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“Freedom Summer Digital Collection at Wisconsin Historical Society”

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Introduction

The Wisconsin Historical Society is home to more than 350 manuscript collections relating to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. The strength of these collections lies in the documentation of organizations and individuals working at a grassroots level. Personal papers from activists like Daisy Bates, Staughton Lynd, Ella Baker, Amzie Moore, Carl and Anne Braden, Howard Zinn and many others are available, as are organizational records from CORE, MFDP, COFO, the Highlander School, and local NAACP and SNCC chapters.

The Freedom Summer Digital Collection, and related projects, are an effort to share these collections with researchers, teachers, and students. This article will describe how the Wisconsin Historical Society created the Freedom Summer digital collection, the many challenges we faced, and the ways that the collection sparked new ideas for us.

Collecting 50 years ago

Civil rights collections were first brought into the Wisconsin Historical Society half a century ago, just a few years after Freedom Summer. We are often asked what these collections are doing in Madison, Wisconsin, hundreds of miles away from Mississippi. Here’s how it happened.

Bob Gabriner, a University of Wisconsin graduate student in History, brought the idea of actively collecting these materials to Les Fishel, the Director of WHS in Dec. 1964. Fishel endorsed a plan to use young people at the University who were active in the civil rights movement to travel to the South and collect records from groups and individuals involved in civil rights. The principal students involved were Alicia Kaplow, Bob Gabriner, Vicki Gabriner, Gwen Gillon, Mimi Feingold and Leah Johnson.

The Gabriners and Feingold traveled different routes through Arkansas, Tennessee, Louisiana and Mississippi in the summer of 1966, using their connections, talking to locals and collecting records wherever possible. Kaplow

worked in Madison with archivist Russell Gilmore, soliciting donations from the CORE offices, Freedom Summer volunteers and their parents, and individuals such as Lucille Montgomery, Elizabeth Sutherland, and Carl and Anne Braden. Leah Johnson and Gwen Gillon joined the collecting team in 1967 and, with Gillon's friend Hollis Watkins, scoured the Delta for records while the Gabriners worked in Georgia and Alabama. By July 1967 the group had brought in 232 accessions of movement manuscripts, including large and important files from the MFDP, COFO's legal counsel, the Fourth Congressional District CORE office, the Freedom Information Service, the Delta Ministry, and dozens of individual activists.

The 50th Anniversary

In 2012, Matt Blessing, Wisconsin state archivist, was inspired to share Freedom Summer-related manuscripts with the public. His idea was to get materials into an online digital collection by summer 2014 so other institutions could utilize them for the 50th anniversary of Freedom Summer. Time was too short to apply for an NEH or IMLS grant so work began by using revenue from sales of genealogical documents. The project got underway in the summer of 2012 with two full-time staff members, volunteers, and several student workers.

Selection

Materials for the Freedom Summer Digital Collection were selected in three ways. Collections were identified by searching subject terms, names, and keywords through the Wisconsin Historical Society's catalog, ArCat. Once collections were identified, the EAD encoded finding aids and contents lists were searched for likely folders. Staff then inspected the physical boxes and folders. About 750 folders were examined, and 350 were selected for inclusion. Initial metadata was created at the time the paper records were first handled.

Since several part-time students were doing the majority of selecting and tagging for digitization, a form was created to keep the process standardized for each folder. This form contained fields like title, description, copyright issues, priority, featured documents, and number of pages. In this way, the selection and description processes were streamlined, saving time later on.

Copyright

The collection consists of published and unpublished works: newspaper clippings, magazine articles, organizational records, circulars, personal letters, diaries, notes, and essays. Because the digital archive was created for non-profit educational purposes, staff relied heavily on the copyright law's fair use provisions when deciding what to publish online.

Newspaper clippings, article offprints, and small sections of periodicals were generally considered to fall under the fair use provisions. The majority of monographs were pamphlets published by SNCC and COFO. Since these organizations are no longer in existence, these materials were considered copyright orphans.

Similarly, unpublished organizational records of these defunct organizations, including works created by their paid staff, were assumed to be orphaned.

The papers of private individuals make up about 15% of the online collection, and these copyright issues took the most effort to settle. Staff flagged these materials during selection, and inspected content as it was scanned to identify unpublished works of significant length or value. The archives catalog, lead files, and deeds of gift were then searched for any restrictions or other creator information. Staff then contacted individuals who might hold copyright, might have placed restrictions long ago, or might simply deserve to be notified out of courtesy. Only one out of 37 individuals refused permission to include their letters or diaries, and several felt excited to learn about the project and proud to have their unpublished materials included.

Scanners were instructed to keep an eye out for social security numbers or any other personally identifiable information, which was suppressed. Emergency contact cards, job applications, personal statements and the like were retained, as the information was 50 years or more out of date.

The mandatory copyright law notification is displayed on every page where copyright protected works are accessible. Contact information for any party who would like their materials taken down is also present on the collection landing page and the search page.

Scanning and Building

Capturing the selected records for the Freedom Summer Digital Collection took several months of student work at two flatbed scanners. Documents and photographs were scanned in color at 300dpi, and microfilm was scanned as well. The resulting TIFFs were uploaded to CONTENTdm where jpg2000 and machine-readable PDFs were generated. The first 20,000 pages were scanned in the first seven months of the project. After these materials were captured, the work was cut back considerably for the next year but staff are still discovering and uploading content at a slower rate.

When designing the architecture in CONTENTdm, Staff decided that the folder would be the basic unit rather than the collection, box, or page. They assumed that most individual pages would be OCRed and users would be able to search the full text. Folders were tagged with modified Dublin Core fields including creator, collection, location, subjects, etc. A professional indexer volunteered to write an abstract for the description field of each folder. The main exception to the folder-level tagging rule was photographs, which received metadata at the item level so they could be individually retrieved in searches. All of the thought behind the architecture of the collection was keeping users in mind, putting their information needs first. For this digital collection, the point was not to reproduce a physical collection online, but to turn the civil rights collections inside out, getting to the documents that users want to view online.

In April 2013, the Wisconsin Historical Society contacted schools, institutions, and authors around the nation to let potential users know that the Freedom Summer Digital Collection was available for use. Researchers and faculty all over the country have accessed the collection, including filmmakers for the PBS American Experience documentary "Freedom Summer" and the National Civil Rights Museum.

Unanticipated Problems and Mistakes

As the collection grew, staff realized some initial assumptions had been mistaken. For example, folders created by Freedom Summer workers usually lacked the intellectual integrity found in organizational records. The miscellaneous nature of the folder contents made it difficult for users to browse, so it was important to improve access within each folder. It also became clear that the OCR was less accurate than staff had initially assumed. The large amount of handwritten documents, carbon copies, and other

unreliable typed pages made the OCR very spotty. More time and labor was required to clean up OCR than had been anticipated.

User Interface

The user interface consists of two parts, the Freedom Summer homepage, designed by the web development team, and the customized CONTENTdm landing page. A few elements of the homepage were specifically designed to engage users with the events of 1964. Some ways that the web team tried to mediate the huge digital collection for users include a Historical Essay on Freedom Summer, and a "Key Documents" section, linking to some of the most important manuscripts. Teachers using the collection can find assistance in the Freedom Summer Sourcebook, which is over 350 pages of the most important Freedom Summer primary sources, downloadable for free. Other tools include an introductory set of powerpoint slides, a timeline of events, and list of Freedom Summer participants, all designed to help users get a background in the events of 1964 and prepare to use the digital collection.

The CONTENTdm landing page shows many options to search and browse the collection. When searching the collection, the user is given the option of searching the entire digital collection, or limiting to photographs. There is also a brief introduction to Freedom Summer, as well as a description of how the digital collection is organized. At the top of the screen, there is a simple search box, with the option of an advanced search.

Spinoffs

It was decided early on that the project should have its own social media presence, separate from the main WHS account. Facebook was a platform that staff was comfortable with, and already had a following through the main WHS page. Images, documents, and stories are selected for inclusion on daily posts, linking directly back to the digital collection. The Facebook page has around 450 likes and receives as many as 18,000 page views per post.

The digital collection enabled the Wisconsin Historical Society to create other products for the 50th anniversary of Freedom Summer. Michael Edmonds edited an anthology of 44 original documents called *Risking Everything: A Freedom Summer Reader* published by the Wisconsin Historical Society Press. A traveling exhibit, also named "Risking Everything," was created to educate Wisconsin young people about the Freedom Summer project and its influence

on Civil Rights history. The exhibit consists of eight double-sided pop-up banners telling the story of Freedom Summer 1964, using scans of photographs and original documents found in the digital collection. A Minneapolis design company DigiGraphics LLC designed and fabricated the exhibit for less than \$10,000.

A second copy of the exhibit was produced to travel throughout the U.S., starting in April 2014, especially aimed at libraries and museums. It will travel to a dozen locations from Denver to Princeton during 2014.

A Web companion to the traveling exhibit was mounted at: <http://fsxbt.tumblr.com/>. It is intended to give users a digital representation of the traveling exhibit, with extra information and context for each image or document. Staff also wanted a place to share resources like related links, teacher's guides, photos, and a calendar of events. Tumblr's option of editing HTML and CSS made it easy to add these features into a simple navigation scheme, usable on computers and mobile devices.

The most anticipated event of the Freedom Summer Anniversary was a week long symposium in April 2014. The original "Freedom Summer Archivists" who collected the manuscripts 50 years ago were invited to come to Wisconsin for a week to share their experiences and recollections of their civil rights activism and the importance of their work as collecting archivists. Panel discussions, class talks, meetings, and book signings were arranged for the six civil rights veterans with audiences totaling over 500 participants. The events were enormously successful, capturing the interest of Madison and Milwaukee adults and students. It was an excellent example of the many ways that an archives can connect with and serve its community.