

Black History Month

A Florida Focus

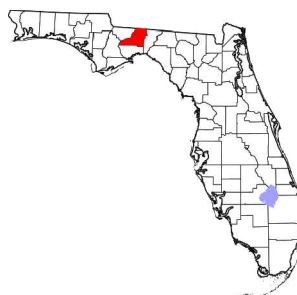
A CIVICS IN REAL LIFE SERIES: CIVICS CONNECTION SPOTLIGHT

Spotlight #10: The Stephens Sisters

After refusing to give up her bus seat to a white passenger in December of 1955, [Rosa Parks](#) inspired more acts of [civil disobedience](#) around the nation. Many demonstrations to protest legal segregation took place in Florida's capitol city of Tallahassee. The civil rights activists behind most of these protests were students from [Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University \(FAMU\)](#), a historically Black college. Among them were two sisters, Patricia and Pricilla Stephens. The Stephens sisters spent the summer of 1959 attending the [Miami Interracial Action Institute](#) where they learned about how to start civil rights organizations, and the [techniques](#) and principles of nonviolent protest. In November 1959, they founded Tallahassee's first chapter of [C.O.R.E.](#) (Congress of Racial Equality). The sisters began to lead the group in sit-in protests at segregated lunch counters. In 1960, using the tactics they learned at the M.I.A.I. workshop, they staged a sit-in at the [Woolworth's lunch counter](#) in downtown Tallahassee. When they were arrested for "disturbing the peace by engaging in riotous conduct and assembly to the disturbance of the public tranquility" they decided not to pay their \$300 arrest fine, but instead stay in jail. This launched the first "jail-in" of the civil rights movement. Their decision sparked the interest of many renowned civil rights leaders who would both reach out through letters, and also engage in their own jail-in events. Martin Luther King Jr. [wrote](#) to the sisters reminding them that "...unearned suffering is redemptive. Going to jail for a righteous cause is a badge of honor and a symbol of dignity." After serving 49 of their 60 day sentence in the Leon County jail, the sisters continued to fight for justice and equality in Florida. They led and participated in [numerous](#) other sit-ins, freedom rides, and marches. They [spoke](#) at events and venues. However, the work of the Stephens sisters came at personal cost. They were asked to withdraw from FAMU (later returning to finish their degrees) and [Patricia](#) suffered a permanent injury to her eyesight after being tear gassed at a march. Nonetheless, as Patricia explained in an interview later in life, "I didn't look at it as making history. It was just something we needed to do." The Stephens Sisters' efforts to stand up for their civil rights helped raise awareness and contributed to nationwide and legislative [changes](#) that safeguarded civil rights for all Americans.

CONNECTION QUESTIONS

- What foundational principles and constitutional guarantees were the Stephens sisters and other individuals involved in the Civil Rights Movement fighting to uphold?



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