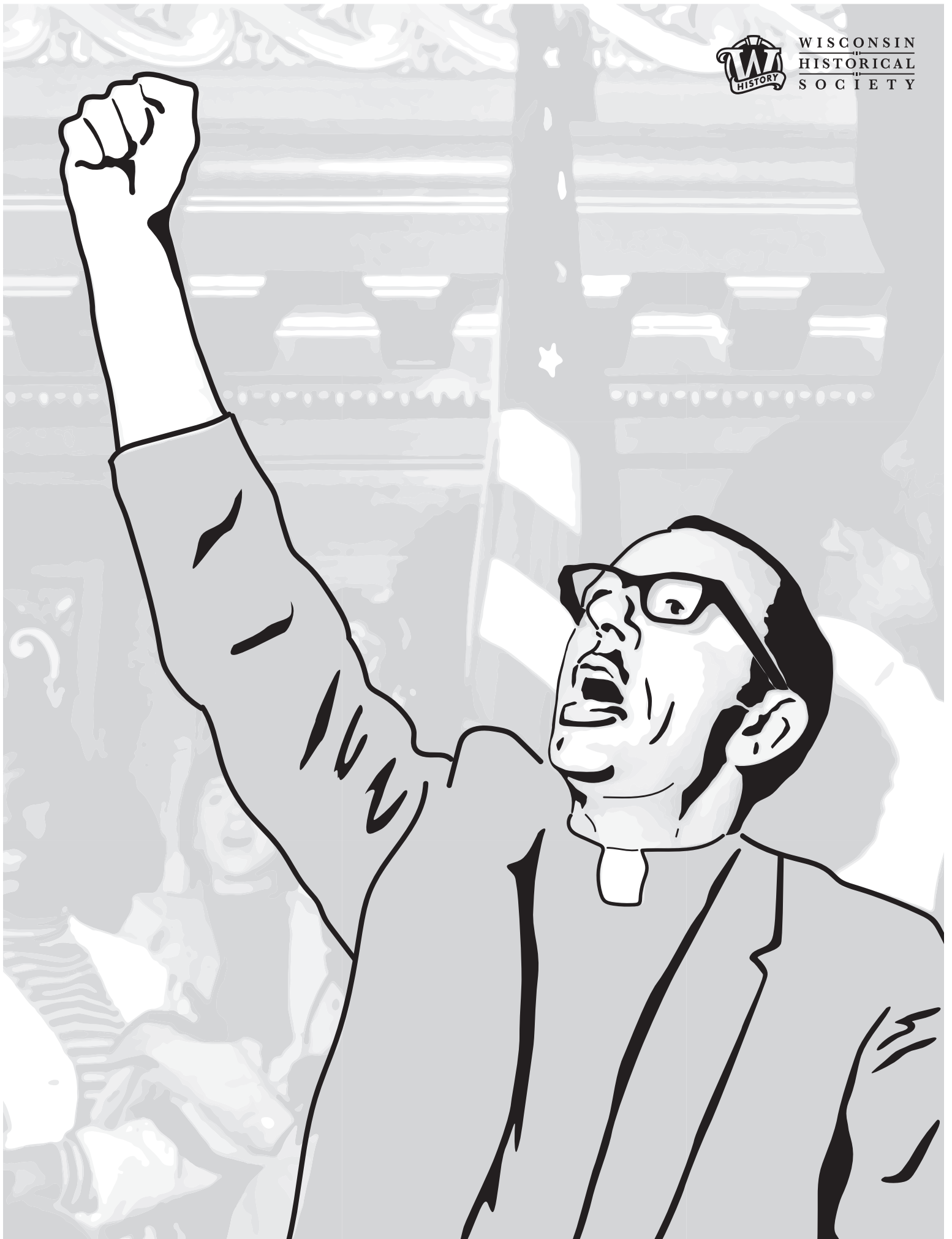




WISCONSIN
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY





Father James Groppi



Father James Groppi at the Wisconsin State Capitol during welfare demonstrations, 1969.

WHI IMAGE ID 4934

What does it mean to be brave? For Father Groppi, it meant being an ally to members of his church and neighborhood.

James Groppi was born in Milwaukee on November 16, 1930. His parents emigrated from Italy. James grew up near Milwaukee in Bay View, Wisconsin, where he went to high school. He had eleven brothers and sisters and worked at his parents' grocery store. He wanted to become a Roman Catholic priest, so after high school he went to seminary school. James paid for seminary by driving buses in Milwaukee. After he graduated, Father Groppi worked at St. Boniface Church in Milwaukee's Inner Core.

The Inner Core was a neighborhood on Milwaukee's north side. Most of its residents were African Americans. The leaders of Milwaukee refused to pay for repairs to the roads and schools in the Inner Core. Homes were falling apart. Schools were neglected. There weren't many jobs. White landlords would not rent to Black people outside of the Inner Core. Black families could not buy homes in other parts of the city. Systemic racism limited Black people's chances for a better life.

During the 1960s, activists protested against the unfair treatment of African Americans. These protests were part of the civil rights movement. Father Groppi marched with southern civil rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. His time in the South helped convince Father Groppi that changes were needed back home in Milwaukee too.

Father Groppi became an advisor to the Youth Council of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). The NAACP used nonviolent protests to demonstrate against unfair housing laws. People wondered why a white priest cared so much about equal rights for Black people. Father Groppi loved all members of his parish. He believed everyone, no matter the color of their skin, should be treated fairly.

Riots broke out in Milwaukee in 1967, and four people were killed. Something had to change. Father Groppi and Vel Phillips led protestors and civil rights workers for two hundred nights of marching. Vel was on the Milwaukee City Council. She was trying to get a Fair Housing Law passed so African Americans could live where they wanted to live. Night after night, the group marched from the Inner Core and crossed the 16th Street Bridge. Every night their march ended in South Milwaukee. Angry white men and women lined the streets. They swore at the marchers and threw rocks and bottles at them.

In 1968, Milwaukee finally passed Vel Phillips's Fair Housing Law. But Father Groppi did not stop helping people. He marched for people on welfare. He marched for American Indian rights. He marched to end the war in Vietnam.

Eventually, James Groppi left the priesthood and got married. He and his wife, Peggy Rozga, had three children. He went back to driving buses in Milwaukee. After he died, the 16th Street Bridge was renamed the James E. Groppi Unity Bridge in his honor. Father Groppi never stopped helping people get where they needed to go.

Read more about Father James Groppi in the Badger Biographies series book [*Father Groppi: Marching for Civil Rights*](#), available now from the Wisconsin Historical Society Press.

<https://shop.wisconsinhistory.org/father-groppi-marching-for-civil-rights>

Find an eBook copy at your favorite local bookstore, library, or online at [Bookshop.org](#).