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# The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission and Beach Integration, 1959–1963: A Cotton-Patch Gestapo?

By J. MICHAEL BUTLER

ON APRIL 24, 1960, THE SEGREGATED BEACHES OF HARRISON COUNTY became the first battleground for integration in Mississippi when nearly 125 black men, women, and children walked upon the sand with the intention of holding a peaceful “wade-in” demonstration in the Gulf of Mexico. A large group of agitated whites met the protesters at the beach and attacked them with pool sticks, clubs, chains, lead pipes, blackjacks, and a wire cable fashioned into an eighteen-inch-long whip. The assault began what the *New York Times* called the “worst racial riot in Mississippi history,” as at least fifteen African Americans sustained serious injuries inflicted by the white mobs who patrolled the area into the next morning.<sup>1</sup> While historians have focused on other segregation protests in Mississippi during the civil rights era, they have paid virtually no attention to the integration of its coastal beaches. Yet beach desegregation in Mississippi is an especially compelling topic, not only as an example of grassroots black protest, but also due to the role played by the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission in the episode. A cloud of secrecy has surrounded the commission since state legislators created it in 1956 to defend segregation throughout Mississippi. Its reticence regarding its activities during the civil rights

<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, April 26, 1960, p. 30; *Biloxi-Gulfport Daily Herald*, April 26, 1960, p. 1; Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, April 25, 1960, p. 1, April 26, 1960, pp. 1, 3, April 27, 1960, p. 1; Jackson *Advocate*, April 30, 1960, pp. 1, 5. The author presented a shorter version of this article as “‘White Solidarity Means White Beaches’: The Long Struggle to Integrate Mississippi Beaches, 1959–1973,” at the seventeenth Gulf South History and Humanities Conference held in Hammond, Louisiana, Southeastern Louisiana University, October 8–10, 1998, and is grateful to the audience and panel participants for their comments and suggestions. The author thanks Charles Eagles for recommending Mississippi beach integration as a possible research topic and for offering suggestions and encouragement through the project’s early stages. In addition, several people have offered their comments on the essay for which the author is extremely appreciative, including Ted Ownby, Charles R. Wilson, Charles Bolton, Lindsay Moffett, Kees Gispén, Karen Butler, Ryan Anderson, Dan Fountain, David Goldfield, and three anonymous readers for the *Journal of Southern History*.

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era has been compounded by the fact that commission files remained sealed until 1998; scholars have consequently written little concerning the agency.<sup>2</sup> Since the coastal protests provide insight into the commission's operation, tactics, successes, and failures in suppressing black equality during the late 1950s and 1960s, the process of Harrison County beach integration significantly illuminates the nature of white resistance in Mississippi during the civil rights movement.<sup>3</sup>

The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case played a crucial role in the solidification of white southern resistance to racial change. As Michael J. Klarman has argued, *Brown* "produced a southern political climate in which racial extremism flourished," catapulting into public office politicians willing to use any necessary means to preserve Jim Crow. This proved particularly true in Mississippi, where the decision instigated a new phase of organized white resistance characterized by an increased level of state-subsidized support. Public reaction to the case certainly influenced the 1955 Mississippi gubernatorial election's outcome, as candidate James P. Coleman's vocal opposition to forced

<sup>2</sup> Prominent Mississippi civil rights historian John Dittmer only mentions beach integration in passing, and former Sovereignty Commission director Erle Johnston summarizes the incident with little analysis in his memoirs. John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago, 1994), 86–87; Erle Johnston, *Mississippi's Defiant Years, 1953–1973: An Interpretive Documentary With Personal Experiences* (Forest, Miss., 1990), 105–11. With the notable exception of Harrison County activist Dr. Gilbert Mason, few authors who deal with the commission mention the coastal episodes at all. See Gilbert R. Mason with James Patterson Smith, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots: A Black Doctor's Civil Rights Struggle* (Jackson, Miss., 2000); Yasuhiro Katagiri, "The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States' Rights in a Deep South State, 1956 to 1977" (Ph.D. dissertation, International Christian University, 1997); Laura Ingram Moore, "The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: State-Supported Resistance to Desegregation" (M.A. thesis, Wake Forest University, 1997); and Sarah Rowe-Sims, "The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: An Agency History," *Journal of Mississippi History*, 61 (Spring 1999), 29–58.

<sup>3</sup> Historians often neglect movement opponents in their works or erroneously portray them, according to Charles M. Payne, as "the ignorant, the pot-bellied, and the tobacco-chewing." Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1995), 418. The scholarship that does address white responses to black activism rarely focuses on the average middle- to lower-class southerners who participated in the majority of anti-civil rights protests. For studies of white segregationists see, for example, Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950's* (Baton Rouge, 1969); Earl Black, *Southern Governors and Civil Rights: Racial Segregation as a Campaign Issue in the Second Reconstruction* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1976); Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York and other cities, 1995); Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954–64* (Urbana, Chicago, and London, 1971); William A. Nunnally, *Bull Connor* (Tuscaloosa and London, 1991); and Roy Reed, *Faubus: The Life and Times of an American Prodigal* (Fayetteville, Ark., 1997). See also Charles W. Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," *Journal of Southern History*, 66 (November 2000), 815–48, esp. 843–48.

integration attracted many voters. Shortly after his election, Coleman promised to release a “bombshell” measure to fight integration that “could be heard ‘from the Atlantic to the Pacific.’”<sup>4</sup>

In 1956 Coleman sent a bill to the legislature to create an official bureau, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, dedicated to the preservation of segregation in the state. The commission had the ambiguous power to “perform any and all acts and things deemed necessary and proper to protect the sovereignty of the state of Mississippi, and her sister states, from encroachment thereon by the Federal Government” if it forced civil rights legislation and court decisions, such as *Brown*, on the state. To fulfill these vaguely defined goals, the commission possessed extensive investigative and subpoena powers, the use of fines and imprisonment to enforce obedience to and cooperation with Mississippi’s segregation policies, a public relations department, and a two-year state appropriation of \$250,000. The governor served as the agency’s ex-officio chairman, while the senate president, attorney general, and house speaker held honorary positions. Coleman’s bill passed through the lower house with a resounding 130-2 victory, with only 8 abstentions. Despite substantial approval, the commission’s broad power and public funding nevertheless aroused misgivings in some state legislators, who pushed for another vote. The bill passed its second consideration with a closer 91-23 vote, as 26 representatives refused to participate. On March 29, 1956, the state senate unanimously approved the commission bill.<sup>5</sup>

On May 2, 1956, Governor Coleman appointed Quitman County representative Ney Gore as the commission’s first director, Deer Creek *Pilot* editor Hal DeCell as its first public relations director, and former Mississippi Highway Patrol chief Leonard Hicks to head the investigative department. The governor gave the commission a spacious office on the senate side of the capitol, adjacent to his own office. Coleman compared its operation to the FBI “during times of war

<sup>4</sup> Michael J. Klarman, “How *Brown* Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis,” *Journal of American History*, 81 (June 1994), 82, 97, 103 (first quotation); James Dickerson, *Dixie’s Dirty Secret: The True Story of How the Government, the Media, and the Mob Conspired to Combat Integration and the Vietnam Antiwar Movement* (Armonk, N.Y., and London, 1998), 15–16 (second quotation on p. 16).

<sup>5</sup> Dickerson, *Dixie’s Dirty Secret*, 17–18; Rowe-Sims, “Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission,” 29–30, 34; *Mississippi Code 1942, Annotated: Containing Permanent Public Statutes of Mississippi to the End of the Legislative Session 1956* (8 vols.; Atlanta, 1943–1944, 1958), VIa, House Resolution 880; *General Laws of the State of Mississippi* (Jackson, Miss., 1956), chap. 365, pp. 520–24; Johnston, *Mississippi’s Defiant Years*, 48–50 (quotation on p. 49).

seeking out intelligence information about the enemy and what the enemy proposes to do” and urged the agency to combat integration “quietly and effectively.”<sup>6</sup> Director Gore fulfilled Coleman’s analogy by implementing a complex record classification structure for the commission patterned after a similar system the FBI used.<sup>7</sup> The commission’s creation elicited an enthusiastic response from white newspapers and their readers, who sent the agency hundreds of letters that offered praise, support, contributions, and service.<sup>8</sup>

Despite its ambitious aspirations, however, the commission spent most of its first three years as a public relations service that defended white supremacy in Mississippi throughout the nation. During 1956 agency representatives traveled thousands of miles, presented countless lectures, sent over 200,000 mailings to media groups and politicians, gave state tours to northern newspaper editors, wrote numerous newspapers articles that defended and promoted segregation, and subscribed to several state newspapers and national publications to track racial developments.<sup>9</sup> Coleman also encouraged the development of

<sup>6</sup> Coleman quoted in Rowe-Sims, “Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission,” 30, 34–35; Dickerson, *Dixie’s Dirty Secret*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> The commission’s meticulous filing system, which is followed to identify items from the commission files in this article, used seven-digit identification numbers to organize documents. The first numeral denotes the file’s classification; the agency categorized sixteen subjects under these numbers. For example, “1” stood for “race agitator,” “2” for “integration organization,” and “97” for “financial records.” The agency also classified records according to school integration, elections, violence, administrative matters, judicial decisions, speeches, and miscellaneous categories. The second numeral in record citations represents the folder number, the third denotes the volume number, and the fourth stands for the document number. The fifth, sixth, and seventh digits designate page, part, and version numbers (usually “1”). Subsequent file citations, therefore, reproduce only the first four numerals of the document identification number unless the reference comes from a page besides the first. In such instances, the page number is noted separately. The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission files (hereinafter cited as SSC) are housed at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH), Jackson, Mississippi. For more on the commission’s classification system see “Sovereignty Commission Agency History,” unpublished finding aid, Search Room, MDAH.

<sup>8</sup> One such letter, dated May 16, 1956, declared, “[N]othing I know of would give me greater pleasure than to be allowed to serve as an investigator” for the commission to uncover “plots by the NAACP to integrate our beloved State.” The writer assured commission members, “I am *LONG AND STRONG* for maintaining segregation,” “expert with a pistol, good with a rifle and fair with a shot gun,” and “*RABID ON THE SUBJECT OF SEGREGATION!*” (emphasis in original). The author, a thirty-five-year-old tobacco salesman from Greenwood, Mississippi, was named Byron De La Beckwith. Surviving records indicate no formal commission response. Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, November 3, 1991, p. 13A.

<sup>9</sup> Dickerson, *Dixie’s Dirty Secret*, 27–29. The agency subscribed to many publications it considered hostile to segregation, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Detroit Free Press*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Ebony*, *Time*, *Life*, *Look*, and the *Southern School News*. Between October 6 and 14, 1956, the commission sponsored a “see for yourself tour” of Mississippi for nineteen newspaper editors from New England. The agency provided the tour to encourage the editors to write firsthand accounts of Mississippi’s harmonious racial climate. The

the commission's covert investigative branch. The commission's directors maintained the program files by collecting information on approximately 120,000 people and hundreds of organizations. Agency representatives compiled membership lists of all NAACP branches in Mississippi and secretly attended their meetings to record the automobile make, model, color, license number, name, address, telephone number, and employer of each person in attendance. The agency also began the practice of hiring black informants during Coleman's administration. In 1956, for example, Leonard Hicks gave two black men \$185 to tell a documentary reporter that they supported segregation. This successful deployment of paid black informants encouraged the governor to extend the commission's informant network into every county in the state.<sup>10</sup>

On March 8, 1958, the Jackson *Daily News* reported that a period of "comparative racial calm" existed in Mississippi, which Governor Coleman attributed to the commission's diligence. The commission's secrecy, however, alienated state legislators, many of whom publicly questioned the agency's efficiency and productivity. Four state senators introduced a bill to abolish the organization, while house members recommended transferring its biennial allocation to the Citizens' Councils. Both measures failed; the commission survived this period of

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tour achieved the commission's goals, as most editors gave favorable reports of the trip upon their return. "Report to the People: A Summary of Articles Written by Northeastern Editors," SSC, 11-1-0-18; J. Michael Butler, "Surface Similarities: A Comparative Analysis of Civil Rights Struggles in Harrison County, Mississippi, and Escambia County, Florida" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Mississippi, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Moore, "Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission," 64; Rowe-Sims, "Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission," 45; Dickerson, *Dixie's Dirty Secret*, 27. One of the first informants, Percy Greene, worked as editor of the Jackson *Advocate*, Mississippi's leading black newspaper, and became one of the commission's most dependable informants throughout the 1960s. The agency used the paper to promote the benefits of segregation and to disparage civil rights campaigns. Commission director Erle Johnston wrote many letters and editorials for the paper. As a reward for the editor's compliance, the agency paid Greene on a regular basis, bought advertisements in his newspaper, and encouraged many white businesses and industries to do the same. On Greene see Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, July 30, 1989, pp. 1A, 11A; Johnston, *Mississippi's Defiant Years*, 231-32. The practice of paying informants encouraged the voluntary cooperation of some African Americans. On November 13, 1958, black educator B. L. Bell, principal of the Cleveland Colored Consolidated School, wrote a letter to Coleman that stated, "It is my greatest ambition to hold a job with the State Sovereignty Commission. Many white friends of mine here in this county know personally how that I have been able to get over to my people the best things for us." Coleman deemed Bell a "white man's Negro" and hired him to organize "a secret underground organization of Negroes to assist in maintaining segregation in Mississippi." Bell readily accepted the position, attended NAACP meetings, took the names of those who attended, and reported their activities to the commission, which paid him \$100 a month. Four hundred eighty-one documents in the existing Sovereignty Commission files contain his name. Zack Van Landingham to J. P. Coleman, Subject: B. L. Bell Informant-Administrative, January 12, 1959, SSC, 2-10-0-6, pp. 1-3; Dickerson, *Dixie's Dirty Secret*, 34-35 (quotations).

tremendous adversity and received funding for the next two years. In September 1958 the agency faced more criticism when the state auditor issued a report that accused commission agents of embezzling state funds. During the remainder of the year and most of the next, the bureau made few public pronouncements and operated under close public and legislative surveillance. Yet its disgraced staff carried on its efforts to compile dossiers and collect articles on individuals, organizations, and racial incidents.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, several developments soon renewed commission activity. The regeneration began in October with Governor Coleman's appointment of former state representative Maurice Malone as commission director, filling a leadership void that had existed since Ney Gore's resignation in November 1957. Two events, moreover, brought racial politics to the forefront of state news. On August 31, 1958, a black Harrison County resident, Clennon King, announced plans to enroll his child in a white elementary school. This would have been the first attempt to integrate a grade school in Mississippi, but King's wife and children fled the state in fear before the registration date. On April 25, 1959, a group of white men lynched Mack Charles Parker in Poplarville, a small town in southwest Mississippi, for allegedly raping a white woman the previous February. A local grand jury failed to indict anyone for the murder.<sup>12</sup> The two incidents again made the preservation of white supremacy the primary focus of white Mississippians after a period of relative tranquillity and presented the Sovereignty Commission with a chance to assert its authority and usefulness, redefine its identity, and lead the resistance to black equality throughout Mississippi. The agency discovered a specific opportunity to accomplish its goals in Harrison County.

Harrison County—located on the Gulf Coast fifty miles west of Mobile, Alabama, and seventy-five miles east of New Orleans, Louisiana—has always stood apart from the rest of Mississippi in several ways. In 1960 its total population reached almost 119,500, a

<sup>11</sup> Jackson *Daily News*, March 8, 1958, p. 1; Dickerson, *Dixie's Dirty Secret*, 33–34; Rowe-Sims, "Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission," 34–35.

<sup>12</sup> On leadership changes see Rowe-Smith, "Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission," 30. For more on the Clennon King episode see Butler, "Surface Similarities," 39–57. Historian Neil McMillen states that Parker's death represented "a resurgent tradition of unpunished white vigilantism" that "brought new infamy to the state." Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Urbana and Chicago, 1989), 252. For the Parker lynching see Howard Smead, *Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker* (New York and Oxford, 1986). Smead notes that "no conclusive proof" exists that Parker raped June Walters, who never positively identified Parker as her assailant. Smead, *Blood Justice*, 87.

42 percent increase from 1950, making it Mississippi's second-fastest growing county. Harrison County had the third-highest median family income (\$4,272) and the second-lowest percentage of rural farmers (1 percent) in the state. Perhaps most interesting, only 56 percent of Harrison County residents were born in Mississippi, the lowest rate in the state and well below its 87 percent average.<sup>13</sup> Biloxi and Gulfport, the two largest cities in the county, unsurprisingly reflected these same statistical trends. In 1960 Biloxi ranked below only Jackson and Meridian in total population with 44,053 residents, 5,557 of whom were black. Only 41 percent of Biloxi residents were born in Mississippi, the lowest percentage in the state. Gulfport, which lies twelve miles west of Biloxi, had a population of 30,204 in 1960, making it Mississippi's sixth largest city. With 6,336 African American residents, Gulfport's population was 20.9 percent black, while Biloxi's was 12.6 percent black. Both cities had low unemployment rates and relied on manufacturing, shipbuilding, construction, public administration, and a thriving seafood industry for the majority of its employment opportunities at a time when most Mississippians still worked in agriculture. A strong federal presence arrived in the county during World War II with the establishment of Keesler Air Force Base, the Navy Construction Battalion Center, and two Veterans Administration facilities. Finally, the completion of a twenty-six-mile manufactured beach in 1953 brought thousands of visitors to the coast each summer, fostered a growing tourist economy, and more than any single factor, contributed to the uniqueness of the Mississippi coast.<sup>14</sup> During the late 1950s, therefore, Harrison County represented one of the most urban, diverse, wealthy, nonagricultural, and fastest-growing areas in Mississippi.

Clennon King's announced attempt to register his child in a white school brought intensified Sovereignty Commission activity into this distinctive Mississippi county. On February 12, 1959, the agency initiated a new phase of mobilization by interviewing law enforcement officials concerning the area's racial atmosphere. The Harrison County

<sup>13</sup> *United States Census of Population, 1960: Mississippi* (Washington, D.C., 1961), 26-10, 26-110, 26-111, 26-168.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-23, 26-41, 26-107, 26-142, 26-149, 26-151. For more on the varied occupational opportunities that existed in Harrison County and for the effects that the federal presence had on the area during the mid-twentieth century, see Hodding Carter and Anthony Ragusin, *Gulf Coast Country* (New York, 1951); Ray M. Thompson, "Mississippi's Man-Made Marvel," *Travel*, 100 (October 1953), 21-24; Harnett T. Kane, *The Golden Coast* (Garden City, N.Y., 1959); Charles L. Sullivan, *Mississippi Gulf Coast: Portrait of a People* (Northridge, Calif., 1985); and E. Paul Durrenberger, *Gulf Coast Soundings: People and Policy in the Mississippi Shrimp Industry* (Lawrence, Kans., 1996).



sheriff and the Gulfport and Biloxi chiefs of police provided Zack J. Van Landingham, a former Federal Bureau of Investigation agent and chief commission investigator, with names, phone numbers, and addresses of suspected Gulfport NAACP members. From this information Van Landingham categorized the Gulfport NAACP as an active branch but concluded that “everything was very quiet” in the county.<sup>15</sup>

On May 14, 1959, however, that racial “quiet” ended, and the struggle for civil rights on the Mississippi coast inauspiciously began, when Dr. Gilbert Mason and seven other blacks, five of whom were children, went swimming in the Gulf of Mexico near Biloxi. A city policeman noticed the group while responding to a car wreck by the beach and ordered them to leave, saying, “Negroes don’t come to the sand beach.” Mason, a thirty-year-old Biloxi physician, and Murray J. Saucier Jr., one of the men who had accompanied Mason to the beach, went to the police station to speak with someone about the beach situation. Assistant Police Chief Walter Williams awaited their arrival and informed them that a city ordinance prohibited black use of the beach. When Mason and Saucier asked to see it, a “very indignant, loud, and vociferous” Williams, using “threatening gesticulations,” angrily accused them of wanting to create a disturbance. The ordinance, he claimed, was in a locked safe that he refused to open until the next morning. When Mason and Saucier returned to the station the following day, they discovered that Biloxi mayor Laz Quave wished to see them. Quave accused the men of using the beach to involve the Civil Rights Commission and the NAACP in the coast’s racial affairs, which both Mason and Saucier denied. Only “the public could use the beach,” Quave informed them. When Mason asked if “the public” included blacks, Quave replied menacingly, “If you go back down there again we’re going to arrest you. That’s all there is to it.”<sup>16</sup> The two men left

<sup>15</sup> Letter to Director, February 12, 1959, SSC, 2-56-1-3; Letter to Director, February 12, 1959, SSC, 2-56-1-7; Letter to Director, February 13, 1959, SSC, 1-15-0-5 (first quotation); Letter to Director, February 16, 1959, SSC, 1-23-0-30 (second quotation).

<sup>16</sup> Murray Saucier testimony, *United States v. Harrison County, Mississippi, et al.*, Civil Action No. 2262, U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Mississippi (hereinafter cited as *U.S. v. Harrison Co.*, No. 2262 [S.D. Miss.]), 574–75; Gilbert Mason testimony, *U.S. v. Harrison Co.*, No. 2262 (S.D. Miss.), 944–49 (first quotation on p. 947; third, fourth, and fifth quotations on pp. 948–49). The seven volumes of trial transcripts for this case (nearly 1,500 consecutively numbered pages) are located in Record Group 21, National Archives and Records Administration, Southeast Region, Atlanta, Georgia. See also Gilbert Mason affidavit, May 3, 1960, *U.S. v. Harrison Co.* file, Group V, Container 1216, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.); hereinafter cited as NAACP Papers (second quotation).

the office and did not attempt to use the beach for the remainder of the summer.

A week after police forced Mason and his friends to leave the beach, Dr. Felix H. Dunn, a thirty-nine-year-old black Gulfport physician, wrote a letter to the Harrison County Board of Supervisors to protest that the use of the beaches “by Negro citizens is virtually non-existent.” Complaining that law enforcement officers coerced the few blacks who tried to use the beach facilities off the property, Dunn asked the board, “What laws, if any, prohibit the use of the beach facilities by Negro citizens?” On June 5 board president Dewey Lawrence replied that individual property owners determined who utilized “the beach and water from the shore line extending out 1500 feet” on their privately owned land. Lawrence also revealed that the board planned to provide a separate beach for blacks “that you will be proud of.”<sup>17</sup> Public proclamations concerning the issue subsided during the summer while both races prepared for a confrontation.

In the meantime, Harrison County’s white leaders contacted the Sovereignty Commission and solicited its assistance in defending the segregated beach facility. On May 27, 1959, acting Biloxi police chief Earl Williams notified commission investigator Zack J. Van Landingham that Mason, whom Williams suspected belonged to the local NAACP, had stirred up trouble by using the beach in Biloxi and would do so again unless the police could show him a law against it. Van Landingham asked for notification of future developments and reported the call to Director Malone. Local white residents also responded to the impending crisis. An editorial in the *Gulfport Pictorial Review* maintained that while “there is little doubt [*sic*] that some negroes need to bathe,” “it would be very dangerous to try mixing races on this beach” due to “the difference in family and sex training between most white women and negro men.” It concluded that if blacks tried to integrate the coastal beaches, “the people of Harrison County and the area would make the [Emmett] Till and Parker cases look like kid stuff.” The Sovereignty Commission kept a copy of the article on file.<sup>18</sup>

Yet despite the open hostility, black residents of Harrison County

<sup>17</sup> Felix H. Dunn to Dewey Lawrence, May 22, 1959, Lawrence to Dunn, June 5, 1959, both in Box 158, Mississippi State Records Center, MDAH.

<sup>18</sup> Zack J. Van Landingham to Director, June 1, 1959, SSC, 2-56-1-11; *Gulfport Pictorial Review*, June 26, 1959. On the Till lynching see Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (New York and London, 1988).

also organized. On September 30, 1959, Joseph N. Austin and three others met with Gulfport mayor Billy Meadows and two city commissioners about procuring a swimming area on the beach for black citizens. The mayor promised to examine the situation and respond to them the next day. When Austin did not hear back from the mayor, he joined the Harrison County Civic Action Committee, which had been established the previous June by area black residents "to seek relief for Negroes in various fields." Gilbert Mason and Felix Dunn also joined the organization and made the beach issue the group's main priority. At one of its first meetings, the Civic Action Committee discussed the situation and decided to file a beach-access petition with the county board of supervisors.<sup>19</sup>

On October 5, 1959, Mason, Austin, and Eulice White presented the board with a petition demanding "unrestrained use of the beach" by blacks. (Felix Dunn did not attend the meeting.) According to the Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, "The Negro delegation appeared well-informed on laws and agreements pertaining to use of the sand beach by the general public." Mason, acting as group spokesman, claimed that while no laws existed prohibiting blacks from the beach, and public funds and taxes paid by all county residents had created and maintained the area, the Biloxi police department had nevertheless obstructed black citizens' right to enjoy the beach. When a supervisor asked if the blacks would settle for a segregated section of the beach, Mason replied that they wanted access to "every damn inch of it." Fifty-one-year-old Eulice White told the board that he had used the beach his entire life and did not understand why he no longer could. Board president Dewey Lawrence told the men, "If you want to integrate the beach, then you're asking for trouble." While "relations between colored folks and white folks on the Mississippi coast have always been good," Lawrence explained, if "we integrate that sand beach entirely we're going to have some riots down there and someone is going to get killed." The board dismissed the black petitioners after thirty minutes of discussion, turned the petition over to their attorney, state senator Stanford Morse, and took no other formal action.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Austin testimony, *U.S. v. Harrison Co.*, No. 2262 (S.D. Miss.), 850–57 (quotation on p. 854); Gilbert R. Mason, Felix H. Dunn, Eulice White, and Joseph Austin to Members of the Board of Supervisors, Harrison County, Mississippi, September 30, 1959, SSC, 5-4-0-2; Felix Dunn testimony, *U.S. v. Harrison Co.*, No. 2262 (S.D. Miss.), 874–78; Mason, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*, 53, 55–56.

<sup>20</sup> Mason, Dunn, White, and Austin to Board of Supervisors, September 30, 1959, SSC, 5-4-0-2 (first quotation); Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, October 5, 1959, pp. 1–2 (second quotation on p. 2; fifth and sixth quotations on p. 1); Mason, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*, 57 (third

A day after the *Daily Herald* published the story about the petition, Joseph Austin received threatening phone calls from angry whites. One caller told Austin's wife that a group planned to kidnap her husband; others threatened Joseph's life. Shortly after midnight on October 7, the Austins awoke to discover a six-foot cross burning on their front lawn. In response to these verbal and physical threats, the Gulfport police established a protective watch at Austin's home. Some local whites scoffed at the protection Austin had received. As one told a city reporter, "He could have fired the cross himself, or some of his people" could have committed the act. Austin told newspapers that while whites "seem to think I'm interested in integration . . . I'm not. All I'm interested in is getting a place for us to swim," a place where his family would be able "to swim unmolested." Two nights later, volunteer firemen discovered another cross burning on a section of the Harrison County beach that the petitioners wanted desegregated.<sup>21</sup>

After county officials delivered the petition to the Sovereignty Commission and requested its assistance, Van Landingham began planning a visit to the area. Board of supervisors attorney Stanford Morse reported that county leaders "had considerable information already on Dr. Felix Henry Dunn" and that they thought they "could handle" White and Austin because of their fragile employment status. Morse's admission that they knew little about Mason made him the target of Van Landingham's preliminary research. Gilbert Rutledge Mason, the investigator discovered, was born in Jackson, Mississippi, on October 7, 1928. He graduated from Tennessee State University in 1949 and completed medical school at Howard University in 1954. After a one-year internship in St. Louis, Missouri, Mason moved to Biloxi in 1955 and became the second practicing black physician on the Mississippi coast. Van Landingham obtained Mason's high school records, credit report, and birth certificate number, as well as the names, occupations, addresses, and credit histories of Mason's parents and wife.<sup>22</sup>

While Van Landingham searched Mason's personal life and other whites used threats and terroristic activities to intimidate blacks,

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quotation); Roy Dedeaux deposition, *U.S. v. Harrison Co.*, No. 2262 (S.D. Miss.), 434–35; Austin testimony, 856–57 (fourth quotation).

<sup>21</sup> Austin testimony, 859 (first quotation); Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, October 8, 1959, p. 4 (second and third quotations); Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, October 6, 1959, p. 1, October 10, 1959, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Zack J. Van Landingham to Director, October 14, 1959, SSC, 2-56-1-16, pp. 1–3 (quotations on p. 1); Van Landingham to Director, October 20, 1959, SSC, 2-56-1-17, p. 7; Mason, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*, 13–35.

coastal officials used economic coercion to diffuse beach integration agitation. On October 9, 1959, for example, Gulfport mayor Billy Meadows ordered Joseph Austin's termination from his job as director of the Colored Division of the Gulfport Recreation Department. Officials claimed that Austin's dismissal resulted from the fact that he lived outside Gulfport, arguing that the position was funded by city taxes and should therefore be filled by a city resident. Nevertheless, Austin removed his name from the beach integration petition. Eulice White and his wife, who worked for a white couple, also lost their jobs because White had signed the petition. White removed his name from the document as well and publicly stated that he did "not want anything to come to breach the good relations between the races" on the Mississippi coast. Felix Dunn excused White's accommodation: White justifiably wanted to "stay out of the news" so that he could return to his job and keep his children in school. Only the names of Dunn and Gilbert Mason, who did not rely on whites for their livelihoods, remained on the petition.<sup>23</sup>

When Zack Van Landingham arrived in Harrison County to investigate its beach situation, he learned from Senator Morse that local officials, following white leaders in other southern locales faced with similar circumstances, wanted to designate a section of the beach exclusively for black use. This segregated beach idea, consistent with traditional solutions whites implemented elsewhere in the region, pleased the commission official, and he made it the focus of his inquiries on the coast. When asked about the separate beach plan, Gulfport mayor Billy Meadows appeared to Van Landingham "to be very enthusiastic over the prospect of it being a solution to the proposed petition to integrate the beach." The mayor thought that the "95% of the negroes" in the area who supported segregation "will knock the props out from under the integrationists such as Mason and Dunn," while "the other 5% could be controlled by the city with the help of negroes" sympathetic to city officials. To support his assertion, Meadows confessed to having ordered Austin's termination because he had signed

<sup>23</sup> Mason, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*, 57–58; Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, October 10, 1959, p. 1 (quotations); Austin testimony, 860, 870–71; Van Landingham to Director, October 14, 1959, SSC, 5-4-0-1; Van Landingham to Director, October 20, 1959, SSC, 2-56-1-17, p. 2; Van Landingham to Director, November 4, 1959, SSC, 2-56-1-19. Joseph Austin did get his job back, although it is not exactly clear when. Austin repeatedly told Sovereignty Commission investigator Van Landingham that he wanted to return to the position he had lost. On January 12, 1965, Austin testified that he worked as director of the Colored Division of the Gulfport Recreation Department and had held the position for approximately two years "on the second go around" (Austin testimony, 850).

the petition and promised to rehire him if Austin convinced the others to withdraw the petition.<sup>24</sup>

The coast's law enforcement agents, Van Landingham found, also endorsed the segregated beach idea. Gulfport chief of police G. E. Mullins even suggested naming the area "for some outstanding Negro without calling it a Negro or colored beach" and hoped the county would "fix it up in an attractive manner." More important to the investigation, the police provided the commission investigator with their impressions of the integration effort's leaders. From his meeting with Biloxi chief of police Herbert McDonnell and assistant chief Walter Williams, Van Landingham noticed that Gilbert Mason's level of education, professional occupation, and status as an outsider endeared him to few area whites. The police officials, the investigator noted, were "very bitter" toward Mason because they believed he caused most of the racial turmoil in and around Biloxi. McDonnell described Mason as "a very smart alleck type of negro," while Williams suggested they "beat the hell out of any negro found on the beach." In his report Van Landingham observed that Mason "was likely to get hurt" because whites "around Biloxi were not going to put up with him."<sup>25</sup>

Van Landingham continued his investigation of coastal activities on October 16 by conducting more interviews. Joseph Austin's former supervisor at the Gulfport Recreation Department called Austin "an excellent employee." "This was the first racial difficulty that Austin had been in," the man stated, "and he had never before exhibited any interest in racial integration." Van Landingham next visited Austin, who claimed that he did not want integration—only a place to swim where whites would not harass blacks. While he disavowed belonging to the Gulfport NAACP, he insisted that no "NAACP outside of possibly the local chapter was attempting to push this petition to integrate the beach." Austin also endorsed the segregated beach plan, promised "to see that it is kept clean and that the negroes behave themselves," and pledged to "get other negroes to influence Dr. Dunn and Dr. Mason to withdraw their names from the petition." Austin assured Van Landingham that he wanted no trouble for coastal blacks and that he had declined interview requests from reporters across the nation

<sup>24</sup> Van Landingham to Director, October 20, 1959, SSC, 2-56-1-17, p. 3 (first quotation), p. 2 (subsequent quotations). For two examples of southern white leaders providing blacks with segregated beaches in Florida, see David J. Garrow, *St. Augustine, Florida, 1963-1964: Mass Protest and Racial Violence* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1989), 198-99; and *New York Times*, March 28, 1999, sec. 1, p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Van Landingham to Director, October 20, 1959, SSC, 2-56-1-17, pp. 1-7.

because he “did not want this matter to get out of hand.” Promising to cooperate and use his influence on others, Austin concluded that he simply wanted his job back.<sup>26</sup>

Still enthusiastic about the segregated beach for blacks, Van Landingham later visited board of supervisors president Dewey Lawrence to discuss the idea. Although Lawrence approved the plan and pledged cooperation with the agency, he wanted Dunn, Mason, and the Sovereignty Commission to write letters to city officials promising their support. Lawrence feared “that Mason is attempting to integrate the entire beach.” Even though Mason “is a very intelligent, shrewd, smart negro who is well versed in the law,” Lawrence promised that “there is not a chance in the world of them integrating the beach in Harrison County.” Van Landingham spent the rest of his day recording the personal and credit histories of Dunn, Austin, and White. He left the area later in the evening, but he intended to return later to negotiate an agreement between Mason, Dunn, and the board of supervisors endorsing construction of a local segregated beach.<sup>27</sup>

With such seemingly broad support for the segregated beach idea, commission officials planned to coerce any recalcitrant local blacks into accepting the offer. A separate beach would satisfy black residents, the agency believed, while crippling the integration efforts of Mason and Dunn. Governor Coleman backed this resolution of the potentially troublesome issue and directed Van Landingham to informally propose segregated facilities to black leaders. On October 27 Van Landingham returned to the coast. City officials would commit to beach construction only with the full cooperation of black residents. Van Landingham first consulted with Joseph Austin, who called the plan “an excellent idea.” Yet Stanford Morse, Billy Meadows, and Dewey Lawrence had informed the investigator that Mason and Dunn had not yet removed their names from the integration petition. The next day, Van Landingham visited Dunn and Mason to offer them a segregated beach proposal from the city of Gulfport, the Sovereignty Commission, and the county supervisors.<sup>28</sup>

When Van Landingham first arrived at Dr. Felix Dunn’s medical office and informed the doctor that he wished to speak with him, Dunn “rather coolly” told him to wait in the reception area where ten black patients sat. If Dunn “was going to see everyone [*sic*] of them before

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–7.

<sup>28</sup> Van Landingham to Director, November 4, 1959, SSC, 2-56-1-19.

seeing me,” the investigator surmised, it would “necessitate my waiting some one and one-half hours.” Convinced the doctor “was letting me ‘cool my heels,’” Van Landingham departed without talking to Dunn. He concluded in his field notes that if the beach situation “was one that could be settled by talking with Dunn, he would have seen me at once.” Van Landingham then went to Gilbert Mason’s medical office, where he encountered no more success. A “very curt and cool” Mason argued that he had never made any statements concerning blacks’ acceptance of a separate beach, maintained that he “would never agree to anything except complete integration,” and asserted that black residents had a legal right to use the existing facilities. Over Mason’s protests Van Landingham still proposed the local construction of a segregated beach. Mason vehemently refused the offer, and the agent left the office. When Van Landingham reported the conversations to Morse, Meadows, and Lawrence, they assured him that local blacks would not support integration efforts. County leaders decided they “would wait this matter out,” still planning to build a segregated beach in the spring. They thanked the commission for its assistance and promised to inform it of future developments.<sup>29</sup> The incident demonstrates that the commission often took an active role in mediating conflicts between local white and black civic leaders.

In the meantime, coastal white and black leaders continued to deal with the beach situation. The Civic Action Committee of Harrison County, which Felix Dunn and Gilbert Mason led, met bimonthly after filing its petition to discuss beach strategies and developments. Local whites also continued to discuss plans to build a \$100,000 segregated beach facility “so fine that Negroes would not want to go anywhere else” to swim and picnic. Yet no one offered black groups a formal proposal that, as Mason insisted, renounced segregation.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, Mississippi’s racial atmosphere intensified following the 1959 gubernatorial election. In November Ross R. Barnett became Mississippi’s new governor and the main figure in white Mississippi’s resistance to the civil rights movement. During his campaign Barnett had vowed to maintain white supremacy throughout the state at all costs, accused his predecessor of conceding to federal integration demands, and criticized, among other things, the governor’s

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Van Landingham to Director, October 20, 1959, SSC, 2-56-1-17, pp. 1–7; Van Landingham to Director, October 14, 1959, SSC, 2-56-1-16, pp. 1–3; Dunn testimony, 874–79 (quotation on p. 879).



restrained use of the Sovereignty Commission. After assuming office Barnett expanded the commission's investigative, public relations, and surveillance functions and used the agency to fund his beloved Citizens' Councils. In March 1960 the commission gave them \$20,000 outright and subsequently funneled \$5,000 per month to the organizations. By December 1964 the commission had transferred \$193,500 in public funds to the councils.<sup>31</sup> In addition, Barnett found in Harrison County his first opportunity to fulfill his promise to increase commission aggressiveness.

Gilbert Mason had continued through the winter of 1960 to reject segregation, informing local black residents and Biloxi officials that he planned to use the beach in the coming summer. His refusal to tolerate segregated beaches did not discourage area whites or commission investigators from their plans, who increasingly turned their attention to Felix Dunn. As Van Landingham discovered after his second coastal visit and the failed attempt to settle on the segregated beach solution, Dunn seemed potentially more open to compromise. Felix Henry Dunn was born in Biloxi on June 29, 1919. He left the area to attend college at Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College for Negroes in southwest Mississippi, where he became a football star during the late 1930s and early 1940s. In 1952 Dunn received his medical degree from Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tennessee. Returning to the Mississippi coast after a short internship at a Missouri hospital, Dunn became the first black physician to practice in the area. Soon thereafter, he established and became president of the Gulfport chapter of the NAACP. It had surprised no one that he signed the beach integration petition and continued to lead the Civic Action Committee after the group had presented its demands to local officials. Yet despite his solid reputation for leadership and activism in the eyes of the coastal black community, Felix Dunn also tried to accommodate white officials. Commission investigator Van Landingham noted that due to the doctor's financial success and close association with local whites, Felix Dunn also "had somewhat of a shady reputation" with coastal residents.<sup>32</sup>

The Sovereignty Commission and coastal whites capitalized on

<sup>31</sup> Johnston, *Mississippi's Defiant Years*, 101–2; McMillen, *Citizens' Council*, 337; "Citizens' Councils Grant," undated report, SSC, 99-30-0-46, pp. 1–2. For two examples of how Ross Barnett used the Sovereignty Commission, see Jackson *Daily News*, March 6, 1960, p. 10, and July 21, 1960, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Van Landingham to Director, October 20, 1959, SSC, 2-56-1-17 (quotation); Van Landingham to Director, October 14, 1959, SSC, 2-56-1-16, p. 2; Dunn testimony, 874–906.

Dunn's willingness to cooperate. From January to March of 1960 Dunn met secretly with county officials, most notably Harrison County sheriff Curtis Dedeaux, to inform them of his group's meetings and decisions. Dedeaux thought that Dunn, "as a substantial citizen of Harrison County," ought to be able to influence blacks from "doing anything harsh or rash" in relation to beach integration efforts. Dedeaux, moreover, held considerable personal influence over Dunn because they worked as partners in the Gulfport-area jukebox and cigarette machine trade. Dedeaux had ordered competing vendors to remove their machines from several black businesses and had allowed Dunn to fill the vacancies with his devices. Dedeaux promised Dunn even more machine spaces in return for his continued support of the segregated beach plan. Dunn complied and eventually had sixty-two machines placed in local black businesses. Sovereignty Commission files also reveal that Dedeaux knew about Dunn's alleged ownership of slot machines that operated in black establishments on the coast, but the sheriff promised to ignore these rumors in exchange for cooperation in racial matters. Under such white coercion and economic pressure, Dunn thus told local officials and newspapers repeatedly that he opposed beach integration, desired a separate beach, and promised to use his considerable influence to urge black acceptance of segregated beaches. Dedeaux described Dunn as a "first class informer." Dunn's declarations brought him into direct conflict with Mason, who still desired full integration. Dedeaux told Van Landingham that Dunn and Mason "were not on good terms" and believed "Mason would give trouble if he could get enough Negroes to follow his leadership."<sup>33</sup>

On Easter Sunday, April 17, 1960, Gilbert Mason acted on his promise to use the beach and swam alone in the Gulf of Mexico. After Mason waded in the water for about thirty minutes, a Biloxi police officer approached the beach and shouted at the doctor until he emerged from the surf. When another officer arrived, they arrested Mason, according to police chief Herbert McDonnell, for "attempting to swim on the front beach which has traditionally been used only by

<sup>33</sup> Dunn testimony, 881 (first and second quotations); Bob Thomas, "Beach Disturbances, Biloxi, Harrison County, Mississippi," May 2, 1960, SSC, 5-4-0-50, pp. 2, 4, 5, 9; Bob Thomas to Governor Ross Barnett, May 2, 1960, SSC, 5-4-0-51, p. 5; "Alleged Facts in This Case That Can Not Be Confirmed At This Time By Records Or Investigative Reports," not dated, SSC, 2-56-2-31; Tom Scarbrough to Director, January 16, 1960, SSC, 2-56-1-77 (third and fourth quotations); Van Landingham to file, February 5, 1960, SSC, 2-56-1-24, p. 2; Bob Thomas, "Investigation of Disturbances at DeSoto National Forest Park, Harrison County, Mississippi, on July 4, 1960," July 7, 1960, SSC, 2-56-1-51, p. 5 (fifth quotation). Approximately twenty-five commission files that mention Felix Dunn are still sealed.

white people” and charged him with disorderly conduct. The chief later told Mason he would beat him if he ever placed his “ass on that goddam beach again” and warned that “some of your own people will get you.” He further told the physician, “If I were one of the doctors down at the hospital I would throw your ass out of the window.” One Jackson newspaper described the incident as “the first specific passive demonstration against segregation” in the state during “the current wave of such protest in the South,” which had begun with the February 1, 1960, Greensboro, North Carolina, lunch counter sit-ins. Chief McDonnell, however, refused to discuss the arrest with the press because he claimed that Mason only wanted to bring public attention to himself. Biloxi mayor Laz Quave echoed McDonnell’s assessment. “We’ll handle this thing locally,” the mayor promised, even though he believed that a small group of area blacks were “trying to make a national issue” of their efforts. Mason, however, declared that he had acted to secure equal rights for black Harrison County residents, and not just to integrate beaches, and he told the press that he would “continue going back to swim in the previously white bathing area even if” it provoked another arrest. Yet now he would not have to swim alone because his arrest inspired the local black community to hold another beachfront protest the following week. After the arrest, Mason later remembered, “it felt as if practically the entire black population of Biloxi had enlisted in my cause.”<sup>34</sup>

On April 19 Mason called a Civic Action Committee meeting to describe his plan to mobilize the black community to use the beach the following Sunday at three sites on Biloxi city property. Making his intentions clear, Mason also told law enforcement officials the detailed plan to integrate Harrison County beaches. Biloxi police chief Herbert McDonnell dismissed his warnings, telling Mason, “If you go back down there and a disturbance is created, I am going to send my force in the other direction.” In a request for assistance in the matter, several local whites delivered the beach integration rumors to Governor Barnett and the Sovereignty Commission. As a result, on April 22 Barnett contacted commission officials who ordered investigator Bob Thomas to the coast immediately. Harrison County officials also prepared for the demonstration. On the same night as Mason’s meeting,

<sup>34</sup> Mason testimony, 954–55; Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, April 18, 1960, p. 2 (first and seventh quotations); Mason, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*, 61–66 (second quotation on p. 62; tenth quotation on p. 66); Mason affidavit, May 3, 1960, NAACP Papers (third and fourth quotations); Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, April 19, 1960, p. 1 (fifth, sixth, and eighth quotations); Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, April 19, 1960, p. 10 (ninth quotation).

every mayor, supervisor, and law enforcement official in the county met to discuss protest prevention. After much heated debate over the preferred tactics, Harrison County sheriff Curtis Dedeaux promised to talk with Felix Dunn about the issue. Arguing that Dunn held more influence over local blacks than Mason, Dedeaux felt that “he could handle Dunn very well” due to their business partnership.<sup>35</sup>

The next day, Sheriff Dedeaux called Dunn and Wilson Evans, the president and vice president of Gulfport’s NAACP branch, to his office for questioning about future beach protest plans. Dunn answered that local blacks had planned to use the beaches again, sharing the day, time, and locations of Mason’s integration efforts. Although blacks in areas surrounding Biloxi “were satisfied with the current situation,” Dunn revealed that the Biloxi black community wanted to support Mason due to his arrest. Dunn had reportedly instructed local blacks “not to go to the beach” during the protest because “if something happens to those kids, the parents will never forgive Dr. Mason.” Dunn also told Dedeaux that the NAACP had nothing to do with the coming protest and pointed out that Mason held no office in the Gulfport branch; Mason, Dunn claimed, “did not represent any cause except” his “own desire to use the beach.” With Harrison County fresh off “the best two weeks of our tourist trade in the history of the Gulf Coast,” Dedeaux feared that any racial unrest could cripple the local economy and instructed Dunn to make Mason and his followers abort their plans. Dunn later recalled that when he told Dedeaux that he “had tried” to change their minds but that “it was too late,” the sheriff “said something about cracking nuts.” As a black male, Evans quipped, “my nuts have been cracked all my life.” “Yes,” Dedeaux replied, “but not like I’ll crack them.” “Stay away” from the beach on April 24, Dedeaux warned at the end of the meeting, because local blacks “were going to lose.”<sup>36</sup>

The Sovereignty Commission began its investigation of the imminent integration threat on April 23 when Bob Thomas met with Biloxi chief of police Herbert McDonnell and assistant chief of police Walter Williams to ask how they planned to handle the protest. The men

<sup>35</sup> Van Landingham to File 5-4, April 27, 1960, SSC, 5-4-0-31; Mason affidavit, May 3, 1960, NAACP Papers (first quotation); Thomas, “Beach Disturbances,” 1–2 (second quotation on p. 1); Dunn testimony, 885–86; Wilson Evans testimony, *U.S. v. Harrison Co.*, No. 2262 (S.D. Miss.), 1085–140; Mason testimony, 999–1000.

<sup>36</sup> Sovereignty Commission recording of Felix Dunn meeting, April 28, 1960, SSC, 5-4A-0-1 (first through eighth quotations); Evans testimony, 1085–140 (ninth, tenth, and eleventh quotations); Dunn testimony, 885–86 (twelfth and thirteenth quotations); Van Landingham to File 5-4, April 27, 1960, SSC, 5-4-0-31; Thomas, “Beach Disturbances,” 1–2.

assured Thomas that they “were looking for trouble Sunday” and that they had information that “Mason was going to organize a group of Negro boy scouts and march on the beach.” Based on the large number of calls the department received from whites who promised to “be around the beach in case Mason showed up,” McDonnell declared, “the public could take care of this situation” themselves. The chief also had scheduled only “a sort of skeleton crew [of] the Biloxi Police Department” to work the next day and had excused himself and Williams from duty during the integration attempt. He further told Thomas that while local police “could coordinate the activities of the citizens against this type of trouble,” they would welcome the formation of a local White Citizens’ Council. Other local whites also prepared for the protest. On the night before the demonstration, a cross burned on the beach as an ominous warning to blacks who wanted the area integrated.<sup>37</sup>

The admonition did not affect the plans of the demonstration participants to meet on the morning of April 24 at McDaniel and Son Funeral Home, the Biloxi business of one of the protesters, where Mason explained the protest’s objectives and methods. He also advised the group against carrying anything that could be considered a weapon. The assembled crowd divided into three groups who would enter the beach near Biloxi Cemetery, Biloxi Hospital, and the lighthouse in front of a busy intersection. Only a few miles separated the locations. Mason told the group of protesters to reassemble afterwards at the funeral home between 3:30 and 4:00 in the afternoon. He wished them luck, said he would join them later on the beach, and departed in his automobile.<sup>38</sup>

At approximately 1:00 P.M. on April 24, 1960, over one hundred black men, women, and children walked onto the beach to hold a nonviolent “wade-in” demonstration in the Gulf of Mexico—the first indigenous, nonviolent, direct action protest in Mississippi during the civil rights era. A mob of agitated whites awaited the protesters and attacked them with a variety of weapons. Mrs. Bernell Fletcher, a black twenty-two-year-old expectant mother, had come to the beach with a friend and her three children. As the four passed in front of the Biloxi-McArthur Hotel to join other demonstrators standing near the water, Fletcher heard a white police officer tell several white males to “get the niggers off the beach.” She glanced behind her and saw the crowd

<sup>37</sup> Thomas, “Beach Disturbances,” 3.

<sup>38</sup> Mason testimony, 956–59; Thomas, “Beach Disturbances,” 5.

running toward them as the police watched. The group viciously attacked both male and female protesters with chains and clubs. A white teenager grabbed an elderly black man who stood in front of Fletcher and began beating him. A policeman approached the fallen man, turned him over with his nightstick, and ordered him to leave the beach. Another black man recalled that when he had tried to return to help his bloody and unconscious friend, the policeman had stopped him and shouted, "Nigger, I told you to get your goddamn black ass off this beach before I blow your brains out."<sup>39</sup>

The violence spread down the beach where a group of four elderly black men and twenty-one women and children had gathered. They had been swimming, playing baseball, and eating lunch for thirty minutes when Delores Sheely saw six police officers, including two state troopers, confront fifty white men who approached the group on the beach. After the officers had returned to their cars to leave, the white crowd advanced, demanding to speak to the black group's leader. Dorothy Galloway, an elderly, disabled veteran who managed a local black funeral parlor, claimed to be the group's spokesman. Taking chains and brass knuckles from their pockets, the whites told Galloway, "We were ordered to ask you to leave or put you off." When Galloway refused to move, a white man said, "All right, get these niggers off the beach." According to Sheely, "That's when the fighting started." While the whites attacked Galloway, a man hit Sheely in the mouth with brass knuckles, which broke her front tooth and bruised her face so badly that she required hospitalization. Several whites, she noticed, whipped with chains the woman who stood beside her. The remainder of the weapon-wielding men chased the rest of the group from the beach; one kicked the fallen Sheely again before telling her to get up and leave. She and two other battered women had to carry Galloway to the street, where a constable ordered them to get in the back of his car. He made them sit in the hot, uncranked vehicle with the windows rolled up for approximately forty-five minutes before taking them to the hospital. In his affidavit regarding the incident, Galloway noted that county police officers watched the beating occur, made no attempt to arrest any whites, and directed traffic while the tumult ensued.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, April 25, 1960, pp. 1–2; Jackson *Daily News*, April 25, 1960, p. 1; Bernell Fletcher testimony, *U.S. v. Harrison Co.*, No. 2262 (S.D. Miss.), 912–14 (first quotation on p. 912); Dorothy Galloway affidavit, May 3, 1960, *U.S. v. Harrison Co.* file, Group V, Container 1216, NAACP Papers (second quotation).

<sup>40</sup> Delores Sheely testimony, *U.S. v. Harrison Co.*, No. 2262 (S.D. Miss.), 780–96 (quotations on p. 786); Galloway affidavit, May 3, 1960, NAACP Papers.

The violence rapidly enveloped all areas of the beach. One of the black men stationed near the hospital saw a group of ten to twelve whites tackle an eighteen-year-old youth and beat him with a blackjack. Charles Ellis and a friend sat in the sand when another crowd of ten to fifteen whites left their conversation with a sheriff to tell the two, "You know you're going to have to leave. We don't want you down here." When Ellis's friend asked for the reason, the whites hit them both with sticks and beat and kicked them as they fled across the adjacent highway. Another group of seven whites repeatedly beat Marzine Thames, a black male, with chains and clubs. Before losing consciousness, Thames remembered one white man telling another, "That will teach him a lesson, to go places he's not supposed to go." Sandy Daniels, a black man who stood near the lighthouse congregation, remembered that "dozens of whites" approached police officers who were parked in their cars across the highway from where his friends stood. When the officers left, the white mob attacked the crowd, beating any black person they could grab. As he fled the scene, Daniels noticed Biloxi police chief Herbert McDonnell sitting across the highway in an unmarked car watching his officers orchestrate and tolerate the violence.<sup>41</sup>

Fourteen-year-old Clemon Jimmerson swam in the gulf near the lighthouse as the white mob grew. He witnessed two white men accost W. B. McDaniel, the elderly man who owned the funeral home where the protesters had met earlier in the day, while he was playing baseball with some children. One of the men stole McDaniel's bat and, according to Jimmerson, "began hitting him beside his head." The bat-wielding white man yelled at Nolan McSwain, who watched the assault from his boat, "Come on out here nigger. We're waiting on you too." Another gang of whites spotted Jimmerson and chased him out of the water and off the beach. When Jimmerson later asked a nearby officer for protection while he retrieved his clothes and wristwatch from the beach, the officer said, "You had no business down there" and refused to aid the teenager. Jimmerson never recovered his valuables.<sup>42</sup>

Gilbert Mason arrived soon after the last protesters had reached the beach. He had decided to drive around the area to check his targeted

<sup>41</sup> W. Charles Ellis testimony, 1022–23 (first quotation on p. 1022); Marzine Thames testimony, 1180 (second quotation); Sandy Daniels testimony, 1032–54 (third quotation on p. 1045); all in *U.S. v. Harrison Co.*, No. 2262 (S.D. Miss.).

<sup>42</sup> Clemon Jimmerson testimony, *U.S. v. Harrison Co.*, No. 2262 (S.D. Miss.), 1143–47.

locations. Although he initially noticed nothing unusual at the positions, he saw “a good deal of fighting and running and scuffling that was taking place” near the lighthouse on his second tour. Closer inspection revealed five whites beating a black teen in front of the beach near the highway. Mason stopped his vehicle in the turning lane to aid the youth who lay motionless on the ground. Stepping from his car, Mason heard a white man exclaim, “Look what we have here.” As the group attacked, Mason tackled a white man who had hit him with a pool stick and managed to wrestle the weapon from his assailant. Struggling back to his feet, Mason watched three police officers approach the scene. As the others fled, Mason grabbed hold of two whites, but the officers freed them and arrested Mason for disturbing the peace and obstructing traffic. They later released the bloodied Mason to treat injured blacks on the scene and at Biloxi Hospital, where facility records noted the cause of injury to hospitalized beach victims as “integrational.”<sup>43</sup>

Sovereignty Commission investigator Bob Thomas arrived on the beach soon after the fighting began. He recorded the license plate numbers of all automobiles parked along the coast, watched the assault on Mason, and refused to assist a group of blacks who had tried for twenty unsuccessful minutes to procure an ambulance for their unconscious companion. In his report of the incident, Thomas noted “that the Biloxi police was scarce” in the area and that Sheriff Dedeaux had told deputies at the scene “that he did not want any arrests on the beach.” When Dedeaux saw Thomas on the beach, the sheriff said he expected no further trouble “after Mason got knocked in the head.”<sup>44</sup>

That same day in Gulfport, Felix Dunn, his wife, and their three children also went to the beach. The family was swimming alone in the water when a Gulfport officer ordered Dunn to accompany him to police headquarters. “You are not under arrest,” the Gulfport police chief told Dunn, “we only called you in to find out just what is going on” in the rest of Harrison County because “there are more Negroes on the beach today than we have ever seen.” The citizens’ committee and local NAACP, Dunn explained, considered it a day of “just going to the beach.” He distanced himself and his organizations from the nearby activities in Biloxi, emphasizing to the sheriff that the wade-in

<sup>43</sup> Thomas, “Beach Disturbances,” 5; Mason testimony, 958–72 (first and second quotations on p. 960); Mason, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*, 68–70 (third quotation on p. 70).

<sup>44</sup> Thomas, “Beach Disturbances,” 4, 7.



participants lived in Biloxi, not in Gulfport. The chief allowed Dunn to return to the beach but warned that his officers would not act as “baby-sitters for you down there.”<sup>45</sup>

Whites and blacks alike became even more uneasy after the beachfront violence had subsided. With white mobs growing larger and more agitated as the day progressed, violence spread throughout Biloxi. Groups of hostile whites surrounded the police department, bus stations, restaurants, and bars to assault black passersby. Others chased African Americans from the downtown and “white” areas of Biloxi back to their homes. One carload of whites shot and wounded three black women sitting on a bench in front of a closed grocery store, while another group attacked seven white airmen and two black sergeants visiting from nearby Keesler Air Force Base for trying to protect injured and elderly blacks from the mobs. The assaults on the soldiers prompted Commandant Colonel Wallace Barret to instruct military personnel to remain on the base and out of Biloxi. One black man barely escaped injury after a white mob broke his front windshield and tried to pull him from his truck. Ruffians even threw one unfortunate black man through a plate-glass window. White gunmen fired into two black lounges and several black-owned businesses, injuring two male patrons. When Myrtle Chatman, a black woman who had witnessed a shooting, reported the incident, a Biloxi police officer sent her to file a report at downtown headquarters. “We should arrest all of you goddam niggers,” the station officer told Chatman and her son when they arrived; he subsequently allowed a mob of angry whites to seize and beat the youth into unconsciousness. Police then arrested Chatman and her son for disorderly conduct, held them in jail for twenty-two hours, and made them each pay a \$25 fine before their release.<sup>46</sup>

Biloxi’s African American citizens flooded the police station throughout the day with calls demanding protection for their families and property. Other black residents locked themselves in their homes and refused to venture onto the streets. Police cars spent the night escorting black workers from their jobs to their homes, and many who could not get rides remained at their workplaces. County sheriff Curtis Dedeaux also sent officers to protect Mason’s office after receiving

<sup>45</sup> Dunn testimony, 882–95 (first and second quotations on p. 891; third quotation on p. 895; fourth quotation on p. 892).

<sup>46</sup> Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, April 25, 1960, pp. 1–2, April 26, 1960, pp. 1, 9; Jackson *Daily News*, April 25, 1960, p. 9; Myrtle Chatman affidavit, May 3, 1960, *U.S. v. Harrison Co.* file, Group V, Container 1216, NAACP Papers (quotation); Mason, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*, 73–74.

word that it would be blown up that night, but the bombing never occurred. Mayor Laz Quave urged all citizens to return to their homes, imposed a curfew, and sent approximately sixty highway patrolmen, county police, and city officers onto the streets armed with riot gear and tear gas to stop the violence. The officers arrested twenty-two blacks but only two whites before Monday morning, indicating that Quave obviously addressed his warning to blacks.<sup>47</sup>

The violence had barely receded before city and county officials began assessing blame. Commission investigator Bob Thomas, who did not record his activities during the riotous night in his notes, heard Sheriff Dedeaux accuse Felix Dunn of causing the previous day's trouble by his failure to "keep things quiet" until alternative beach arrangements transpired. Most local officials, however, publicly blamed Gilbert Mason for the chaos. "Mason has this town in an uproar," Biloxi chief of police Herbert McDonnell said. Although he argued, "All of us got along good with colored people down here until [Mason] stirred up some of the younger ones," adults and elderly African Americans had constituted the majority of wade-in participants. "I don't know what's going to happen next," the police chief confessed nervously. "This thing could get serious." Suspecting a vast conspiracy, Mayor Quave erroneously stated, "We've got Negroes here from Alabama, Louisiana, all parts of Mississippi and everywhere else." He called the riot "an organized move" that "is just the beginning." Biloxi Chamber of Commerce member Anthony Ragusin reflected the paranoia of coastal whites by insisting that the NAACP, "financed with overseas money from enemies of the United States," had orchestrated the disturbance.<sup>48</sup> In an attempt to restore order in Biloxi after the riot, Quave continued his curfews, required the registration of all firearms and ammunition, prohibited sporting goods and hardware stores from selling arms to whites or blacks, and made the police search groups of two or more people for weapons. Governor Ross Barnett promised to send in the National Guard if local authorities could not handle future developments.<sup>49</sup>

State and regional newspapers also voiced their opinions concerning

<sup>47</sup> Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, April 25, 1960, p. 1; Jackson *Daily News*, April 25, 1960, p. 1; Thomas, "Beach Disturbances," 5.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas, "Beach Disturbances," 7 (first quotation); Jackson *Daily News*, April 25, 1960, p. 1 (fourth, sixth, seventh, and eighth quotations), p. 9 (second, third, and fifth quotations), April 26, 1960, pp. 1, 2 (ninth quotation).

<sup>49</sup> Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, April 26, 1960, p. 1, April 27, 1960, p. 1; Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, April 26, 1960, pp. 1-2, 9, April 27, 1960, pp. 1-2, April 30, 1960, p. 1; Jackson *Daily News*, April 27, 1960, p. 1.

the Biloxi turmoil. The Jackson *Daily News* observed that Mason “is obviously more interested in gaining social attention than providing medical care for members of his race.” The Carthage, Mississippi, *Carthaginian* declared that the Biloxi blacks were “a well organized group” led by “outside professional agitators.” The Shreveport *Times* offered a unique interpretation of the affair by attributing the “inevitable” tumult to “the system of mass teaching of Negroes by the white-directed CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] to intrude illegally into any and all areas where they are not accepted—not confining themselves to lunch counters.” The Louisiana paper blamed the violence on local blacks who roamed the streets in large numbers and “with physical massiveness attempted to ‘take over’ to the extent of occupying the beaches and swimming in the waters regardless of law.” It further reported that only the “disorganized” whites, who had responded “armed with sticks and clubs” to the “mass Negro invasions,” had managed to stabilize the situation. The article concluded that if whites did not stop the radical organization CORE, “There can be no guarantee that [the Biloxi riot] will not be repeated in greater gravity and tragedy.”<sup>50</sup> This article reflected a white fear of organizations dedicated to integration much more than it accurately reported the wade-in, for neither CORE nor college students, who constituted the majority of the group’s membership, played any role in the coastal incident. In fact, women, children, and the elderly comprised most of the protesters. Their leader, Gilbert Mason, also defies simple characterization. He had no ties to student groups or national civil rights organizations and subscribed to neither a passive resistance nor militant philosophy. Mason and his followers simply responded to local conditions with tactics and methods that best suited their needs in the given situation without the assistance of national civil rights agencies, a characteristic that distinguishes the wade-in from direct action campaigns that later occurred throughout the state.

National and local black leaders responded to the accusations with swift indignation. Roy Wilkins, the executive secretary of the NAACP, vehemently characterized Ragusin’s nationally publicized charge as “a deliberate, premeditated, and vicious falsehood.” Dunn publicly claimed that his organization, the Gulfport NAACP, had no knowledge of and “had absolutely nothing to do with” the Biloxi incident. Mason defended himself by saying, “Anyone who says I touched off the riot

<sup>50</sup> Jackson *Daily News*, May 3, 1960, p. 6; Carthage (Miss.) *Carthaginian*, April 28, 1960, p. 2; Shreveport *Times*, April 26, 1960, p. 6A.

is an unmitigated, calculated, and pathological liar.” Instead, he denounced the gang of organized “hoodlums and goons” who had attacked blacks during their peaceful demonstrations, adding, “We shall not give up our fight to use the beach although whites have resorted to violence.” Mason consistently maintained that he had contacted no outside forces, such as the NAACP, FBI, or Justice Department, and that he had no plans to involve the federal government before the 1960 wade-in. Mayor Laz Quave told W. B. McDaniel, a protester injured in the beach melee, “Negroes had ruined Biloxi”; the best thing blacks could do “would be to stay off the beaches.” McDaniel, however, echoed black sentiments and white fears when he responded that whites “talk about the NAACP. They’ll see something of it now.”<sup>51</sup>

On April 28, four days after the wade-in, Felix Dunn and his attorney met with Sovereignty Commission officials at its Jackson headquarters. According to investigator Zack Van Landingham, Dunn had requested the meeting and had not come “at the invitation of the Commission.” The participants refused to discuss their conversation with the press, who knew about the meeting due to a commission tip-off, but Dunn did tell one paper that coastal blacks wanted “to feel they could use the beaches” if they so desired. He also added, however, that most blacks did not care for the beach because members of his race “don’t like swimming much” and “don’t need a tan.” Less than a month later, the commission leaked the meeting’s purpose and content to the press in an effort to stifle beach integration by embarrassing its proponents. The tactic became a commission favorite. The Jackson *Daily News*, among others, reported that Dunn had informed the commission that local blacks had accepted a segregated beach proposal—a complete contradiction of Mason’s position. The commission also used a tape recorder to document the meeting, which legitimized the media reports. Dunn did not know the agency had recorded his statements.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, April 25, 1960, p. 1; Jackson *Daily News*, April 26, 1960, p. 2 (first quotation), April 25, 1960, p. 1 (third and fifth quotations), p. 9 (fourth quotation); Mason testimony, 999–1000; Laz Quave deposition, *U.S. v. Harrison Co.*, No. 2262 (S.D. Miss.), 336 (sixth and seventh quotations); Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, April 25, 1960, p. 1 (second quotation), p. 2 (eighth quotation); Mason, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*, 71–72, 84. A major study of the NAACP during this era does not yet exist, but Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America’s Struggle for Equality* (New York, 1977) and Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP’s Legal Strategy against Segregated Education, 1925–1950* (Chapel Hill and London, 1987) are both fine examinations of the NAACP’s legal actions against segregation.

<sup>52</sup> Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, April 29, 1960, p. 1 (first quotation); Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, April 29, 1960, p. 15; New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, May 20, 1960, p. 11 (second quotation); Jackson *Advocate*, May 7, 1960, pp. 1, 7; Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, May 19,

The surviving tape provides a detailed account of the three-hour meeting between Dunn and the commission. Dunn first asked commission representatives for their assistance in reaching a “mutual agreement” between Harrison County officials and the black community concerning beach usage. Since “Biloxi has blown up” due to the beach demonstration, Dunn wanted to negotiate a solution to the problem before the area’s prosperous economy and tourist industry suffered irreparable damage. (Dunn also said, with little explanation, that he personally stood to lose \$43,000 in vending machine business if the situation could not be rectified.) When commission investigator Bob Thomas unequivocally stated, “The people of Mississippi are not going to have integration,” Dunn maintained repeatedly that segregated facilities satisfied local blacks. He also assured commission officials that “the NAACP has nothing, up until this very point, to do with this.” Nevertheless, he declared that he had wanted to abdicate his position as president of the Gulfport branch, but its members “won’t let me resign,” and he maintained that he had told black residents to avoid Biloxi Beach on April 24. Gulfport blacks, commission representatives learned from Dunn, had “no desire to use the beach”; Biloxi, however, was “another ballgame” due to Gilbert Mason’s leadership and insistence upon integration.<sup>53</sup>

Commission officials characterized Mason as an obstacle to racial progress who “has caused a lot of unnecessary trouble” on the coast. One commission agent noted that he “is a difficult man to sit down and talk to” because of a “mouth which is not pleasing” to whites, while

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1960, p. 1 (third and fourth quotations); Jackson *Daily News*, May 19, 1960, p. 3; Thomas, “Beach Disturbances,” 5; Thomas to Ross Barnett, May 2, 1960, SSC, 5-4-0-51, p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> Recording of Dunn meeting, April 28, 1960 (quotations); Thomas to Barnett, May 2, 1960, SSC, 5-4-0-50, pp. 8–10, and SSC, 5-4-0-51, p. 4. Despite the fact that commission tapes reveal that Felix Dunn clearly endorsed a segregated beach plan and repeatedly distanced himself from Gilbert Mason’s demands, Mason makes numerous attempts to dismiss the tape’s content and discredit commission materials throughout his memoirs, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*. He argues that “the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission files are filled with untruth,” contain “unproven suspicions” and “libelous[,] destructive rumormongering,” and are “full of gossip.” “[N]o one,” he concludes, “should be fooled into taking the Sovereignty Commission files at face value” (96–97). In regard to the tapes of Dunn’s meeting, Mason defends his colleague by saying that Dunn made conciliatory statements to confuse commission agents. Dunn “jived them,” “faked the agents out of position and got the ole boys with their noses wide open,” and lied to disguise his true intentions (102–5; quotations on p. 103). Despite Mason’s protest to the contrary, the entirety of Dunn’s statements and actions do not substantiate Mason’s interpretation of events concerning commission evidence. Regardless of its accuracy, Mason’s argument raises the possibility that commission informants consciously misled agency representatives. While this does not render commission records useless, as Mason suggests, it does present alternative scenarios that historians must consider when examining the materials. For more on the relationship between Mason, Dunn, and the Sovereignty Commission, see Mason, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*, chap. 6.

another believed Mason “could say ‘good morning’ to somebody and make them mad.” Dunn conceded that “Mason might forever be a troublemaker” but promised, “I can control Mason and the other Negroes” who wanted integration if county officials gave blacks segregated facilities. The commission promised to provide the black community a segregated beach in exchange for Dunn’s promise that the issue would remain “a local situation” with no interference from any NAACP groups. The agency supported the segregated beach solution because, according to investigator Van Landingham, “[w]ithout a plan of action the Sovereignty Commission is just a police club.” Dunn pledged to sponsor the plan in the black community, insisted that he did not “want any national headlines,” and promised to cooperate with the commission. At a secret meeting organized by the commission the following day between Dunn, commission investigator Bob Thomas, Harrison County sheriff Dedeaux, and the mayors of Gulfport, Biloxi, Pass Christian, and Long Beach, Dunn privately repeated the black community’s desire for a segregated beach. Although he reassured the men that he “could definitely control Mason,” the officials decided to make no arrangements until tensions had subsided in Biloxi.<sup>54</sup>

An expected reoccurrence of the riots failed to materialize on May 1, thanks in part to an assembly Mason had organized that Medgar Evers, the Mississippi field secretary for the NAACP, national media representatives, an NAACP-appointed attorney, and over seventy-five area black citizens attended. Mason used the forum to urge a boycott of businesses that had fired several black employees for their participation in the beach protest. Although the meeting seemed to be a victory for local integration, Mason’s efforts also encountered resistance from the black community. Nearly one week after the May 1 meeting, an informant told Sovereignty Commission investigators that Mason’s boycott “is a total failure” since blacks “are flocking to the white stores more than ever in an attempt to show Mason that they do not agree with his policies.” At a state medical convention for African American doctors held in Jackson days after the wade-in, the organization’s president both publicly and privately reprimanded Mason for his role in the riot. In addition, an April 30 editorial in the *Jackson Advocate* deemed coastal integrationists a “small minority” of the community and advised Mason to advance his race through medical

<sup>54</sup> Recording of Dunn meeting, April 28, 1960 (quotations); Thomas to Barnett, May 2, 1960, SSC, 5-4-0-50, pp. 8–10, and SSC, 5-4-0-51, p. 4.

discoveries, not political battles. The piece concluded by advocating a separate beach for blacks.<sup>55</sup> The apathy, resistance, and hostility Mason encountered for his role in the wade-in demonstrates that he had to struggle against both races to achieve integrated beaches.

In the meantime, white leaders moved toward offering blacks a beach of their own by forming a nine-member committee (all white men) to plan facility details. County officials accepted the idea after lengthy meetings with and considerable encouragement from the Sovereignty Commission. White officials, however, told reporters that blacks once had a section of the county beach designated for their use in front of the Veterans' Hospital in Gulfport, which they had shared with the facility's residents, during the mid-1950s. In 1959 the hospital ended the arrangement because, according to the hospital director, the presence of black bathers interfered with patient activities and recreation. He also admitted that white protest influenced the decision. Beach access was taken away, other officials claimed, because local black residents "swam nude in the dark," ran "naked in the day time," "used it for a love-making ground," and "packed as many as 1,000–1,500 Negroes" on their three-hundred-foot section at one time. Syndicated journalist and Gulfport resident Clayton Rand claimed to have witnessed blacks having "seagull-boils" on the beach after shooting the birds with pellet guns. He also said that black bathers left "a few little piles" of human excrement on the sand. One Harrison County resident remarked that the true reasons Gulfport blacks lost the beach "will never get into a newspaper north of the Mason-Dixon line," reflecting local frustration that northern newspapers like the *New York Times* and *New York Amsterdam News* portrayed whites in a negative light in their coverage of the event.<sup>56</sup>

The segregated beach plans continued to dissatisfy Gilbert Mason.

<sup>55</sup> Van Landingham to File 5-4, May 5, 1960, SSC, 5-4-0-56 (first and second quotations); *Jackson Advocate*, April 30, 1960, p. 4 (third quotation), May 7, 1960, pp. 1, 8. Mason claimed the medical censure "never happened" and assumed the Sovereignty Commission had paid *Advocate* editor Percy Greene to fabricate the story. In his memoirs Mason called the commission report "either a deliberate bold-faced lie or a Percy Greene hallucination." Interestingly enough, Mason defended the physician who supposedly reprimanded him even though commission files do not name the individual. Mason also dismissed agency claims regarding the failure of the black boycott in Biloxi. He instead maintained that a limited protest succeeded in crippling two local businesses that continued to discriminate against blacks following the wade-in. Mason, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*, 107, 83–84.

<sup>56</sup> Van Landingham to Director, October 20, 1959, SSC, 2-56-1-17, pp. 1–3; *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 1, 1960, p. 1, May 2, 1960, p. 1 (second, third, and seventh quotations); *Biloxi-Gulfport Daily Herald*, May 3, 1960, p. 1; *Jackson Advocate*, May 7, 1960, p. 8; Bob Thomas to Director, May 12, 1960, SSC, 5-4-0-69 (first and fourth quotations); Dedeaux deposition, 441–42 (fifth and sixth quotations); *New York Times*, May 2, 1960, p. 16.

Mason, who received several death threats after the wade-in, maintained that he “could not condone any form of segregation,” “will never be satisfied or accept segregated facilities for our citizens,” and would “not be satisfied with anything except first-class citizenship.” Felix Dunn, however, continued to secretly assure coastal officials that no black organizations would offer “organized resistance” against local beach policy. Commission investigator Bob Thomas surmised in his last written report that “Dunn can control Mason.” If the “mayors and supervisors will get together with something reasonable” concerning a segregated beach, Thomas reasoned, “Mason will have to go along with it. If not, he may be by himself.” Dunn’s unwavering support of segregated facilities led Thomas to conclude that “our job is done” on the Mississippi coast.<sup>57</sup>

Events soon transpired that invalidated Thomas’s conclusions. On April 30 a Biloxi police officer witnessed Mason and Dunn having “a pretty good argument” at an Elks Club meeting, before Mason had announced to over two hundred black area residents and press representatives his ongoing plans to pursue beach desegregation. Mason subsequently distanced himself further from Dunn and claimed that “the so-called riot” demonstrated “the need for a branch of the NAACP in the Biloxi area separate and distinct from the Gulfport branch.” As a result of the tension that had existed between the two in the year preceding the wade-in and had increased after April 24, Mason split from Dunn to found and preside over the Biloxi branch of the NAACP. Medgar Evers also distanced the state NAACP from Dunn. The reports of Dunn’s meeting with Sovereignty Commission officials after the wade-in infuriated Evers. He claimed that no branch “of the NAACP had ever asked for a negro beach” and that no NAACP representative had “ever appeared before the State Sovereignty Commission requesting a segregated beach on the Gulf Coast.” Dunn’s actions during the beach integration episode incurred the mistrust of blacks as well as whites, despite the fact that he had done little more than protect his own financial interests. Yet coastal events inspired, as well as frustrated, NAACP officials. The national office used the wade-in, which was the first direct action protest of its kind, as its model in campaigns against segregated beaches in eleven states from Cape May, New Jersey, to Brownsville, Texas. Executive Secretary Wilkins claimed

<sup>57</sup> Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, May 2, 1960, p. 1 (first quotation); Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, May 2, 1960, p. 1 (second quotation), p. 2; New York *Times*, May 2, 1960, p. 16 (third quotation); Thomas to Barnett, May 2, 1960, SSC, 5-4-0-51, pp. 1, 4 (fourth through eighth quotations).



that since tax dollars maintained the beaches, black taxpayers, who “get hot just like white people do,” had a right to use them. His rationale for beach integration foreshadowed the coming legal battle.<sup>58</sup>

On May 17, 1960, exactly six years after the release of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, the United States Justice Department filed a lawsuit against the Harrison County Board of Supervisors, Harrison County sheriff Curtis O. Dedeaux, the city of Biloxi, Mayor Laz Quave, and Biloxi chief of police Herbert McDonnell seeking to desegregate Harrison County’s beaches. The case, handled personally by Joseph Ryan, the acting director of the department’s Civil Rights Division, launched the series of legal maneuvers against segregation in the entire South. In the suit the U.S. government claimed that coastal officials had asked for federal assistance to rebuild the county’s seawall after a hurricane ravaged the area in 1947. The next year, Harrison County received \$1,133,000 in federal funds to repair the damage. In exchange for the aid, the county promised to build a three-hundred-foot-wide sand beach south of the seawall that would be open for public use. Local authorities, the suit claimed, had broken their contract with the federal government by “carrying out a policy of interfering with use of the beach by Negroes.” The case marked the first of its kind filed by the federal government to rectify the unfair use of a public recreation area built in exchange for federal funds. The NAACP publicly endorsed the lawsuit two days later, yet Dunn reassured white area residents that his branch “is not a party to the suit.”<sup>59</sup>

Federal intervention severely limited Sovereignty Commission activity and effectiveness on the coast, as the agency comprehended and feared the suit’s implications. Commission investigator Van Landingham confessed to Ross Barnett that the Justice Department case “presents quite a problem” to legal segregation because federal

<sup>58</sup> Thomas to Barnett, May 2, 1960, SSC, 5-4-0-51, p. 4 (first quotation); Jackson *Advocate*, May 7, 1960, pp. 1, 8; “Oral History Memoir of Dr. Gilbert Mason,” August 10, 1965, p. 4, Millsaps College Oral History of Contemporary Mississippi Life and Viewpoints (Millsaps-Wilson Library, Millsaps College, Jackson, Mississippi) (second and third quotations); New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, May 20, 1960, p. 11 (fourth quotation); Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, May 19, 1960, p. 1 (fifth quotation); New York *Times*, May 8, 1960, p. 1 (sixth quotation); Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, May 8, 1960, p. 1; Jackson *Daily News*, May 18, 1960, pp. 1, 3; Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, May 20, 1960, p. 29. The April 24, 1960, demonstration is the first recorded “wade-in” protest of segregated southern beaches. Other beach demonstrations, including a well-documented crisis in St. Augustine, Florida, occurred after the Biloxi incident. See Garrow, *St. Augustine, Florida, 1963–1964*; and David R. Colburn, *Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877–1980* (New York, 1985).

<sup>59</sup> Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, May 17, 1960, p. 1 (first quotation), May 18, 1960, p. 1, May 19, 1960, p. 1 (second quotation); New York *Times*, May 18, 1960, p. 1; Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, May 19, 1960, p. 9.

funds had built and maintained the beaches. He noted that whites living on the beach truly had no basis for their complaints since they “no longer own the land” on “the water front.” The agency nevertheless conducted one last project before it vacated the Gulf Coast.<sup>60</sup>

The commission already believed it had a reliable informant in Felix Dunn, primarily because it possessed material that could wreck Dunn’s career. Agents, who claimed to have evidence that Dunn was involved in a fee-splitting scheme with local attorneys, had threatened to present their proof before “a grievance committee of the Medical Association” if Dunn did not cooperate with their demands. Newly appointed commission director Albert Jones, who sensed that Dunn had even more to hide, instigated a deep examination of his personal life nearly two months after the Biloxi riot. Jones apparently hoped to find some sort of scandal involving Dunn’s medical license or his marriage to his first wife, Allie Parker, and to his second wife, Sara Ida Oden. He found the medical license and documentation of Dunn’s marriage to Oden but had difficulty locating the other marriage certificate. Encouraged that there may have been some duplicitous arrangement, Jones pursued without success further information on Dunn’s wives. The ambitious director found nothing credible to back his allegations of marital impropriety and eventually abandoned the investigation.<sup>61</sup>

Although the search for additional incriminating evidence against Felix Dunn failed, it demonstrates the measures the commission undertook to find material that would force black leaders to comply with the agency’s goals. Commission representatives also used public officials, who obeyed without questioning the ramifications of their actions, to do their bidding. In some instances commission agents personally spied on individuals. The use of personal information to blackmail civil rights leaders became a tool that the commission used time and again throughout the 1960s. Commission files still contain a copy of the Dunn and Oden marriage certificate, a symbol of the lengths the commission would go to manipulate intimate facts against its enemies.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Van Landingham to Barnett, February 4, 1960, SSC, 2-56-1-21, p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Van Landingham to Director, October 14, 1959, SSC, 2-56-1-16 (quotation); Albert Jones to S. O. Tharp, June 29, 1960, SSC, 2-54-1-18; Jones to Wilburn Hooker, June 30, 1960, SSC, 2-54-1-25; Carl Cuevas to Jones, July 4, 1960, SSC, 2-54-1-30; Jones to E. G. Lindsey, July 6, 1960, SSC, 2-54-1-31; Tom Scarbrough to Jones, July 8, 1960, SSC, 2-54-1-39; Jones to Lindsey, July 8, 1960, SSC, 2-56-1-45; Lindsey to Jones, July 13, 1960, SSC, 2-54-1-43; Jones to Hooker, August 17, 1960, SSC, 2-54-11-29.

<sup>62</sup> Dunn-Oden marriage license, SSC, 2-54-1-28.

While the federal case worked through the courts, a second organized demonstration turned local attention upon the beach once again. Frustrated that “the 1960 case was moving too slowly,” Gilbert Mason led sixty-eight blacks and three whites onto the Harrison County beaches on June 23, 1963, to protest the segregated recreation area. The action surprised few coastal residents. The *Daily Herald* reported that the demonstration was the result of three weeks of open planning; in fact, “city residents had been expecting the wade-in demonstration each Sunday this month.” Mason even informed Biloxi mayor Daniel Guice of his carefully orchestrated plan five weeks in advance. Dunn had also known about but refused to participate in the demonstration. During their protest Mason and his followers carried black flags in memory of Medgar Evers, whom Byron De La Beckwith had assassinated eleven days earlier. Over 150 FBI agents, Biloxi, Gulfport, and Pascagoula police officers, Harrison County deputies, and Mississippi highway patrolmen, armed with tear gas and wearing riot gear, watched the protesters as they swam, played baseball, and “milled around” during the event. Other officers blocked off the “Negro section” of town to keep whites out and dispersed crowds of whites that formed in the city. Keesler Air Force Base, hearing of the planned protest, did not allow its personnel to leave the base for the weekend.<sup>63</sup>

Hundreds of loud, jeering, and agitated whites grew to over two thousand during the course of the hour-long demonstration. Police arrested a white man who charged the beach with a .38-caliber revolver in his hand, but they could not stop a mob that slashed the tires of Mason’s automobile, broke its antenna and mirrors, scratched obscenities such as “nigger bastard” on its sides, hood, and roof, and finally set it on fire with lit cigarettes. The white rioters also overturned the vehicles of two other protesters. After nearly forty minutes of the demonstration, beachfront-property owner and realtor William Allen screamed at the demonstrators on the beach through a bullhorn, “I’m filing charges against all of you for trespassing on personal property.” Police then arrested all seventy-one protesters amid cheers from the enormous crowd of white onlookers. The next day a local judge found twenty-nine of the forty-three adult demonstrators who had been arrested guilty of trespassing and gave eight of them, including Mason,

<sup>63</sup> Biloxi Branch NAACP, “Biloxi Branch NAACP History,” on the web at [http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Senate/5197/B\\_history.htm](http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Senate/5197/B_history.htm) (accessed November 12, 2001) (first quotation); Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, June 24, 1963, p. 1 (second and third quotations), p. 2 (fourth quotation); New York *Times*, June 24, 1963, p. 20; Mason testimony, 965–80; Mason, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*, 134–38.

the maximum penalty of thirty days in jail and \$100 fine. The judge fined the rest \$50.<sup>64</sup>

The Sovereignty Commission's absence during the second protest is a crucial difference from the 1960 integration attempt. The agency disappeared from the area soon after the Justice Department filed its beach integration suit and showed no interest in the 1963 protest. The agency sent no investigators to the coast before or after the protest and only kept one newspaper report of the incident in its files.<sup>65</sup> Commission inactivity during the second beach event raises many questions that may never be fully answered. However, several elements provide some explanation for the agency's lack of interest.

First, the commission had three directors between 1960 and 1963. In March 1960 Governor Ross Barnett appointed Albert Jones as commission director to replace Maurice Malone, who had supervised the commission's work on the coast from 1959 until the first wade-in's aftermath. In April 1963 Erle Johnston became director. Each officer led the commission in new directions but spent less time and resources in Harrison County than his predecessor. The Mississippi coast, therefore, lost status as a commission priority with each new director. Second, the agency became involved in several other events throughout the state from 1960 to 1963. When Barnett made his commission appointments in 1960, he ordered the men to use the agency more aggressively to defend segregation wherever needed. As a result, the commission instituted a variety of operations between the two coastal protests, including the increased recruitment of black informants, the intensified surveillance of civil rights activists such as Medgar Evers, and attempts to undermine the Freedom Riders, a Jackson library "read-in," and James Meredith's admission to the University of Mississippi. In the commission's eyes, the June 23, 1963, beach event paled in importance when compared to incidents that had occurred throughout the state since the original "wade-in."<sup>66</sup>

Finally, the racial atmosphere on the coast had changed between beach demonstrations. Biloxi's new mayor, Daniel Guice, a young,

<sup>64</sup> The U.S. Supreme Court reversed these convictions on December 12, 1966. Mason testimony, 968–69, 974 (first quotation on p. 969); Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, June 24, 1963, pp. 1–2 (second quotation on p. 2), June 28, 1963, pp. 1–2; *New York Times*, June 24, 1963, p. 20; Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, October 1, 1963, p. 5, November 20, 1963, p. 2, November 21, 1963, p. 2, December 5, 1963, p. 23; *New York Times*, December 13, 1966, p. 39.

<sup>65</sup> Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, June 24, 1963, p. 1, clipping filed as SSC, 2-56-2-37.

<sup>66</sup> Moore, "Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission," 53–54. For more on leadership changes and the relationship between Ross Barnett and the Sovereignty Commission, see Rowe-Sims, "Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission," 30, 36–37.

progressive, and energetic leader who was elected in June 1961, promised to work with local black leaders like Gilbert Mason to avoid a reoccurrence of racial violence. Guice used communal self-interest, primarily economic arguments, to justify white cooperation with black demands. The tactic proved successful, as a degree of interracial cooperation developed on the coast during a period when racial tensions increased elsewhere in Mississippi. Most important, Guice believed that racial problems should be solved on the local level with no outside assistance from groups such as the Sovereignty Commission. Unlike city officials' response to the first integration effort, Guice did not call upon the agency during the second beach protest and told local officials to follow his lead. The decision of local white leaders not to request commission assistance best explains agency inaction during the second protest.<sup>67</sup>

While the fight for racial equality in Mississippi was waged throughout the 1960s under national media scrutiny, the federal beach integration case worked its way through the courts quietly. On December 14, 1964, opening arguments began in *United States v. Harrison County*. The trial ended on February 12, 1965, but Judge Sidney Mize died before issuing a decision. On March 8, 1967, Chief Judge William H. Cox, who had a reputation as an enemy of civil rights legislation, ruled in favor of the county and the property owners and dismissed the case. Federal attorneys appealed the decision to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans, which reversed the Cox decision on August 15, 1968. Tracing the history of the beach construction contract between the federal government and Harrison County, the court found that after the 1947 hurricane, county officials had turned to a federal statute that provided financial assistance for the protection of publicly owned shores against erosion and natural damage. To guarantee receipt of the aid, the Mississippi legislature had passed a 1948 act that assured "perpetual public ownership of the beach and its administration for public use only." The opinion stated, "It would be difficult to conceive of a more positive, complete, thorough, or unlimited grant of authority to comply with the requirements

<sup>67</sup> For Daniel Guice's relationship with the black community in Harrison County, see Mason, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots*, 122–24. For Guice's reaction to the 1963 demonstration, see Jackson *Daily News*, June 24, 1963, p. 1; Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, June 24, 1963, p. 1; and New York *Times*, June 24, 1963, p. 20. The degree of coastal uniqueness in regard to race relations manifested itself again over a year later, when Biloxi public schools became the first in the state to integrate. No protests or violence accompanied school integration on the coast. Butler, "Surface Similarities," 165–83.

of a federal program.” Judge James P. Coleman, the former Mississippi governor who had founded the Sovereignty Commission in 1956, wrote the appeals court decision. On July 31, 1972, after property owners had exhausted all additional appeals, the long battle to desegregate Harrison County beaches finally ended with all citizens legally free to use the public recreation area. Local and national newspapers, which had long since lost interest in the case, failed to mention the decision. Yet the importance of the coastal struggle is now recognized and appreciated by a new generation of Mississippians. On February 11, 1998, the Harrison County Board of Supervisors announced plans to erect a monument on the Biloxi beach in honor of those who participated in the April 24, 1960, wade-in protest, insuring that their sacrifices, courage, and accomplishments will not be forgotten.<sup>68</sup>

As the federal suit ran its course, so too did the Sovereignty Commission. On April 17, 1973, Governor William Waller vetoed a bill that provided commission funding. The Mississippi legislature did not try to override the veto, but it waited until January 1977 to begin the process of formally abolishing the agency. Yet the decision to eradicate the agency raised questions concerning the future of the commission’s files that state lawmakers debated during the 1977 legislative session. Legislators initially agreed to burn everything, but in March 1977 they voted instead to preserve and seal the files for fifty years. The legislature also ordered their transfer from a state storage facility in Flora, Mississippi, where they had been since 1973, to the Mississippi Department of History and Archives (MDAH) in Jackson.<sup>69</sup>

Several groups expressed their disapproval of the legislature’s decision to seal the files. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) ultimately spearheaded a legal effort to have the records opened to public scrutiny. While Judge William H. Barbour initially ruled in favor of the ACLU’s request on July 27, 1989, concerns about privacy issues and new countersuits delayed the process. Finally, in May 1994

<sup>68</sup> Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, December 14, 1964, pp. 1, 14, February 10, 1965, p. 1, 17, February 11, 1965, pp. 1–2, February 12, 1965, pp. 1–2, February 27, 1965, pp. 1–2; Johnston, *Mississippi’s Defiant Years*, 111; Biloxi-Gulfport *Daily Herald*, March 9, 1967, p. 1, May 6, 1967, p. 1, August 16, 1968, pp. 1, 8; New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, January 1, 1967, clipping filed as SSC, 6-45-4-39; *U.S. v. Harrison County*, 265 F. Supp. 76 (S.D. Miss, 1967); *U.S. v. Harrison County*, 399 F. 2d 485 (5th Cir., 1968), at 488–89; *U.S. v. Harrison County*, 463 F. 2d 1328 (5th Cir., 1972); Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, February 11, 1998, p. 2B.

<sup>69</sup> Moore, “Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission,” 98; Katagiri, “Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission,” 400–401; Rowe-Sims, “Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission,” 50–53; Johnston, *Mississippi’s Defiant Years*, 377, 379–81.

Barbour issued a new ruling that both opened the files and took privacy rights into account. This landmark judgment ordered that individuals named in the files be classified as “victims”—those subjected to “investigation, surveillance, intrusions or the dissemination of false and misleading information”—or as “state actors”—those who worked for the commission as employees or informants. Only the victims could protest the release of their files because state actors had violated “the constitutional rights of the victims” and so forfeited their own.<sup>70</sup>

Another appeal caused further delay, but in January 1997 the MDAH was free to advertise the files’ opening and to give victims a chance to protect their privacy. Nearly 1,000 of the 60,000 named individuals requested to review their information; of these only 116 asked that their files be sealed. Though some records remained mired in litigation, the MDAH opened the rest of the cleared files on March 17, 1998. Three computer terminals contained over 124,000 pages of official and unofficial notes, letters, press clippings, and other agency correspondence, including two subject folders on Harrison County beach integration.<sup>71</sup>

The Harrison County direct action protests, particularly the April 24, 1960, “wade-in,” are important events in Mississippi’s civil rights history for several reasons. The initial demonstration showed that while Harrison County differed from most of the state in many substantial ways, it did not escape the violent atmosphere that permeated Mississippi race relations during the 1960s. Yet the existence of a diverse economy and population, as well as the relative racial cooperation that characterized the area after the protests, indicate coastal distinctiveness. The segregated beach protests also complicate an understanding of how local civil rights struggles coincided with national, and intrastate, trends. The black community initially rejected integration and only slowly accepted it as a solution to the beach crisis, while the Gulfport NAACP never pushed for integration. The leader of local integration efforts, Dr. Gilbert Mason, also differed from most civil

<sup>70</sup> To publicize the files’ opening, the state placed advertisements in national and state newspapers. Victims had ninety days to request to seal their files, after which they waived all privacy rights. *ACLU of Mississippi et al. v. Ray Mabus et al.*, 719 F. Supp. 1345 (S.D. Miss., 1989); *ACLU of Mississippi et al. v. Fordice et al.*, 969 F. Supp. 403 (S.D. Miss., 1994), at 409 (quotations). See also Rowe-Sims, “Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission,” 54–58; Johnston, *Mississippi’s Defiant Years*, 382–83; and Dickerson, *Dixie’s Dirty Secret*, 219–21.

<sup>71</sup> *ACLU of Mississippi v. Edwin King*, 84 F. 3d 784 (5th Cir., 1996); Rowe-Sims, “Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission,” 56–58; *New York Times*, March 18, 1998, p. A1, p. A16, March 19, 1998, p. A12, p. A20; Dickerson, *Dixie’s Dirty Secret*, 226–27. At issue in the final lawsuits were the privacy rights of four individuals who had died before receiving their requested information from the commission files.

rights leaders and activists of the era. Mason was not a student; he did not initially belong to any large civil rights organizations; he acted nearly alone in bringing beach desegregation to his community's attention; and he did not subscribe to a strict philosophy of activism. Mason's efforts followed no intricate program and proved relatively short-lived and spontaneous, as his two demonstrations occurred over three years apart. He belonged to the black middle class, but he did not accommodate to the existing racial code or attempt moderate solutions to desegregate beaches, as many other blacks in his position throughout the South, like Felix Dunn, had done. He also stayed away from national groups and the federal government until he needed outside help to obtain integration, and he turned to the NAACP, which had limited power in Mississippi at the time, when he decided to organize Biloxi under a national organization.<sup>72</sup> Mason's actions reveal that he modified his tactics and strategies as coastal conditions changed, which further complicates an understanding of civil rights struggles in local areas and their relation to intrastate and national movements.

Most important, however, the coastal struggles illuminate several important aspects of the role the Sovereignty Commission played in preserving white supremacy throughout Mississippi. First, evidence reveals that until 1959 many state legislators viewed the commission as inefficient, corrupt, and a waste of state funding. The agency had to grow into its role as a strong agent of state-supported resistance to black equality. Only a change in Mississippi's racial atmosphere, the beach integration petition, and Ross Barnett's election provided the commission with a chance to lead the fight against civil rights in the state and saved it from an early demise. Second, the Harrison County affair reveals much about commission procedure and how it operated when faced with racial turmoil. Agency investigators responded rapidly to coastal racial agitation, interviewed local white leaders and law enforcement officials concerning the disturbances, checked the personal and private backgrounds of suspected agitators, tried to find incriminating evidence involving black leaders that they could use as blackmail material, enlisted black informants, and leaked information

<sup>72</sup> For more on class and black civil rights leaders see Daniel C. Thompson, *The Negro Leadership Class* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963); Louis E. Lomax, *The Negro Revolt* (New York, 1963); Emily Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1989); Glenn T. Eskew, *But For Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill and London, 1997); Dittmer, *Local People*; Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*; and Bayard Rustin, "The Role of the Negro Middle Class," *Crisis*, 76 (June-July 1969), 237-42.



to the press that damaged beach integration efforts. Yet the power and effectiveness of the commission should not be overstated. While most historians who have mentioned the commission have focused upon its role as a strong and omnipresent tool of white resistance to the Mississippi freedom struggle, the Harrison County incidents also demonstrate commission weaknesses and limitations.

In fact, the Sovereignty Commission actually did little to curtail beach integration. It did not organize or recruit local whites to oppose the protests and had to depend upon local officials, especially police departments, to mobilize popular white resistance. Commission representatives used Felix Dunn as an informant, but they already possessed most of the information he gave them. The agency's strategy to use black informants did not therefore prove particularly effective, for Dunn provided investigators with little to no help at all in preventing desegregation. On the contrary, his support of segregated facilities, along with agency news leaks that proclaimed a black desire for separate beaches, inspired local blacks and national organizations to increase their integration efforts. Sovereignty Commission leaders did not acknowledge the deep divisions that existed among black leaders in Harrison County, and their failure to understand the divide undermined commission activities. Furthermore, the agency's disappearance from the coast after the Justice Department filed its integration suit demonstrates the commission's impotence when faced with federal power. The commission realized it could do little to defend white supremacy against federal opposition and decided to utilize its resources elsewhere in the state.

Yet neither should observers characterize the Sovereignty Commission as comical or totally inept. Although its sporadic and often unsuccessful intervention has led some writers to compare the commission to a bumbling agency of "Keystone Kops" or to consider it the "KGB of the cotton patches," the existence and operation of the commission's public relations function should not be overlooked or dismissed as unimportant to its purpose.<sup>73</sup> The wade-in and subsequent civil rights violations brought tremendous media scrutiny upon segregation in Mississippi, which the commission had pledged to defend. In such a contentious atmosphere, rectifying the state's negative image seemed as important to defenders of white supremacy as actually prohibiting integration.<sup>74</sup> The commission, moreover, proved to serve an

<sup>73</sup> Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, March 19, 1998, p. 11A.

<sup>74</sup> Take, for example, director Erle Johnston's reaction to a letter from Dr. Stephen Taller, a

important role as mediator of local conflicts. In Harrison County most of the commission's independent activity focused on promoting segregated beaches as the best way of solving coastal racial disputes. The agency did not accomplish its goal in the county, but it was most effective when coercing whites *and* pressuring blacks into accepting its solutions.

What this examination of the commission's role in the beach protests finally makes clear, however, is that the agency could hardly have functioned without the assistance of white citizens, law enforcement agents, and public officials. Local whites empowered the commission by requesting its involvement in area racial affairs, providing it with information, and responding with force to black demands. The agency could not, and would not, have functioned as it did without white grassroots support and active resistance. The idea that ordinary citizens played a key role in the operation of large, oppressive, state organizations has been best developed most recently in historiography concerning Nazi Germany's Gestapo police force. Historians such as Robert Gellately and Ian Kershaw have argued that the criminality of a regime cannot be blamed solely on those in leadership roles; the general public must bear responsibility for compliance in the state's goals. While it may be a stretch to compare civil rights era-Mississippi to Nazi Germany, the conclusions concerning public accountability in the operation of the Sovereignty Commission and the Gestapo are similar: Neither organization would have been as effective without assistance from the general populace.<sup>75</sup>

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Berkeley, California, resident who claimed to have refused to purchase two frozen chickens from his local grocer because a Mississippi farm had produced them. Johnston declared, "I happen to know, from personal observation, that Mississippi chickens are the most scientifically produced of any in the nation." The "flocks are of the best strains," he continued, and the birds are "cared for almost as if they were members of a family." He recommended that Taller try "broiled Mississippi chicken for breakfast, golden fried Mississippi chicken for lunch," "appetizing baked Mississippi chicken for dinner," and "sliced Mississippi chicken sandwiches for a snack before bed-time." "Maybe one of these days," Johnston concluded, "you will set aside your emotions and again enjoy Mississippi chicken on your table." The records do not indicate if Taller ever succumbed to the lures of Mississippi poultry. Nevertheless, such boosterism was an integral part of the Sovereignty Commission's response to national criticism. Even a rejected chicken symbolized a threat to white supremacy in Mississippi that required immediate and serious attention. Stephen L. Taller to Mississippi Chamber of Commerce, December 21, 1964, SSC, 99-29-0-44; Erle Johnston to Taller, January 22, 1965, SSC, 99-29-0-45.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Gellately, "Denunciations and Nazi Germany: New Insights and Methodological Problems," *Historical Social Research*, 22, no. 3/4 (1997), 228-39; Gellately, "Rethinking the Nazi Terror System: A Historiographical Analysis," *German Studies Review*, 14 (February 1991), 23-38; Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy, 1933-1945* (Oxford, Eng., 1990); Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria, 1933-1945* (Oxford, 1983); Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Gerhard Paul, "Omniscient,

These conclusions regarding the commission's role in the Harrison County beach protests ultimately highlight a need for additional research into the agency's role throughout Mississippi. Some information is known about commission activity in the 1960s, but much more needs to be explored.<sup>76</sup> What role did the commission play during Freedom Summer and the Neshoba County murders? Did the agency's strategies or purpose change with each new director and governor? What effect did black suffrage have on commission activities? Did the agency remain active until its demise and if so, what elements, organizations, or events did it focus upon? Did the Mississippi Commission inspire the creation of similar organizations in Alabama, Louisiana, and other states throughout the region? How did the groups differ, and what did they have in common? Such questions reflect a need for more examinations of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, for future scholars must confront the agency to completely understand the nature of southern white resistance during the civil rights movement.

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Omnipotent, Omnipresent? Gestapo, Society and Resistance," in David F. Crew, ed., *Nazism and German Society, 1933–1945* (London and New York, 1994), 166–96.

<sup>76</sup> One of the most widely known and infamous examples of Sovereignty Commission activity was its involvement in the April 6–16, 1964, trial of Medgar Evers's assassin, Byron De La Beckwith. Investigator Andy Hopkins obtained a list of prospective jurors, examined their backgrounds, labeled them as "fair and impartial" or "[b]elieved to be Jewish," and presented his research and suggestions to defense attorneys. The subsequent jury, which included a cousin of Hopkins and a member of the White Citizens' Council—an organization that had sponsored a fund raiser to handle Beckwith's legal fees—acquitted him. In 1989 Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* reporter Jerry Mitchell researched the case and published findings that led to a new trial for Beckwith. In February 1994 a jury convicted Beckwith of murder and sentenced him to life in prison. Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, October 1, 1989, pp. 1A, 17A, October 3, 1989, pp. 1A, 5A, October 23, 1989, pp. 1A, 7A, November 26, 1989, pp. 1A, 15A; *New York Times*, February 6, 1994, sec. 1, p. 1.