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“Documenting the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi: An Overview of the Collections at the University of Southern Mississippi”

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Abstract

Special Collections at the University of Southern Mississippi houses a variety of civil rights materials documenting all aspects of the movement. In addition to detailing the activities of civil rights volunteers in the 1960s, in particular Freedom Summer, the collection also maintains collections of those attempting to prevent equal rights. For example, Southern Miss has the papers of Theodore G. Bilbo, a former Mississippi governor and US senator, who actively fought to prevent African Americans from achieving rights similar to the white citizens of the state. His collection, which starts in the early 20th century, provides a glimpse at the other side of the struggle. Bilbo’s papers and other collections relating to segregationist groups like the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission and the White Citizens Council, provide the context in which the civil rights movement existed. By coupling the collections of over 100 civil rights activists with materials pertaining to those wanting to deny equal rights, the civil rights collections at the University of Southern Mississippi provide a comprehensive look at the civil rights era.

Introduction

In Mississippi, the civil rights movement represents a defining feature of the state’s history. With the anniversary of Freedom Summer this year, the importance of volunteers, both national and local, and their work highlights the sacrifices and accomplishments of these organizers and volunteers. [Special Collections](#) at the University of Southern Mississippi contains collections that highlight the work of civil rights workers during the movement in Mississippi especially during Freedom Summer. In addition, the library holds collections from those who fought integration and were the very people the volunteers battled. This article will highlight the manuscripts and books relating to the civil rights movement as well as people and groups who opposed equal rights for African Americans.

Freedom Summer Manuscript Collections

The University of Southern Mississippi has over 120 manuscript collections from volunteers and local activists participating during the Freedom Summer initiative of 1964 and other civil rights activities. [These collections](#) contain correspondence, brochures from civil rights organizations, photographs,

clippings, curriculums for the Freedom Schools, ephemera, realia, and a slew of other materials pertaining to the movement. The civil rights collections are the most frequently used materials in Special Collections with researchers, documentarians, students, and others requesting access to the papers regularly.

Photographs are some of the most popular items requested from the collections. The [Herbert Randall Freedom Summer Photographs](#) are extremely popular with the local community as well as those wanting to see what the civil rights movement looked like in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. His photographs document events ranging from the activities of the organizers, local volunteers and supporters of the movement, and the work of volunteers who established Freedom Schools and helped teach voting rights.

Segregationist Collections

When researching the civil rights movement, some researchers often overlook materials emphasizing the segregationist perspective that created the need for the movement. By acknowledging the context of race relations in the state, the work of the activists and volunteers becomes more significant. Special Collections provides access to a number of collections that represent the segregationist perspective of the era.

The collections containing anti-integration materials range from items representing the activities and beliefs of the local, state, and national governments. The [Hattiesburg Municipal Records](#) provide an insight into local civil rights complaints and how the mayor responded. Requests for equal rights by the African American community include action to prevent toxic chemical dumping in the waterway passing through the black neighborhood as well as moving to employ African American bus drivers, policemen, and department store workers in the city. Demands submitted by the local NAACP chapter with handwritten notes by the mayor provide an insight into how the local government hoped to respond to the requests. Even more telling is a copy of the original response to the NAACP which were altered in tone over the initial responses noted in the handwritten document.

On the state level, the papers of politicians illustrated the emphasis to prevent integration in Mississippi. The [Paul B. Johnson Family Papers](#) includes the materials of Paul B. Johnson Sr., Paul B. Johnson Jr, and other members of the family. Johnson Jr. was the governor in Mississippi in the 1960s during the most visible years of the civil rights movement. As governor, he was copied on correspondence from the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, the state agency designed to keep track of civil rights activities and prevent integration in the state. The collection includes materials documenting the

actions of civil rights volunteers including some documents by "Operator 79," an undercover agent reporting to the Commission about civil rights organizing. Besides the documentation relating to the civil rights movement, there are other items that illustrate the extent of segregation in Mississippi. In 1964, Edgar and Randy Williamson were eight and nine years old and had never attended school because there was debate about their racial background.



Image courtesy of McCain Library & Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi

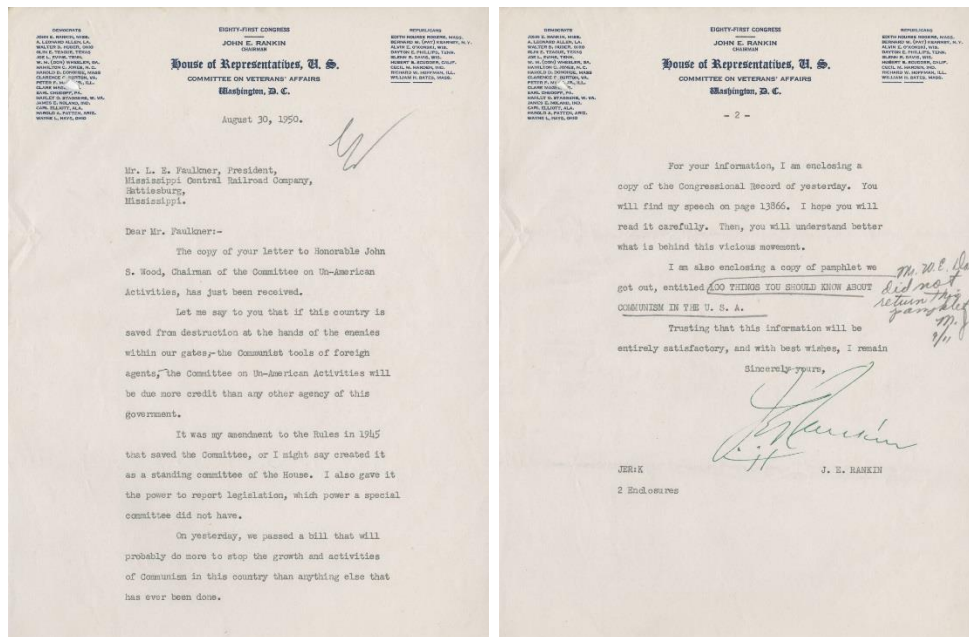
Edgar and Randy Williamson; 1964

In an era when one drop of African American blood defined a person as black, the Williamson brothers were fighting the claims that they were 1/16 or 1/32 African American even with a Mississippi law stating that 1/8 African American ancestry or less defined a person as white (a startling law to begin with). The letters in the collection discuss their struggle to become enrolled in school which eventually occurred.

Highlighting national sentiments, Special Collections owns the papers of some national politicians that include materials discussing race relations in the country. The [Theodore G. Bilbo Papers](#) include records pertaining to his career from 1910-1947. Bilbo, a staunch segregationist, not only worked to prevent integration by, among many things, proposing a repatriation act, but he also drew others with similar values to him. His correspondence and collections contain his work with black nationalists, politicians, Mississippians, and citizens worldwide who sympathized with this beliefs.

The library also includes collections pertaining to the history of community organizations opposing integration. Relevant documents are found in the Bilbo Papers covering national groups, but there are also collections representing local groups such as the White Citizens' Council. The [Citizen's Council/Civil Rights Collection](#) contains materials collected by historian and Bancroft Prize winner Neil McMillen for the research conducted for his book *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-1964*. The collection includes correspondence from Citizens' Council members, Ku Klux Klan publications, and other items from segregationist and conservative groups.

The [L. E. Faulkner Papers](#) illustrate the fine line between segregationists and anti-communists in the south. His papers illustrate how the president of the Mississippi Central Railroad became heavily involved in the anti-communist movement in the 1940s and 1950s, and how aspects of his work was directly related to the segregationist movement. The [William D. McCain Pamphlet Collection](#) supplements the Faulkner Papers by providing a large collection of ephemeral publications produced by the Citizens' Council and groups with similar agendas around the United States.



Images courtesy of McCain Library & Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi
Letter, John E. Rankin to L.E. Faulkner; 30 August 1950

Books

At Southern Miss, Special Collections acquires books representing the history of Mississippi and the people in the state. As part of the collection, the curator seeks to collect books relating to the civil rights movement including fiction and nonfiction titles. In addition to collecting recently published books, the

curator also collects monographs from the civil rights era. These books may be somewhat rare or expensive to obtain, but the library does have some items created by civil rights organizations in the 1960s.

One particular book created during the movement was *Today*, a picture book representing the success of an early Head Start Program in Holly Springs and Durant, Mississippi. The book, written by children in the program, was published in dialect. When creating this book, there was discussion about whether to retain the language used by the children or to change the text to adhere to grammatical rules.

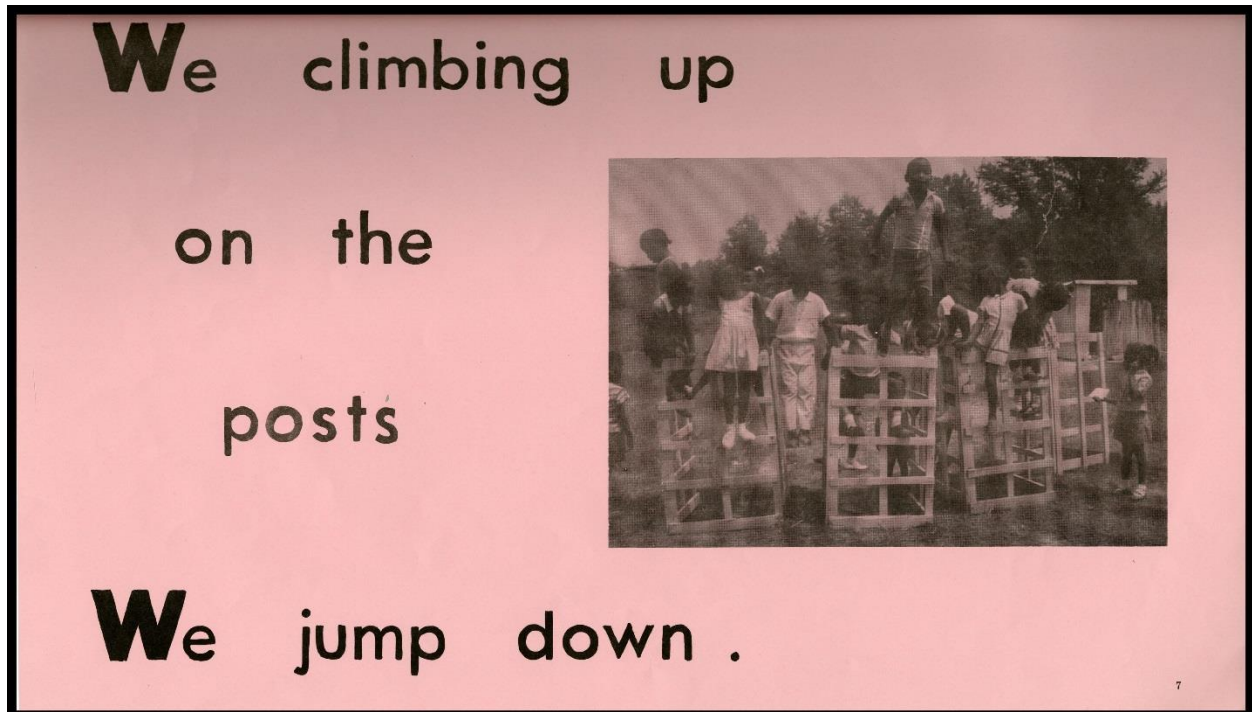
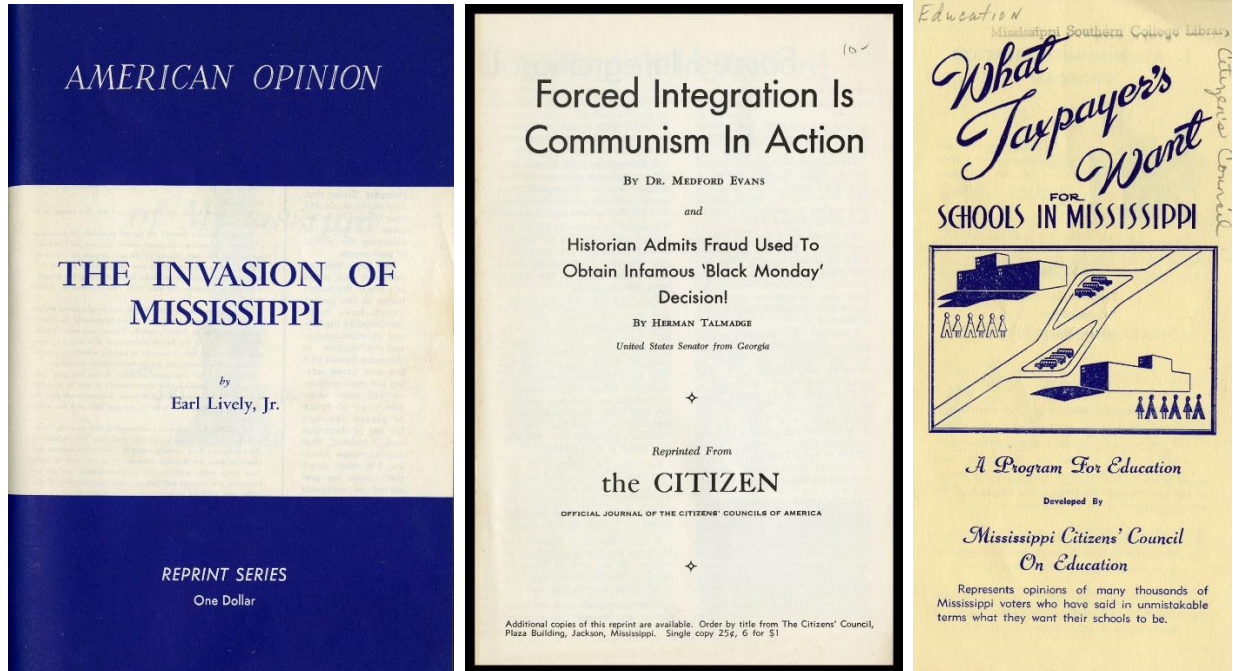


Image courtesy of McCain Library & Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi

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In addition, the Mississippiana book collection contains publications created by segregationist groups like the White Citizens Council. These pamphlets or small books with titles such as *What Taxpayer's [sic] want for Schools in Mississippi: a Program for Education, Forced Integration is Communism in Action*, and *The Invasion of Mississippi* were tools used by the Council to promote their anti-integration beliefs. These publications were distributed around the state, but more importantly, they were circulated to Rotary Clubs, Chambers of Commerce, and businesses across the country in an effort to promote their beliefs on the separation of races.



Images courtesy of McCain Library & Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi

Assorted Titles from the Mississippiana Book Collection

Digital Collections

To provide additional access to collections, Special Collections digitizes select items from the collections make those images [available online](#). In 1999, the library started work on the Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive by digitizing and making accessible a selection of oral histories relating to activists as well as segregationists. Three years later, with the help of an Institute of Museum and Library Services National Leadership Grant, Special Collections was able to add images of additional civil rights holdings to the digital archive. Since that time, the library has continued to [add civil rights materials](#).

The civil rights era collections in Special Collections at the University of Southern Mississippi cover many aspects of history surrounding the equality movement. From the civil rights volunteers and activists to the politicians who fought them, the library works to provide resources that provide insight into the history of the movement and the beliefs of the time. Much of the information may not be emotionally difficult to review, but knowing that the activists came out the other side makes research worth it.