On July 11, 1963, at the height of the Danville civil rights struggle, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., spoke at High Street Baptist Church to a large crowd, condemning the ruthlessness of the Danville police department and commending those who participated in the nonviolent direct action demonstrations.

"You have inspired all of us through your courageous efforts, your willingness to suffer, and your willingness to stand up for a cause... which we all know, is a righteous cause." Dr. King said.

He pledged his support not only as the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference but also, he said, to let the community know that he was there as an individual.

"Now there's another reason why I am here and that is... that injustice is here," Dr. King said, "and I feel that wherever injustice is alive, it is a responsibility for people of good will to take a stand against it, for injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Those who participated placed themselves at risk and paid a price. As Bishop Lawrence Campbell, a leader of the Danville Christian Progressive Association, has emphasized, included among their numbers were some white residents of Danville and other who had come from afar; all considered themselves allies in the fight against injustice.

Virginia Bourne, left, led the effort to desegregate the local Young Women's Christian Association, engaged in dialogue with black leaders in the summer of 1963, and stood up for integration throughout the city.

Charles Womack, right, a moderate on city council, participated in discussions in the fall of 1963 between demonstration leaders and city council that helped break the impasse between protesters and white authorities.

The Society of Christ Our King, a Catholic missionary order dedicated to evangelization and social work, provided housing on its eighty-acre farm outside Danville for young civil rights workers from out of town; Danville's Mother Teresa of the Society of Christ Our King encouraged young protesters and demonstrated herself.

Reverend Robert L. McCan, a pastor of First Baptist Church, was dismissed for speaking out for justice; and the
minister of Mount Vernon Methodist Church, the Reverend William P. Watkins, was censored for criticizing from the pulpit the actions of the all-white city administration and the segregationist element of city council.

Dr. Samuel Newman, right, a native of Warsaw, Poland, was a member of the board of the Southern Conference Educational Fund, which worked to end segregation and disenfranchisement of African Americans in the South. He corresponded with James Dombrowski, the executive director, and, for their activism, both men were labeled communists by segregationists. When Dr. King first came to Danville, he sought out Dr. Newman to convey greetings from Rabbi Israel Dresner of Springfield, New Jersey, then stayed for two hours of conversation between the two about their respective religious traditions. The two then struck up a correspondence, according to Dr. Newman, who detailed the relationship when he delivered remarks about Dr. King at a service at Loyal Baptist Church in Danville.

As Demonstrations began in Danville, Mother Teresa and Sister Leona Card of the Society of Christ Our King order joined protesters on the steps of the Municipal Building, carrying a sign saying “Segregation is inherently evil.” When they returned to the convent, a call was waiting from Bishop John J. Russell in Richmond, forbidding them to demonstrate.

In July 1963, the Danville Christian Progressive Association planned a mother’s march for civil rights, and asked Mother Teresa to join, but, given Bishop Russell’s call, she declined. However, she wanted Catholic representation in the march, and contacted Dorothy Day, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement and a fierce advocate for the poor.

Understanding that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” Dorothy Day got on a bus from New York to Danville. When she arrived, she spoke to a mass meeting at High Street Baptist Church. The next morning, Day (above) protested on Danville’s Main Street, carrying a placard with this quote from the Pope: “He who possesses certain rights has likewise the duty to claim those rights as marks of his dignity, while all others have the obligation to acknowledge those rights and respect them.”


“He who possesses certain rights has likewise the duty to claim those rights as marks of his dignity, while all others have the obligation to acknowledge those rights and respect them.”
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the SCLC in Virginia

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., visited Danville four times in 1963 as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). That group planned to conduct a major campaign in the southern Virginia city in the fall of 1963. This commitment grew out of a rich history of the SCLC in Virginia, where SCLC affiliates in Petersburg, Hopewell, Lynchburg, Danville, and other cities gave the SCLC a strong organizational base.

Bolstered by this network, SCLC staff traveled around the commonwealth, giving speeches, offering moral support for protesters, organizing voter registration drives, leading citizen education courses, and providing training in nonviolent resistance and direct action to end racial discrimination and segregation. Highlights, outside of Danville, of SCLC activity in Virginia include the following.

October 2, 1958
Virginia Chapter of SCLC Established. The SCLC holds its annual conference in Norfolk on October 2, an event that inspires African-American leaders in the commonwealth to establish the Virginia chapter of SCLC.

January 1, 1959
Prayer Pilgrimage for Public Schools. The Reverend Wyatt Walker, pastor of Gillfield Baptist Church in Petersburg, leads as many as 1,800 people through the rain on a seventeen-block march to protest the school closings in Virginia. Dr. King, at Rev. Walker’s urging, had written a letter to ministers throughout the state. He encouraged each to send at least fifty participants. A prerecorded message from Dr. King is played in front of the Virginia State Capitol.

June 1, 1960
Dr. King Speaks at a Mass Meeting in Petersburg. Dr. King speaks at Gillfield Baptist Church, Petersburg, to inspire the large crowd at a mass meeting. Dr. King and Rev. Walker had been friends in seminary. Rev. Walker was leading the SCLC-affiliated Petersburg Improvement Association in protests, including lunch counter sit-ins, that result in the integration of the Trailways Bus Terminal and the Petersburg Public Library later that year.

September 1960
Dr. King Recruits Top Aides from Petersburg. Rev. Walker moves to SCLC headquarters in Atlanta to become SCLC executive director; Dorothy F. Cotton, a key figure in the Petersburg Improvement Association, accompanies him as an administrative assistant and, beginning in 1963, directs the SCLC’s Citizenship Education Program.

March 27-28, 1962
People to People Tour in Southside. Dr. King conducts a “People to People Tour” in Southside VA, accompanied by the Rev. Milton A. Reid of Petersburg, the head of the VA chapter of the SCLC, and other senior SCLC leaders. The group visits Petersburg, Lynchburg, Farmville, Hopewell, Mount Level, and Rocky Branch. In Hopewell, Dr. King attends a hearing for the Rev Curtis W. Harris, who is being tried for contempt for refusing to give the names of other SCC members to the Boatwright Committee of the Virginia General Assembly or to answer questions posed by the committee.

June 1962
Southside Voter Registration Drive. SCLC field secretary Herbert V. Coulton, a Petersburg native, begins a voter registration drive in the Fourth Congressional District. In the rural Southside district, blacks make up nearly 50 percent of eligible voters, but less than 20 percent are registered to vote. The drive continues for the next two years.

March 25 & 26, 1963
University of Virginia Audience Hears Dr. King. On March 25, Dr. King speaks at Old Cabell Hall at the University of Virginia, inspiring a crowd of about 900 people, then travels to Danville, where on March 26 he addresses a crowd of 2,500 at an event at the City Auditorium, organized by the Danville Progressive Christian Association, and SCLC affiliate.

August 28, 1963
March on Washington. At Dr. King’s request, the Reverend Virgil Wood, pastor of Diamond Hill Baptist Church in Lynchburg and the leader of the Lynchburg Improvement Association, an affiliate of SCLC, coordinates the state of Virginia for the historic March on Washington. The day after, a brick is hurled through the window of his residence in Lynchburg.

September 24-27, 1963
SCLC Holds its Annual Convention in Richmond. The SCLC meets in Richmond for its annual convention and wrestles with its next move – return to Birmingham, where official had not fulfilled an agreement signed in May 1963, or launch an initiative in Danville.

July 2, 1965
Dr. King Calls for End to War. In a nationally reported speech at a SCLC rally at Roger Stadium, Virginia State College, Petersburg, Dr. King speaks out against the Vietnam War.
After Charles Kenneth Coleman, a history teacher in the 1930s at John M. Langston High School, was dismissed from his job for fighting for equalization of black and white teacher salaries, he became a carrier for black newspapers, collecting installments on the $4.50 Virginia poll tax as he collected payments for the papers. In 1946, Coleman, who was head of the Danville NAACP and the Danville Voters League, ran for Danville City Council, the first African American to seek elected office since Reconstruction. Although Coleman lost, the late James W. Peters, a long time Danville resident and funeral home operator, said of him: “We would have to say he was the actual founder of the [Danville] movement.”

Alicia H. Thorpe, a revered Danville teacher, worked in unequal school facilities with unequal resources and unequal pay in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, using her creativity to find solutions and level the playing field for her students. Her commitment, integrity, and determination, coupled with her care and concern for her students, endowed many young people with the confidence, self-esteem, resilience, and educational foundation they needed to challenge inequality in their own eras.

Lawrence M. Clark attended John M. Langston High School in the Holbrook-Ross neighborhood. Mrs. Thorpe, his English teacher, took a special interest in him. “If a teacher saw a student showed some promise, then they would kind of tuck them under their shoulders and try to work with them,” he said. Dr. Clark, who died in 2012, went on to earn his bachelor’s degree from Virginia State University in Petersburg, his doctorate in education from the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, and became associate provost and professor of mathematics at North Carolina State University. There he coordinated all activities related to the university’s affirmative action plan, established academic and cultural programs in Africa, was a co-founder of the African American Cultural Center, and fostered many initiatives to promote social and racial equality, fulfilling the promise Mrs. Thorpe saw in him.

A retired Danville teacher and author, Beatrice Hairston was actively involved in the Danville civil rights activities, providing bond for one of the first leaders.
arrested, lobbying Dan River Mills to change its segregationist policies and practices, and serving as an officer in the Danville Christian Progressive Association (DCPA), an affiliate of Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). When Dr. King came to Danville to inspire and encourage the demonstrators, he stayed at Mrs. Hairston's home. David Levering Lewis, in King: A Biography, writes that at a time when “the essential Martin Luther King was buried under tons of press copy and television film,” Dr. King was able at Mrs. Hairston’s house to feel at home and relax. “Off went the shoes, the tie was loosened, and after a cup of her good coffee, he made his way to the Hairston refrigerator for some Southern fried chicken. Later, they talked about the families they knew in Atlanta, and Martin cracked a number of jokes that, although few can be recalled, unfailingly convulsed his friends.”

In the fall of 1963, Danville civil rights leaders added boycotts and a Citizenship School at Loyal Baptist Church to their strategy. Through Citizenship Schools, the SCLC teachers instructed local community members in reading, leadership, grassroots organizing, and nonviolence. On October 2, 1963, Dorothy E. Moore of the Danville Progressive Association wrote to Dorothy Cotton of the SCLC, stating that DCPA had started a Citizenship School at Loyal Baptist Church, the largest Negro congregation in the city. But the school faced an obstacle. Because a boycott [of white businesses] was in effect, she wrote, shopping was limited and supplies expensive. She requested $570 to start classes.

Loyal Baptist Church, where SCLC started a Citizenship School in 1963. Photo: Emma Edmunds

In 1966, Johnnie M. Fullerwinder and her husband left their hometown in Spartanburg, South Carolina, to teach at George Washington High School in Danville. After interviewing with Danville’s superintendent of schools, Mrs. Fullerwinder had been confident she would be offered a position teaching biology at Danville’s all-black Langston High School. To her surprise, she was instead offered a position at the recently integrated and predominantly white George Washington High School. With some trepidation, Mrs. Fullerwinder accepted the job as the first African-American teacher at the school, determined to prove that she could do her part as a teacher in the civil rights struggle, focusing on educating her students and presenting herself as the very competent science teacher she was. “Failure was not an option,” she said in an interview with Derrick P. Alridge, a professor in the Social Foundations of Education program at the Curry School at the University of VA and director of the Teachers in the Movement Project; and Shontelle White, a Curry student from Danville and a member of the Teachers in the Movement research team.

The Hairston home, where Dr. King stayed when he was in Danville. Photo: Emma Edmunds

Dorothy O. Harris, a longtime Danville educator, decided to become an active part of the Danville civil rights movement after seeing fire hoses turned on peaceful protesters. “I was in the school board office, looking out at the courthouse. The policemen had water hoses pushing demonstrators down the street, just with all the power of the water. I said to the secretary, who was white, and was looking with me, ‘You know where I will be spending the rest of my summer? As part of this movement. This is not right.’ And she said, ‘It surely is not.’” Mrs. Harris volunteered as the recording secretary at High Street Baptist Church, the center of the movement, noting who marched, who was arrested, and who was in need of bail. Her husband, the late Charles Harris - then a teller at First State Bank - helped organize the bonding effort; he later became the first African-American mayor of Danville.
In the summer of 1963, civil rights protests, violence, and a protracted legal struggle gripped Danville, Virginia, and challenged the social and political contracts that black and white residents assumed to govern their community. The violent police reaction to a peaceful prayer vigil was unusual in the Upper South, and in its aftermath, fractures and fissures developed in the social foundation of Danville and in the relationship between black and white residents. The local black leaders who often represented the black community in negotiation with the white community aligned behind the protesters, and property holders in the black community stepped forward to help finance the bonding and legal costs of more than 300 demonstrators who were arrested in the months of June and July.

Martin Luther King Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People all sent state and national leaders to Danville in 1963 to assist the African-American protesters. Jails overflowed with protesters, and demonstrators were sent to facilities in neighboring counties. The court dockets log-jammed; some cases dragged on until 1973. During the fall of 1963, SCLC prepared to launch a major campaign in the tobacco and textile town in southern Virginia but halted it when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963. Behind this decision was not only propriety but also the fact that, under President Lyndon B. Johnson’s leadership of the country, Dr. King’s attention turned to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

In the long narrative of the civil rights movement, the Danville protests — like many of those in 1963 — helped bring attention to the struggle of African Americans to gain their full rights, leading to the national momentum that played a role in the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and led ultimately to the end of segregation. Significant gains were made in Danville in the fall of 1963: African Americans registered to vote for the first time, despite the poll tax, and the city hired an African-American policeman and adopted a fair employment policy.

Funding for this project was provided by the Elizabeth Smart James Grant Trust of Danville and the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities.
Mapping Local Knowledge: Danville, VA, 1963

January 1
Sit-in at Howard Johnson’s.
Five members of the Danville Christian Progressive Association (DCPA) sit in at the local Howard Johnson’s restaurant. Each is found guilty of trespassing and fined $100.

March 26
King speaks in Danville. Martin Luther King, Jr., speaks at the Danville City Auditorium to a crowd of 2,500 at an event organized by the DCPA.

May 31
Demonstrations Begin Peacefully.
Rev. Lawrence Campbell and Rev. A. I. Dunlap, leaders of the DCPA, organize and lead demonstrations. No arrests are made; the press ignores the event.

June 5
Occupation and Ouster at City Hall.
On June 5, police oust 125 demonstrators who march into City Hall and the City Manager’s Office; five are arrested.

June 6
Judge Aiken Issues Temporary Injunction.
Two hundred demonstrators march to the Municipal Building. Corporation Court Judge Archibald Aiken issues a temporary injunction, later made permanent, vastly limiting the scope of demonstrations.

June 7
Special Grand Jury Indicts DCPA Leaders.
A special grand jury, called by Judge Aiken, indicts three leaders of the DCPA—Lawrence Campbell, A. I. Dunlap, and Julius Adams—under the 1835 “John Brown” statue outlawing conspiracy “to incite the colored population of the State to acts of violence and war against the white population”; bail is set at $5,000 each.

June 10
Bloody Monday.
Demonstrations begin in the morning; police make arrests, hose down demonstrators, and jail about fifty. That evening, Rev. Hildreth McGhee leads a peaceful prayer vigil to protest the arrests early in the day, and police and firemen react by attacking protesters with billy clubs and fire hoses. The day becomes infamous as “Bloody Monday.”

June 11
Council enacts Ordinance.
City council enacts an ordinance to limit the time, place, and size of picketing and demonstrations.

June 21
Grand Jury Indicts More Leaders.
The grand jury indicts ten more civil rights leaders under the 1835 statue, including officials of the SCLC’s Virginia state chapter and SNCC leaders.

July 11
King Comes to Danville.
Dr. King speaks to a large gathering at High Street Baptist Church. In an eloquent speech, he notes the brutality of Danville police and commends the courage of local protesters.

At High Street Baptist Church, SNCC workers train protesters in non-violent techniques. Photo: Danny Lyon/Magnum

Judge Aiken, student at UVA’s School of Law. Photo: Corks and Curls

Dr. Martin Luther King speaks at High Street Baptist Church on July 11. Photo: Danville Register & Bee
July 17
SNCC Protest at Dan River Mills.
The New York affiliate of SNCC stages a 100-person protest at Dan River Mills’ sales office in New York to urge the hiring of more African Americans and the use of corporate power to force the city to accede to the protesters’ demands.

August 11
N.Y. Times Cites Danville’s Defense Tactics. The New York Times recognizes white authorities in Danville for “a defense strategy against civil rights protesters that is among the unyielding, ingenious, legalistic, and effective of any city in the South.”

August 25
Schools Integrate. Eleven African-American students enter the Danville public schools the week of August 25 under order of the State Pupil Placement Board. The only incident is a minor traffic jam, caused one day by rain.

August 28
March on Washington. The March on Washington draws 250,000 people. John Lewis, president of SNCC, closes his speech by warning that, if Congress does not pass “meaningful” civil rights legislation, SNCC will march “through the streets of Jackson, through the streets of Danville, through the streets of Cambridge, through the streets of Birmingham.”

September 24
SCLC Convention Opens in Richmond. The seventh annual SCLC convention opens in Richmond. King takes the opportunity of being on Virginia soil to announce publicly that Danville would be SCLC’s next target, and that a task force would be heading to the city soon.

“Success in Danville will do much for the civil rights movement,” he says.

October 6
SCLC Plans Danville Campaign.
Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker, executive director of SCLC, announces the organization’s plan to start organizing in Danville the upcoming week “for desegregation of hotels and restaurants and appointments of Negroes to city boards, the police force and the fire department.”

October 16
Danville Hires City’s First Black Policeman. After Rev. C. T. Vivian, one of Rev. King’s lieutenants, arrives to organize and train demonstrators, Danville Police Chief E. G. McCain announces the hiring of William T. Terry, the city’s first African-American policeman. This fulfills a demand made by civil rights leaders earlier in the summer.

November 11
SCLC Mounts Pressure. SCLC keeps up threats of demonstrations, pulling staff out of Birmingham and Louisiana, and sending them to Danville. Andrew Young, another SCLC lieutenant, reports to Dr. King that things are picking up.

November 12
Fair Employment Policy. Five members of city council, after meeting with African-American leaders, agree to put the fair employment policy on record and to hold conferences when differences occur, meeting two of the protest leaders’ demands.

November 15
Boycott pinches.
The Washington Post reports that an African-American boycott resulted in the loss of $90,000 in sales that year, and that almost all major department stores now employ African Americans.

November 16
King speaks at High Street. Dr. King shares the platform at High Street Baptist Church with an avowed Nazi who tries to interrupt his speech, only to have the SCLC leader let him have his say.

November 17
King Vows to Return. Dr. King flies back to Atlanta, but vows, “We are going to be here indefinitely,” referring to a task force of about twenty people who had moved into Danville. He says he will return to heal a rift that had arisen between DCPA and the local NAACP.

November 21
‘We Mean Business’. Dr. King returns and speaks at High Street Baptist Church again, although he doesn’t set a date for demonstrations, he declares, “We mean business.”

November 22
Kennedy Is Shot. As Rev. C. T. Vivian, SCLC director of affiliates, prepares to send teams into white Danville neighborhoods to talk about the immorality of segregation, news arrives that President John F. Kennedy had been shot, and, out of a sense of propriety, the SCLC abandons its Danville effort.

March 26, 1962
Chuck Moran came forward and gave his hand to Dr. King as his gesture to join the nonviolent struggle.
– SCLC Newsletter, April 1962
Photo: Courtesy of Wyatt Tee Walker

John Lewis, SNCC president, threatens more demonstrations in Danville, among other places, unless Congress passes significant civil rights legislation. Photo: Danny Lyon/Magnum