

A conversation with Thomas Holt about his involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, April
2017

Footage has recently surfaced of you with Martin Luther King Jr. in Danville, Virginia in the summer of 1963. What happened in Danville that summer, and how did you come to be involved in the events there?

In early 1963, civil rights activists began to mobilize in Danville. The leaders of that movement were people who were associated with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—two ministers—and they had been organizing demonstrations at the courthouse and demanding meetings with the City Council. Although I had grown up in the rural area outside Danville, I was not involved in these initial events: I was a second-year student at Howard University when they started.

In the summer of 1963, I had come home for a short visit before heading up to New York, where I planned to stay with relatives and work to raise money to pay for my college expenses. On June 10th, there was a demonstration at the courthouse in Danville that was repressed very violently with water hoses and police batons. My mother was listening to the demonstration being covered on the radio, and she called me downstairs. We heard the sounds of the screams and people being beaten and so forth. The next day I joined the demonstration, and one thing led to another. I was eventually arrested—not at my first demonstration, but at a subsequent one—and I spent a few days in jail. A short time later, I was arrested again, and that arrest resulted in me spending about two weeks in jail. My recollection is that the photograph of me with Dr. King was taken in July just before I was arrested the second time.

Dr. King was visiting Danville on his way to Washington, DC where he was to be involved in a meeting organizing the March on Washington that took place that August. Of course that was important business, but we also wanted him to lead a demonstration to resume the local protests, which were experiencing a lull at that point. I believe that particular photo was taken at a lunch and meeting which was followed by a press conference. Later that evening there was a mass meeting and then a march that followed from it. I was arrested during that march and spent two weeks in jail.

It sounds as if your engagement in the Danville events in 1963 was rather spontaneous. Thinking back, can you recall your expectations going into these events? Did you feel prepared—organizationally, psychologically—for what eventually unfolded?

It's a bit of a mixed bag. Danville was not my first demonstration. Howard University, where I was studying, was very much a northern outpost of the Civil Rights Movement, and many of my classmates like Stokely Carmichael became quite famous. And I'd been involved in sit-ins in Maryland. At that point, Maryland was a border state with a southern racial personality: African and other diplomats of color would pass through the state on their way between the business and diplomatic outposts in Washington and the UN in New York, and they would be discriminated against in the usual way that black Americans were. So Maryland became a target of protests. I was engaged in some of those, but on a rather *ad hoc* basis: I would go and participate in a sit-in or picket or whatever, and then go back to class.

The Danville demonstrations were different in that I became engaged full-time in a wide range of activities — voter registration, demonstrations, mass meetings, and so forth. Also, I became much more involved with SNCC, which was very active in organizing in Danville. In fact, for a brief moment, I was paid by SNCC—but not very much and not for very long. In short, that summer witnessed a change in the character and extent of my involvement, moving from what one might call a kind of casual episodic engagement to a real, a full-time engagement that persisted long after the summer. This shift came about by virtue of going to jail, and by virtue of the kind of conflicts that were involved.

Can you talk a bit about your feelings toward the Civil Rights Movement's commitment to non-violence? You've written an interesting essay that reflects on how anger inspired your devotion to non-violence.

The events that unfolded in Danville on June 10th enraged me, preventing me from carrying on with business as usual. I had returned home thinking that my goal for the summer was to go get a job and earn some money for college, but it turned out that I couldn't do that. That was a critical change for me and shaped the rest of my life in many respects. Referring back to your question about to what extent I was prepared to participate in the movement, in retrospect I can think of a few things that prepared me for the events of that summer. But I think that most of all, my engagement was spontaneous and driven by anger. One of my first experiences with SNCC was a workshop in which we role-played how to handle being beaten by police, which subsequently happened to me while I was in jail: that is, how to cover your vital parts and so on. For me, as for most people around me, non-violence was a necessity; it was not a philosophical commitment. Now, there were people who were philosophically committed to it. Most of them were driven by religious conviction, some of them have read Gandhi and so forth. But for the overwhelming majority of people, it was either nonviolent action no action at all, so that's what drove us.

What happened after you were released from jail for the second time?

The actions of that summer culminated in the March on Washington. A large delegation from Danville, mostly young folk, went up and joined the march. Since I was familiar with Washington from the time I had spent at Howard, I assumed responsibility for organizing the logistics: figuring out where the marchers would stay and so forth. There was a bit of a debate about whether we would actually be involved with the March on Washington because it seemed much less militant and much more restrictive than the kinds of actions that we were engaged in. After much discussion, we decided that we would join the march, but that prior to the march we would have demonstrations in Washington. So we actually marched down Connecticut Avenue all the way to the Justice Department and protested there the day before march.

It sounds like you witnessed Dr. King in several contexts: personally in Danville, and then at the March on Washington. Can you reflect on his qualities as a leader, an orator, a person?

Well, my primary engagement with him was when he came to Danville. It was interesting because as I said, he had not intended to stay—he was just passing through to give us support. A group of us younger people, the student leadership there, actually went to his hotel room and argued very passionately that he should stay and lead a march because we needed his inspiration, his leadership. He was an incredible speaker. Obviously, people know this from his recordings, but up close it was even more remarkable. But he was very reluctant to stay. In retrospect I know why—he had much bigger issues to deal with in terms of organizing the March on Washington and so he didn't want to get trapped in Danville, go to jail, and get diverted from that task. But in the end he did lead a march and gave an incredible speech at the church, at the mass meeting, which got people really revved up. He left the march at an opportune moment so that he wouldn't be arrested. So that was the compromise: he would lead the march, but he would not be arrested so he could go on to Washington and do the business he had to do there. The people around him were much more reluctant than he was about this plan. The fact that he was willing to take this risk was revealing about his own personality and commitment to the movement. I was in the front row at that evening speech and it was just electric.

What was the March on Washington like for you?

Ironically, at the March on Washington, I became quite ambivalent about it, as hundreds of thousands of people marched from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial. At the time, I felt the demonstrations we had at Danville were much more meaningful to me. In retrospect, of course, [the March on Washington] was a dramatic and important event. But at the time, you don't think of yourself as historically involved, you're involved in the moment. So, I sort of just wandered off as we approached the Lincoln Memorial. So, ironically, I missed a lot of major events there, after having been very intimately involved in actually organizing our group's participation in Washington.

How did your involvement with the Civil Rights Movement evolve after 1963?

Well, I went back to school that fall. For a while it didn't seem like I was going to be able to do that since I hadn't worked over the summer to earn the money I needed for school, but people in SNCC and SCLC were able to convince some people to put up money to help the students who had been involved that summer to pay their school fees. So in the end I was able to go back to school. That moment was also a big change in my life because up to that point I had been studying engineering. After I came back to school, I switched my major to English Literature. That intellectual shift occurred precisely around that moment of my intense involvement in the movement. Had it not been for the movement, I would be doing something else today.

Can you articulate what exactly catalyzed that shift?

Well, first of all I should say it was becoming clear to me that I was not going to be a hotshot engineer. I was doing okay, but I wasn't first in my class or anything. However, I'd been very much engaged with my courses in social studies and literature and humanities and so forth. The readings I was doing in those classes were things that really seemed to matter to me—and given my experience in the movement, even moreso. For example, at one point at Howard, the SNCC group invited James Baldwin to speak to us. This was the period when many of his more militant writings were coming out: *The Fire Next Time* and so forth. So it was a time when my work life and my real life were melding in interesting ways. It took a while before I actually came to history as such but it was via that moment.

I graduated in '65. We'd just had the Selma demonstrations, and I'd helped organize demonstrations at the White House in support of that. At that point I decided I was going to do postgraduate work, and I was going to continue to work in the movement. So that summer, after graduation, I volunteered with SNCC to go to Cambridge, Maryland, which was one of the hot spots of the movement in the upper South. There I got involved with trying, not very successfully, to organize seasonal migrant farm workers. Maryland at that point was very much part of the agriculture industry: there were huge farms that relied upon migrant labor to pick their crops. That experience eventually led me to go back to school to do a master's degree and then to get a job in the federal government in the poverty program, which seemed a logical transition from the kind of issues I'd been working with. I worked with the seasonal and migrant farm workers program there, organizing educational programs and job training programs in the South. My territory also included the west, the southwest, and midwest. I went from there to graduate school, where I ended up studying history.

Do you have a sense of when you discovered history and what it was about history that appealed to you?

Well, my trajectory was still in literature until I took a course at Howard from Sterling Brown, who was a well-known poet, writer, and critic—one of the people who emerged out of the Harlem Renaissance era. In that class, we were reading Faulkner and Steinbeck and so forth. Sterling recognized that my real interest in literature was much more historically grounded than the New Criticism, which was then in vogue then, and was very textually oriented. My interests were also informed by the [Civil Rights] Movement and my work in the poverty program, some of which involved social analysis and writing up reports that touched on issues related to labor and culture and race. So history came together for me in bits and pieces. Later, when I was getting my PhD at Yale, I remember writing a paper for a course in which I drew upon my experience setting up programs for communities that were trying to organize in a broad way around labor issues, family issues, child rearing issues, and so forth. So, it turned out that my practical experience was very resonant with the kinds of intellectual issues that were being debated by historians at the time.

Intellectual issues aside, do you feel that your engagement in the Civil Rights Movement changed you as a person?

Yes, it's hard to articulate, but it's no doubt true in all kinds of ways. It think it gave me a sense of working towards goals bigger than myself. I realize that may sound pompous, but in

fact when I first went to school, I chose engineering simply because engineers seemed to make a lot of money, not because it was something I really loved. The moment of revelation for me was that all my compatriots in the engineering program were in the radio club. They'd spend their time fussing around with radios in their spare time. By contrast, I was in the debate society and the drama club. That was a telltale sign that engineering was not for me—that I might make some money, but that it didn't mean much to me. So the movement helped to redirect me in this sense, and it also played a fundamental role in shaping my political sense and political commitments.

You mentioned earlier that your experience in the movement informed some of the historical themes that you've worked on, such as poverty, slavery, labor, and race. Are there other ways in which you think your experience in the '60s informed your thinking as a historian?

Yes, my engagement with SNCC was especially important in this regard. That made me understand that movements are made by ordinary people—that they don't just come down from on high. My ideological commitment to this principle as well as seeing it in practice in a variety of communities has shaped how I approach history. My first book was on political leadership in South Carolina. It was trying to seek out information on former slaves and other people on whom there wasn't much documentation. They were not important people, but I wanted to find out what enabled them to do what they did. That's a consistent thread in my work. This is not to say we should ignore the grand, structural thinkers and so forth, but much of my work ultimately comes back to the capacities of ordinary people to at least try to shape their lives. If I had not been involved in the movement, this theme is unlikely to have loomed quite so large in my scholarship. My work in the movement also gave me great faith in the capacities of people—including students like myself coming from less-favorable backgrounds—to study and speak to their experience in the university. I had never had the slightest idea that I would be teaching at a university, it was actually kind of anathema to me. Why would you spend your time doing that? But I came to realize that there was a mission there as well. I'm not certain how that would have evolved had it not been for that early experience.

Shifting to the present moment, I'm curious to hear your thoughts about the nature of activism today — its status, its accomplishments, its challenges.

Well, I think the Civil Rights Movement is instructive both in terms of its failings and mistakes as well as its successes. Given recent events, I'm particularly interested in what sparks a movement. I think there are parallels between the kind of activism arising now out of people's

absolute anger at the direction that things are headed. Movements require you to divert energy from day-to-day business, to make sacrifices. That happened in the fifties and sixties. Many people had a moment of truth, myself included. This is a really interesting thing to watch with Black Lives Matter now. Police brutality, police killings have been a constant in American history, but then one or two or three specific acts create this upwelling of resistance and protest. I think that historians, sociologists, others in our respective fields should try to understand what makes this happen. What makes Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown create this response whereas Joe Blow or somebody last year or the year before does not? This is a real problem of our lives but it's also a profound intellectual problem in some ways. And this happens whether it's the gay rights movement, or women's movement, or labor movement, or any number of other movements...something just galvanizes people; they can't just go on with business as usual. And that's quite striking to me. It's encouraging because each time we're talking about a whole new generation that has no particular links to the previous one that went through a similar experience.

Does the example of the Civil Rights Movement give you any particular cause for hope or cause for concern about today's movements?

No, I think these things evolve, it's not that they have to follow the patterns of the past. We have to organize in relation to the actual existing conditions of the moment. Again, this is true whether it's a labor movement, or a civil rights movement, or whatever. And the instruments for organizing are very different than they were. I mean, we didn't have Twitter! There are problems with these new instruments, but they also have potential that simply wasn't available to earlier movements.