Hazel Millard, February 2018
Advisor: Professor Joyce Mao

“No way on earth that we can gain any kind of political power unless we have some kind of economic power”: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Freedom Farm Corporation, 1969-1977

This research considers the work of Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977), a leader in the civil rights movement, on the Freedom Farm Corporation. Founded in 1969, the farm was designed to support the impoverished and malnourished residents of the Mississippi Delta. Beyond providing these basic services, which Mississippi’s government had failed to do for centuries, the farm also served as a meeting ground for the civil and labor rights movements. In doing so, the Freedom Farm both confronted and reflected deeply-embedded historical forces in Mississippi that had been used to protect the power of white plantation owners at the expense of black farm workers since the 18th century. Beginning with the enslavement of individuals of African descent, this power structure continued after the Civil War and into the 20th century through the rise of the sharecropping system. Arriving in the 1960s, this systematic oppression of black labor resulted in some of the worst health, housing, and employment conditions in the country. The founding documents for the Freedom Farm and its affiliated projects, including a nearby garment factory and day care center, demonstrate how the farm challenged these historical trends by fundamentally altering the relationship of black farm workers with their labor. The farm’s structure and finances show how it provided black farm workers the radical opportunity to both dictate the terms and reap the benefits of their labor. Moreover, the garment factory and day care center introduced a third intersection of activism to the project: women’s rights. This research also addresses Hamer’s significant contributions as a leader of the Freedom Farm Corporation, as well as how her story and the broader civil rights narrative is presented in Mississippi today.

Sources Include:


