

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN MINNESOTA: THE NORTHSTAR STATE LEADING THE NATION'S STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

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With reason, Minnesota can pride itself on leading the nation in many progressive causes. And a broad participation in the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s was no exception. Long overlooked, Minnesota led the cause to combat *de facto* segregation in the North. Not only did it produce numerous national leaders that fought for the cause of civil rights at the federal level, but at the state and local levels it also paced the nation in many ways promoting equality through moral education and passing substantive legislation to combat discrimination in housing, employment, and education. These efforts were bipartisan, biracial, and ecumenical. That is not to say there was no resistance. Minnesotans, like other Americans, expressed concerns over civil rights and the expansion of state power to address the grievances of, especially, African Americans. But unlike in other states, no substantive backlash formed. Thus the Civil Rights Movement in Minnesota, though slowed by legislative calendars and the limits of budgets and moral persuasion, witnessed some of the most, if not the most, progress in the nation.

This progress stands in marked contrast to the rest of the country—the South being the most obvious example where the fight to overturn Jim Crow was intense and in many cases violent. In many non-Southern states, though, backlash was clear whether in terms of resistance to legislation or quite literally in resistance in the streets against civil right protests. The North may have been more benign on paper than the South, but it also witnessed tremendous degrees of bigotry and opposition to integration. Minnesota was not free of bigotry, but the consensus and rapidity with which legislation passed at the state and municipal level, despite urban disturbances, underscored Minnesota's liberal cast of mind during a national period fraught with racial tension. Minnesota, thus, proved a northstar state for the nation even if its, albeit smaller racial tumults, proved a cautionary tale on the limits of civil rights. If Minnesota with its small African American population could not be free of even some racial tension, what state could hope for peace and justice?