The 1960s in the United States were years of great social change and heightened awareness of inequality. Despite slavery having ended nearly 100 years prior, African Americans were still treated unfairly socially, politically, and economically. Before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed by Congress, African Americans had little recourse against racist hiring practices and were often forced to accept any job, no matter their qualifications. Rather than lash out violently because of these frustrations, many in the African American community, along with other sympathizers, followed the lead of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in peaceful, non-violent protests against these injustices.

In Oberlin, during the autumn of 1963, a group of college students, activists, and community members banded together to protest the local telephone company for what the group believed were racist hiring practices.

Paul Hamlin, an Oberlin resident and president of the Citizens Improvement Council (CIC), took great personal issue with the Northern Ohio Telephone Company (NOTC) that operated an exchange in town. Hamlin, along with other CIC members, had sent in three job applications of African American women to see if they would be hired, or at least given an interview. No one from the NOTC followed up with any of the applications, despite Hamlin feeling the women were more than qualified for the job. Another point of contention was that out of the nearly 900 people employed by the NOTC, only two were African American, and both of them were janitors. The CIC organized a small picket of the NOTC office in August of 1963, signs of which included "No jobs, no phone" (Figure 1). Little seemed to come of these initial protests, save for some newspaper coverage by the Oberlin News-Tribune and the Oberlin Review.

Despite receiving no response from the Northern Ohio Telephone Company, the aim of the CIC did not go unnoticed. Oberlin College's student council as well as members of the local chapter of the NAACP got involved. Together these groups collaborated to come up with a plan that hopefully would change what they felt were the racist hiring practices of the NOTC. The initial pickets stopped and they began writing letters to Col. William Henry, the president of the NOTC, urging him to agree to a meeting between the telephone company and the picketers to discuss the hiring practices of the company.
Col. Henry rebuffed the protesters' requests, claiming the company was not discriminatory in its hiring practices. The NAACP-CIC group doubted this because they were well aware of the mostly white workforce of the NOTC. Many people were upset that the NOTC seemed more than willing to take the money of African Americans but balked at the idea of employing them.

Col. Henry spent the next few weeks dodging requests to meet with the NAACP-CIC group. He claimed that jobs were being held for those who were laid off due to the onset of automatic exchanges. He also erroneously claimed that the NAACP-CIC group was demanding preferential hiring of African Americans. According to the newspapers the group only sought to have a meeting to discuss the NOTC's hiring practices. The group did not demand favorable action, but rather a discussion between the two parties in which some common ground could be formed.

Despite the request of the NAACP-CIC group, Col. William Henry and the NOTC refused to sit down and talk. It was not until multiple requests were denied that the NAACP-CIC group decided they must again take a more direct approach and stage a mass picket in order to get any sort of meaningful attention. On the morning of October 5, 1963 nearly 400 citizens of Oberlin wore their finest clothing and walked quietly through the streets carrying signs. The entire event was peaceful, with no violence or property damage. The only issue that came up was confusion about participation. Many residents were under the impression that the protest planned for October 5th was for college students only. The event was supposed to be open to any citizen of the town sympathetic to the cause.
While many other parts of the country were silent to racial inequality, people of Oberlin spoke up for themselves and their neighbors. Unfortunately, little seemed to come directly from their efforts in terms of policy change. The NOTC never met with the NAACP-CIC.

Oberlin City Council managed to arrange a meeting with the company later in the year, though that also did not result in any change. In the last news article found about this issue, published January 10, 1964, the NOTC continued to claim it was not biased in its hiring practices. Perhaps echoing the disappointed feelings of many, Oberlin resident and business owner Bill Long commented, "Sounds like the same old stuff."

The Information presented in this public history project was sourced from archived issues of The Oberlin News-Tribune and The Oberlin Review. The newspaper articles date from August 1963 to January 1964. Digital copies of these articles were collected by and are available at the Oberlin Heritage Center. This public history project was written in 2018 by OHC volunteer Alex Shaver. If you have memories or items related to this or similar events, the Oberlin Heritage Center is interested in hearing your story. Please contact us by phone at (440) 774-1700, or email us at history@oberlinheritage.org.

Image Sources

- Figure 1: “Pickets, Phone Company Shun Conference Table” The Oberlin News-Tribune August 15, 1963
- Figure 2: “College NAACP Votes Support For Telephone Company Protest. The Oberlin Review September 27, 1963
- Figure 3: “NOTC Turns Down Integration Talks” The Oberlin News-Tribune August 29, 1963
- Figure 4: “A Quiet Saturday” The Oberlin News-Tribune October 10, 1963
- Figure 5: “A Quiet Saturday” The Oberlin News-Tribune October 10, 1963
- Figure 6: “No Bias In Its Hiring NOTC Tells Councilmen” The Oberlin News-Tribune December 26, 1963