

## Unveiling-1968 MLK Jr.'s Marks Mule Train Interpretive Trail

NOW, cemented in history, the visits, planning and implementation of Dr. King's visits to Marks/Quitman County, Mississippi to organize the 1968 Poor People's Campaign to Washington, D.C. is now a reality. This project was made possible through the funding of a 2018 National Park Service African American Preservation grant (NPS) and the collaborative partnership with Mississippi State University's Carl Small Town Center (CSTC). Residents and tourists can journey along the marked [Mule Train Interpretive Trail](#) and read, touch and explore the content of each marker. These markers signify the locations and places where Dr. King, members of the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference \(SCLC\)](#), noted celebrities, Freedom Riders, and hundreds of civil rights community organizers, as well as scores of local leaders and residents emerged; creating this civil rights history, which is now documented and artistically displayed on the eleven interpretive markers.

### ***A glimpse of the past 5 years--what propelled this small rural community forward...***

Prior to Quitman County and the City of Marks receiving the 2018 NSP grant, sparks were being ignited; the successful construction of the newest Northwest Amtrak station located in Marks, Mississippi was groundbreaking. This newly built station opened on May 4, 2018, and serves (2) trains stopping daily on the Chicago and New Orleans routes. It took two decades of lobbying to obtain the Amtrak station, and this community is proud to be one of 500 Amtrak stations in the United States. The station is located in a rural underserved region in northwest Mississippi, which now provide an affordable transportation option to a population of 347,150 within a 50 miles radius. <https://vimeo.com/280795466>

Call it a coincidence, fate or luck, just so happened when Quitman County/Marks was finalizing plans to launch a week-long commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the MLK 1968 Mule Train, simultaneously, the local grassroots committee was working on the grand opening and ribbon cutting for the Amtrak station in Marks. Both events attracted national, state and regional coverage. Joining the historic festivities in Marks fifty years later to commemorate these two separate events, were national elected leaders, [U.S. Senator Roger Wicker](#) and [U.S. House of Representative Bennie Thompson](#). They were joined by, state and regional elected and appointed officials. Several noted civil rights leaders in attendance were [Martin Luther King III](#), SCLC President [Dr. Charles Steele](#) and former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, [Mike Espy](#). The community was especially honored to have distinguished guest speakers, [Conor and Kathleen \(Kick\) Kennedy](#), grandchildren of the late [Senator Robert Kennedy, Sr.](#) The Senator visited the Delta in 1967, and witnessed the prevailing poverty. Thus, he along with [Marian Wright Edelman](#) were instrumental in convincing Dr. King to visit the Delta. <https://quitmancountymss.org/video/>

### **The SCLC Factor**

In 2013, with the exception of two entrance signs ([show picture of sign in park](#)) erected at the locations near Highway 6 & 3, in the Marks public park, and one sign located on the outskirts of the Town of Lambert, the existence of this civil rights history was practically unknown. The two mentioned signs were designed and procured by a Jackson State University professor and prominent historian, Dr. Hilliard L. Lackey, in honor of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Mule Train in the 1990s.

The sheer lack of the missing history of Dr. King's presence in Marks/Quitman County and the role of the *Mule Train* contribution, was evident when the president of the SCLC, Dr. [Charles Steele](#), visited Marks and this region in January, 2013. Dr. Steele was the keynote speaker for the activities planned in celebration of Dr. King's birthday in Marks. These activities were spearheaded by the organization, Youth

Opportunities Unlimited Division, Inc., under the leadership of Dr. Mary Frances Dear-Morton. Dr. Steele, members of his staff, and city and state officials toured the key sites of the meeting places and rallies where activities were held in preparation for the 1968 Poor People's Campaign (PPC). These locations included sites where Dr. King spoke, and other key SCLC staffers met to plan the Poor's People Campaign including Ralph Abernathy, Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young, Hosea Williams and Joseph Lowery. After King's assassination on April 1, 1968, the SCLC staff members returned back to Marks a month later.

### **2013-Pictures to highlight Dr. Charles Steele's visit**

Dr. Steele and his entourage, escorted by the late local civil rights activist, James Figgs, walked down the same streets in Marks as Dr. King walked and cried (Cotton Street) after witnessing the horrid living conditions in which families lived. Dr. Steele visited the grounds of the Quitman County High School, where 300 students and 13 teachers walked out in protest of the arrest of Willie Bolden, the headmaster of the *Mule Train*. He visited the jail site, where students and teachers were beaten by members of the armed state troopers. Steele got to step on the porch of the (shot-gun house) that served as the temporary SCLC headquarters located on Third Street. He visited the churches where Dr. King issued a rallying cry for support of the Poor People's Campaign (PPC) including Silent Grove Missionary Baptist Church and Eudora A.M.E. Zion Church. Later, he visited Valley Queen Missionary Baptist Church, where Dr. King conducted the 1966 memorial service for Armistead Phipps, who died while participating in the James Meredith's *March Against Fear* from Memphis, TN to Jackson, MS. Dr. Steele's last stops were downtown Marks Main Street, where the students and teachers marched to the courthouse and jail and later took the Main Street route once the protest was met with violence and "tent city" to view the camp site where civil rights leaders gathered and rallies were held. Additionally, the mules and wagons were assembled and people from over all the country gathered at "tent city" in preparation for the Mule Train journey.

### **National Historical Significance (you might consider adding a title for this next section)**

Steele's visit in 2013, energized this community and brought awareness of the need to unearth this history and expose it to the world. His visit was the beginning of a partnership with the Mule Train Historical Society. They played a pivotal role in organizing the grassroots committee to explore opportunities and resources to help tell and share the story of the Mule Train's impact and its role in 1968 Poor People's Campaign.

The members of this grassroots committee were challenged. This committee sought the means to bring this civil right history out of obscurity and into the light. Members learned that in 2011, Marks was selected from over 200 sites viewed as one of the thirty locations in Mississippi to receive a historic marker by the Mississippi Freedom Trail Task Force. This distinction was based on Marks' pivotal role and contributions to the MLK, Jr. 1968 Poor People's Campaign. With matching funds secured from the Quitman County Board of Supervisors and the City of Marks Board of Aldermen, the Mississippi Freedom Trail historic marker was installed in Marks, Mississippi on October 2, 2015, to honor the Mule Train's legacy. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uV25ALiAlpU>

The Mississippi Freedom Trail historic Mule Train Marker stands proudly in a prominent place on the intersection of Roger Road and Martin Luther King, Jr. Street, where the 13 mules and wagons traveled as they left Marks on the first leg of the Mule Train journey to Washington, D.C. The installation of this marker was the first major step to spotlight the Mule Train history. The installation of this marker also kicked off the inaugural Mules & Blues Festival, which spotlights the history of the Mule Train and

features the iconic local blues and country music artists that are descendants of Quitman County. [www.mules-bluesfest.org](http://www.mules-bluesfest.org)

### **Collaborative Partnership-Mississippi State University**

Momentum and progress continued in bringing this history to “life.” In 2015, Quitman County and the City of Marks, through a collaborative partnership with Mississippi State University’s Carl Small Town Center, received an “Our Town National Endowment of the Arts” grant to help fund the new Welcome Sign in the Marks Park. This sign would serve as the trailhead for the interpretive trail. In October 2016, the Welcome sign was installed and unveiled and kicked off the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Mules & Blues Festival. This sign represented “hope” and was the highlight of the 2016 annual county’s festival. During the course of this two-day weekend event, photographs of the welcome sign were posted by a number of festival attendees on social media. <https://www.smalltowncenter.msstate.edu/communities/marks-ms>

### **50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Impact**

In 2017, Dr. Charles Steele and members of his staff returned to Marks on two occasions, offering assistance in planning the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary commemoration. Upon his return, Steele was encouraged to see the grassroots committee progress since his visit in 2013. He visited the sites of the [Mississippi Freedom Trail historic Mule Train](#) marker and the new [Welcome](#) sign in the park. Steele, also toured the area of the proposed Marks children playground. ([Show pictures of Steele visiting these sites](#)) He was happy to see the overall success of the annual county Mules & Blues Festival. He returned in May 2018, as a participant of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary commemoration. On behalf of SCLC, Dr. Steele made a generous contribution to help establish the playground for the children in Marks. This project was spearheaded by the Marks Project. (<https://marksproject.org>)

Martin Luther King, III made his pilgrimage to Marks and was an integral part of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration activities, spending two days in May, 2018. King, III walked the path and viewed *the temporary markers mounted on steel metal poles, consisting of two aluminum panels, one side with a display of images and on the back were the descriptions, identifying the activity at each designated site.* These temporary markers were installed with the assistance of Mississippi State University (CSTC), and the grassroots committee which added to the commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup>. Thus, King, III stepped into the history that his father had created. For those in attendance of the events in which King, III was a participant, the occasions appeared reverent, seeing him honor the fortitude and the depth of the work that his father contributed to in 1968 by coming to Marks and the Delta to bring attention of the poor and economic inequality.

King, III most memorable appearance was standing on the portico county courthouse structure. He was surrounded by large antebellum columns supporting the overhead verandah of the 110-year-old building. At one point during his remarks, the American flag and the Mississippi State flag (bearing the confederate symbol) were flying simultaneously at full mast, as King delivered his remarks to the crowd. King, III was unaware, as he stood at the vantage point that overlooked the 1968 protest and peaceful march that turned violent as over 300 hundred high school students and a number of teachers were participants in. At one point, once the billy clubs and gun butts were swirled by the armed police officers, the students and teachers ran across the courthouse grounds and downtown Main Street, and west back

across the railroad tracks; into their segregated neighborhoods for safe haven. Several of the students and teachers sustained injuries, but thankful on that day, there were no fatalities.

King, III most impactful speech was before the crowd of high school students. He revealed his story of loss and tragedy, but his life experiences had not affected him nor his commitment to carrying out his father's and mother's (the late Coretta Scott King), legacies of promoting change by using the non-violent approach. He shared that the legacy of his parents has been imbedded in his psychic and overall being. <https://quitmancountymys.org/video/>

Dr. Steele and King, III visits to Marks/Quitman County ignited flames of hope. Their presence indicated that this civil rights history is worth preserving. Dr. King's visits and his plan for the Poor People's Campaign can't be viewed with symbolism. This campaign proved to be substantial in the programs which evolved that promoted funding for children's school nutritional programs, Head Start programs and the emphasis it brought to inequality for those living in poverty. Not just in the Delta, but the benefits impacted the lives of millions in this country.

### **Why the wagon wheel design?**

It was important to those working on this historic 1968 civil rights *Mule Train Interpretive Trail* project, to ensure the intent of Dr. King's goal of selecting Marks/Quitman County as the starting point for the Poor People's Campaign was a tribute honoring his heroic efforts, the members of SCLC and all those who participated in launching and the implementation in this Campaign. Thus, the 13 wagons, each pulled by two mules, kicked-off the Poor People's Campaign. The wheel is a symbol of continuous motion that revolves on an axle, which is used to thrust a wagon, locomotive, vehicles, and other modes of transportation forward. Without the foundation of the wheel, it's difficult to produce movement. It is an essential object to the elevation, which lift modes of transportation to the desired surface allowance, to enable ease for travel. It was the wheels that propelled the caravan of wagons movement; thus, the committee was fixated, and agreed to make the wheel the symbolic image for the Mule Train markers to mark the interpretive trail.

In 1968, little did Dr. King know, that this would be his last campaign to bring attention to the *War on Poverty*. And, little did the historians and local community realize Dr. King's visits would evolve over fifty years later, with the potential to help shape this impoverished rural Delta county. Marks/Quitman County is now becoming a nascent civil rights destination, with the potential to bring economic stimulus in tourism growth and the capacity to attract private investors and businesses for downtown and regional development. This potential has been fueled with the addition of the Amtrak station. The station in itself, took a lot of wheels, which were put into motion to secure the necessary state and federal funds for its construction. As with the unveiling of the Quitman County rich civil rights history, the stakeholders and the grassroots efforts continue to solidify state, federal and regional funding as well as collaborative partnerships. These efforts produced sparks, and now those sparks are flickering out signs of hope and aspiration. Maybe in retrospect, Dr. King was keenly aware that his presence in Marks/Quitman County, would one day open a door to help not only this community, but other small rural towns in the Mississippi Delta see a pathway forward to a greater economic prosperity.

