Milwaukeeans marched in his honor.

Open-Housing Marches

The Milwaukee NAACP Youth League, also called the "Commandos," held a series of daily marches for open housing in 1967 (below). Their main target was what they saw as the bastion of housing discrimination—the South Side. It was populated mainly by Polish and Irish Catholics, who felt they were defending their neighborhood from unwanted change. People on both sides compared the South Side to the southern U.S. Presidential candidate George Wallace commented in 1964 that if he lived outside of Alabama, he would choose the South Side. African Americans referred to an Alabama civil rights struggle when they called Milwaukee "the Selma of the North." Father James Groppi (center) compared the Menomonee River Valley that divided the North and South sides to the "Mason-Dixon Line" that divided the North and South before the Civil War. On August 28, after receiving a permit for a rally in Kosciuszko Park in the heart of the South Side, about 260 open-housing marchers crossed the valley on the 16th Street viaduct. When they arrived they were met by a crowd of 8,000 whites—mainly youths—some of whom chanted, "White Power" and "We want slaves." The next day, 200 marchers, escorted by shotgun-wielding police, were stopped before reaching the park by a crowd of about 13,000, throwing rocks and carrying an effigy of Groppi. After six days of violence, a peaceful civil rights march of 1,000 people wound through the South Side on September 2. The marches continued daily for 200 straight days until December 12—when a judge ruled in favor of open housing.

The Bombing of Sterling Hall

Foreign interventions commonly result in violence within the intervening country. The U.S. intervention in Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) led to a small-scale "war at home," and nowhere was it more evident than in Wisconsin. On January 1, 1970, two young Madison men, angered by the U.S. "carpet-bombing" of Vietnam flew a light plane over the Badger Army Ammunition Plant near Baraboo. The "New Year's Gang" dropped a bomb that failed to detonate, but the group's action exploded on front pages around the country as the only aerial bombing in the U.S. during the war. The underground group also attacked U.W. ROTC offices and attempted to bomb a Sauk City electrical substation and Madison draft board offices. (Other clandestine groups firebombed military targets on the Milwaukee and Whitewater campuses, and elsewhere in the U.S.) The group saw university research and institutions as complicit in a war effort that killed many Indochinese civilians and also killed some student protesters. Some antiwar activists supported the group, but many others criticized it for using the same violent tactics as the military. On August 23, 1970, the New Year's Gang detonated a van packed with explosives next to Sterling Hall, intending to destroy the Army Math Research Center. The 3:42 AM blast destroyed part of the building (above), injuring some researchers and killing postdoctoral physics fellow Robert Fassnacht, one of the few casualties in the U.S. resulting from the Indochina War. Authorities apprehended three of the bombers (one remains at large to this day). Antiwar protests continued in Madison for two more years, but on a less militant level. More than 58,000 Americans and two million Indochinese lost their lives in the war.



THE "SIXTIES" ON CAMPUS

Turmoil and change had marked many periods in Wisconsin history before the late 1960s and early 1970s. The state had seen campus antiwar activism (opposition to intervention in Central America in the 1920s), left-wing militancy (see *Labor*), feminist rallies (see *Women*), and critical social thinking (see *Cultural Figures*).

What made the 1960s different was the *variety* of movements and the ways they reinforced each other. College students, in particular, challenged many of society's political and cultural assumptions. Campus activists came from both conservative families and families with longstanding reform politics.

Police and National Guard troops in tear gas masks detain a protester on Bascom Hill at the University of Wisconsin in February 1969.

These tendencies came together in Madison, which became known as the radical center of the Midwest. Students, professors, and community members joined in early 1965–66 actions against the Vietnam War. They included peaceful 40-mile walks to the Badger Army Ammunition Plant near Baraboo, and protests against examples of the "military-industrial complex": the draft board, the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), and military research contracts on campus.

As U.S. participation in the war escalated in Southeast Asia, militancy on campus increased. A youth "counterculture" grew out of the feeling that society had to be transformed. In 1967, National Guardsmen disrupted a summer youth festival at Lake Geneva, and police maced and clubbed Madison students protesting recruitment by Dow—a firm that made the jellied gasoline *napalm* used in Vietnam. As similar clashes spread around the U.S., the local left-wing newspapers *Daily Cardinal* and *Kaleidoscope* predicted a "revolution," though many still backed the use of the military to fight communism in Southeast Asia.

Antiwar, feminist, and other movements drew much inspiration from civil rights activism. "Minority" college students brought that activism onto campus by demanding ethnic studies programs. In Oshkosh, 94 students who held a 1968 sit-in were expelled. A 1969 "Black Strike" in Madison was countered by National Guard troops.

Officials also took a "law-and-order" line against white student activists. Madison police cracked down on the countercultural Mifflin Street Block Party in 1969, and had running battles with antiwar protesters. Guardsmen were again deployed after the reaction to the 1970 Cambodia intervention, and the killing of a total of six students at Kent State in Ohio and Jackson State in Mississippi. Protesters attacked not only military offices, but also businesses seen as exploiting students. Militant tactics lessened after the fatal bombing of an Army research lab (see column at left).

Many Madisonians preferred to join peaceful marches and tried to forge broad-based community alliances. Madison voters elected student activist Paul Soglin as mayor in 1974. The U.S. military withdrew from Indochina in 1975, but Madison's reputation as a radical hotbed did not easily fade.