

FROM SIT-INS TO EAT-INS: COMMEMORATING CHARLOTTE'S 1963 DESEGREGATION

Charlotte made national headlines in May 1963 when Chamber of Commerce members led by Mayor Stan Brookshire voluntarily joined with African American leaders to go two-by-two and desegregate Charlotte's leading restaurants. This "eat-in" came three years after the sit-in movement had opened lunch counters. It helped set the stage for the nation's landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act which decreed that segregation in all "public accommodations" must end.

Charlotte Civil Rights activist Dr. Reginald Hawkins triggered the action, leading a march on May 20, 1963 from Johnson C. Smith University to the old Mecklenburg County Courthouse and declaring "We shall not be pacified with gradualism; we shall not be satisfied with tokenism. We want freedom and we want it now." His call echoed a spirit of revolution honored in Charlotte history when on May 20, 1775, forefathers signed the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence declaring freedom from England. Restaurateur James "Slug" Claiborne suggested Brookshire's response and former Davidson College president Dr. John Cunningham, leader of what is now Charlotte Mecklenburg Community Relations, organized the activities.

The successful desegregation on May 29-31, 1963 pushed Charlotte into the national spotlight. The city's progressive action contrasted sharply with the massive resistance then going on in places such as Birmingham, where police chief Bull Connor turned fire hoses and police dogs on young Civil Rights protestors that same month. It was a key turning point in Charlotte's emergence as a major Southern city.

Groups across Charlotte are making plans join together in May 2013 to mark the 50th anniversary.

Organizers include Levine Museum of the New South, Mecklenburg Ministries, The May 20th Society, Charlotte Mecklenburg Community Relations and Merts Heart & Soul. With assistance from Charlotte Center City Partners, Charlotte Chamber, Queens University, Johnson C. Smith University, and the Carolina Room of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library.

SCHEDULED EVENTS

Sunday, May 19, 2013, 2:30pm – History Makers panel discussion. 1963 Participants & historians share their stories. Organized by Levine Museum of the New South at 1st United Presbyterian Church, 201 E. 7th St.

Monday, May 20, 2013 at 10:30am - March from Johnson C. Smith University to County Courthouse reenacting May 20, 1963 march led by Dr. Reginald Hawkins demanding desegregation.

Monday, May 20, 2013 at 11:30am – Annual Noon Commemoration of Mecklenburg Declaration in uptown including cannons, reading of declaration, and a celebration of Mecklenburg County's 250th anniversary.

Monday, May 20, 2013 at 7:30pm – The May 20th Society 8th Annual Speaker Series featuring Pulitzer Prize author Isabel Wilkerson, *Warmth of Other Suns*, who will connect her research on 20th century African American history with the Charlotte 1963 history. 7:30 lecture, McGlohon Theater in Spirit Square.

Wednesday May 29, 2013 – "Eat-in" Event for media in late morning will mark the historic desegregation, featuring some of today's civic leaders. It will kick off two days in which Charlotteans are urged to invite someone of a different race to lunch. Coordinated by Mecklenburg Ministries based on "Friday Friends."

Thursday evening May 30, 2013 – "From Sit-ins to Eat-ins" Community Festival hosted by Mecklenburg Ministries' "Friday Friends" at Levine Museum. Music and munchies set the mood on 1963. Participants in the 2013 Eat-in reflect on history, share what they've learned and suggest hopes for future. 5:30 – 7:30 pm.

Throughout May – Mecklenburg Ministries will encourage churches, temples, mosques and other faith organizations to draw upon this history in sermons and other communications.

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