

PROLOGUE

Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.

— Horace Mann, Antioch College commencement address, Yellow Springs, Ohio, 1859

In June 1964, Willie Peacock, a member of the civil rights organization the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was arrested, along with several black colleagues, on a trumped-up traffic charge outside Columbus, Mississippi. He was describing his treatment from the police officers in the county jail to a group of civil rights volunteers:

“Nigger, do you believe I’d just as soon kill you as look at you?”

“Yes,” Willie responded to the police officer. But he wasn’t fast enough. *Whack!* Willie was struck with the officer’s left hand.

Willie looked out at the sea of mostly white college students who had come to this safe, idyllic school nestled in the rolling farmlands of southwestern Ohio. He was giving them a firsthand account of what life was like in the South. And he unnerved his audience when Willie’s colleague occasionally



Willie Peacock (*front row, third from left*) attended a rally on the steps of the Hinds County Courthouse in Jackson, Mississippi, in October 1963.

rubbed his aching jaw where his teeth were still loose from the beating he took in that Mississippi jail just a few weeks before. Willie and his friends were speaking to the Freedom Summer volunteers who were training here in Oxford in preparation to live in Mississippi for the summer and register blacks to vote.

Willie warned his idealistic young listeners: “When you go down those cold stairs at the police station, you don’t know if you’re going to come back or not. You don’t know if you can take those licks without fighting back, because you might decide to fight back. It all depends on how you want to die.”