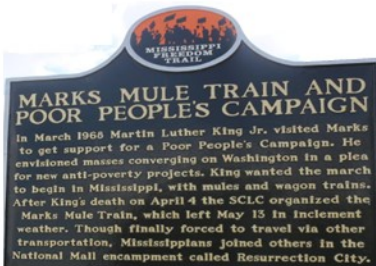


## Unveiling the 1968 Civil Rights Marks Mule Train Interpretive Trail Markers; Celebrating the 53<sup>rd</sup> Anniversary of the Marks Mule Train & Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign



On May 13, 2021, history was made once again in Marks, MS. After three years of planning and hard work by the City of Marks, the Quitman County Board of Supervisors, the Mule Train Historical Society and others, the Civil Rights Marks Mule Train Interpretive Trail was unveiled to commemorate the 53rd Anniversary of the 1968 Mule Train & **Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign**. This historic trail showcased eleven markers, displaying the history and activities, which took place fifty-three years ago of Dr. King's visits to Marks/Quitman County, MS and earned Marks the duly distinction of being known as the **"Home of the Mule Train."**



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). These markers signify the locations and places where Dr. King, members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) including **Rev. Charles Steele**, 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.



The unveiling program began at 3:00 pm with a VIP tour. Tourists, visitors and residents were able to journey along the marked Mule Train Interpretive Trail in the trolley. Tour guides and local leaders **Samuel McCray** and **Rev. Michael Jossell**, provided first hand accounts of what took place at each "wagon wheel" marker. They were guided by seven directional pathway signs pointing the way, as they rode the Mule Train Cultural Trail.

The first leg of the tour began at **Silent Grove Baptist Church**, where Dr. King stopped to rally support for the Poor People's Campaign. Other sites included **Valley Queen Baptist Church**, where he visited a local head start program and saw homes and people living in extreme poverty and the infamous **Cotton Street neighborhood**, where he wept and was inspired to take up the fight against poverty and economic justice.



Nearly three hundred students and thirteen teachers left the **Madison S. Palmer High School** to the groundskeeper's house where a high school science teacher housed and took care of the mules, **Tent City**, and the **Quitman County Courthouse**, where the protestors were met with violence by state troopers. A teacher and student were injured on the courthouse lawn. Finally, the jailhouse or sheriff's office where **Rev. Ralph Abernathy** then decided to bring Memphis into the fold recruiting Bluff City residents to protest. By late that afternoon, eight buses full of protestors from Memphis arrived ready to join the Mule Train.



As the tour continued, each location and interpretive marker were pointed out and tour guides explained the back story of Dr. King's visit, thus becoming extremely clear of the historical significance that Marks played in the civil rights movement. According to the King Institute, Dr. King's visit to Marks in 1968 was the start of the Poor People's Campaign, which was an effort to demand jobs, a fair minimum wage and education for poor adults and children.



As remembrances by local leaders began to emerge on the tour from stop to stop, eventually participants broke out in singing Freedom Songs, including "We Shall Overcome." Tour attendees were moved as they viewed the various locations where Dr. King walked for the Mule Train & Poor People's Campaign as he visited and interacted with the local people. After the tour ended, they arrived at the location of the 53rd Anniversary program, awards and Quitman County School District Lackey Scholars Recognition program, which was held outdoors next to the Quitman County Welcome Interpretive Center.



An air of celebration was spreading throughout the crowd as the observance of the **53rd Anniversary of the Marks Mule Train & Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign** began. **Dr. Hilliard L. Lackey, Jr.**, President of the Marks Mule Train Historical Society and Marks native son, presided. As guests were gathering on the lawn of the Quitman County Welcome Interpretive Center, they were serenaded by the musical sounds of **James "Super Chikan" Johnson** of Clarksdale, MS. In his welcome and reflections of the 53rd anniversary, Mayor **Joe Shegog**, reminded the audience that "It's left up to those who are living who can remember some of the things and witnessed some of these things that happened to keep the dream alive." **Manuel Killebrew**, President of the Quitman County Board of Supervisors, extended greetings to all in attendance. The invocation was given by followed by **Rev. Reginald Griffin**, Pastor, Pleasant Hope M.B. Church, Lambert, MS.



Native son, **Samuel McCray**, Vice-President of the Marks Mule Train Historical Society, shared some **first-hand** historical reflections about his 1968 Mule Train experience and his interaction with Dr. King. **Leah Kemp**, Director of the Mississippi State University Carl Small Town Center presented the historic Marks Mule Train Interpretive Trail. **Dr. Lackey** recognized **Pamela Junior**, Director of the Two Mississippi Museums, who introduced **John Spann**, Curator of Education and Interpretation. He informed the audience that they will be adding video and pictures to the Civil Rights Museum of the Mule Train Interpretive Trail.



Mule Train Historical Society Community Awards were presented to the following: "**Man of the Year**", **Calvin Upshaw**, *American Idol* Contestant; "**Woman of the Year**", **Velma J. Benson-Wilson**, *Quitman County's Economic & Tourism Director and Quitman County Administrator (2016-2020)*; "**Person of the Year**", **Senator Robert L. Jackson**, *MS State Senator, 11 District* and **Humanitarian Award Honorees**, **Dr. Richard E. Waller, M.D.** and **Dr. James E. Warrington, M.D.** The *Key to the City* and special recognition for **Outstanding Documentarian Award** were presented to **Katina Rankin**, News Anchor, WATN-TV Local 24 ABC News, Memphis, TN. She was nominated for an Emmy award for her documentary, "The Mule Train: Poor People's Campaign Continued."



One of the highlights of the 53rd Anniversary observance was the awards presented to the **2021 Quitman County School District Lackey Scholars** by Judge **Gina Higgins**, Shelby County Circuit Court Judge and **Alice Smith**. The Lackey Scholars are esteemed ambassadors for the Quitman County School System as well as their high school and community.



**Velma Benson-Wilson**, Quitman County Director of Economic & Tourism, recognized the support and funding received from the National Park Service African American Civil Rights Grants and from Mississippi State University's Carl Small Town Center (CSTC). She further stated that "she was honored to be a part of this project to bring this history of life."



Superintendent of Quitman County Schools, **Dr. Evelyn Jossell**, gave closing remarks.



~ The unveiling and program were made possible by the following sponsors ~



This project is supported in part by funding from the Mississippi Arts Commission, a state agency, and in part, from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.





## Why the Wagon Wheel design?

*"Without the foundation of the wheel, it would be difficult to produce movement. It was the wheels of those wagons that propelled the Poor People's Campaign forward, and those wagon wheels will now be parked permanently along the Mule Train Interpretative Trail",*

*Katina Rankin, Emmy Nominee, "The Mule Train: Poor People's Campaign Continued" Documentary.*



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. This 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 which enables 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*. Little did the historians and local community realize that Dr. King's visits would evolve over fifty years later with the potential to help shape this impoverished rural Delta county. 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 blossomed with the addition of the Amtrak station. The station within 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, stakeholders and grassroots efforts continue to solidify state, federal and regional funding as well as collaborative partnerships. These efforts produced sparks which are now 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 greater economic prosperity.



*The Mule Train cultural civil rights markers were produced with assistance from the Historic Preservation Fund, administered by the National Park Service, Department of the Interior. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of the Interior."*

