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The Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive

Diane DeCesare Ross, University of Southern Mississippi

Mississippi was a focal point in the struggle for civil rights in America, and Hattiesburg, home of The University of Southern Mississippi, had the largest and most successful Freedom Summer project in 1964. Through the use of digital imaging and other information technologies, The University of Southern Mississippi Libraries is providing a worldwide audience of researchers with a firsthand perspective on the Civil Rights Movement that otherwise would be restricted to local users and only the most dedicated of historical researchers.

The University of Southern Mississippi Libraries laid the foundations of the *Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive* in 1999. For the first phase of the project, the Libraries cooperated with the University's Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage to offer more than 60 oral history transcripts on the Civil Rights Movement, such as those by civil rights leaders Charles Cobb, Charles Evers, Aaron Henry, and Hollis Watkins. This collection also includes oral histories of race-baiting governor Ross Barnett, national White Citizens Council leader William J. Simmons, and State Sovereignty head Erle Johnston. The project was expanded in 2001 by the addition of twenty-two letters from the Joseph and Nancy Freedom Summer Collection and four diaries of freedom school teachers in 1964.

With the award of an Institute of Museum and Library Services National Leadership Grant for 2002-2004, the second phase of the *Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive* went into full swing. The grant project resulted in the addition of 84 more oral histories, as well as nearly 1,000 items selected from the Libraries' manuscript and photograph collections, totaling more than 7,000 pages. In addition to enhancing access to primary source material, preserving original materials by creating digital surrogates, and creating learning opportunities for remote users, the project provided a demonstration of what a digital imaging program in a medium-sized repository can accomplish. The digital archive has continued to grow since the grant project ended. At the time of this writing, more than 1,600 items are available to online researchers. These include the papers of Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party founder and Senatorial candidate Victoria Gray Adams. Further selections include the papers of State Sovereignty Commission director Erle Johnston, Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field secretary Sheila Michaels, civil rights advocate Rabbi Charles Mantinband, and Freedom School teacher Sandra Adickes.

Building the Digital Archive

Image Capture and Standards

Creating digital surrogates for the original materials was the most straightforward part of the process. Flatbed scanners were used for objects that could be safely captured in that manner; a professional-quality digital camera was used for books and oversize materials. Though the primary goal of the effort was to provide electronic access to records, an off-line archival-quality set of images was created in anticipation of future needs and changing standards. These masters were captured in 8-bit gray scale or 24-bit color at 600 dpi. They were saved in uncompressed TIFF file

format, the industry standard. The access images, derived from the masters, are 8-bit (gray scale) or 24-bit (color) 200 dpi JPEG compressed images.

Descriptive Data

Prior to the *Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive* project, archival holdings in McCain Library and Archives had only been cataloged at the collection level. Making selected materials available online required individual descriptive records for each item in the database. Bibliographic Services and Special Collections librarians agreed on the vital importance of a controlled vocabulary in digital projects. *Library of Congress Subject Headings* (LCSH) was the first choice for a project thesaurus, but it was quickly evident that the headings available in LCSH were not specific enough for optimal access to the items being digitized. As a result, librarians created an in-house thesaurus that combines nationally authorized LC headings supplemented with locally created terms backed by careful authority control. The Civil Rights in Mississippi thesaurus is an ever-growing resource with cross-references and see-references, available for online use at http://www.lib.usm.edu/techserv/cat/tools/crm_index.

Intellectual Property and Privacy Issues

American race relations is as complex an issue in the beginning of the twenty-first century as it was in the middle of the twentieth. Thus, a digitization effort addressing relatively recent civil rights events has been quite a challenge. When the *Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive* grant project began in 2001, most repositories solved the problem of intellectual property and privacy issues inherent in twentieth century materials by simply eliminating such collections from consideration for digital capture. This practice severely limited access to original materials on the twentieth century's social movements and other recent events of historical significance.

In general, McCain Library and Archives does not own the intellectual property rights to materials in its collections. Therefore, a substantial effort was put into the identification of rights holders and the establishment of an appropriate level of permission that would allow the inclusion of primary sources in the digital archive in a manner that was consistent with the interests of the rights holders. Permission from collection donors was obtained first. If selection of items within the collections had been limited to materials authored by the collection donors, the intellectual property resolution process would have been greatly simplified. However, many of the items selected for digitization were authored by individuals other than the donors, so permissions were also pursued from other authors of individual items within the collections. The procedure included identifying potential copyright and privacy issues, opening a channel of communication with affected individuals, and providing contextual information. Rights holders also had an opportunity to review the digital assets before they were made available to the general public. For example, former Mississippi Freedom Summer volunteer Zoya Zeman reviewed the portions of her papers that were particularly private in nature, including her Freedom Summer diary and letters written home to her family from Clarksdale, Mississippi. This process not only had the effect of increasing the comfort level of the rights holder with the project, but it also created a valuable opportunity for Ms. Zeman to impart contextual information that has enhanced the research value of her collection.

Database Management and Access

The current software used for file management, searching, and browsing is OCLC's CONTENTdm. CONTENTdm features the ability to create compound objects within the database so that searches result in full digital objects rather than separate pages of items such as books, postcards, or sides of three-dimensional objects. It also offers fast searching capabilities, flexibility

of metadata structure, scalability for future growth, and greater ease of use by both staff entering the data and patrons searching the database. Users can perform more complicated searches or browse through all items in a particular collection.

Historical Context

The web site for the *Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive* also provides historical context to the materials presented online. Information specific to the Civil Rights Movement in various Mississippi towns is presented, including biographical information of major people involved in the Movement, active civil rights groups, notes of important places, and major civil rights activities and events. The web site provides a link to a timeline of Civil Rights Movement activities that begins in the early 1900s and continues until the present-day, as well as a resource which defines the many organizational acronyms related to the Civil Rights Movement and provides cross references and background information (http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm4/crmda_context.php).

Moving towards the future

The *Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive* became the cornerstone in a broader vision to build a statewide cooperative digital archive to preserve and provide electronic access to resources throughout Mississippi. The pilot effort of the *Mississippi Digital Library* (MDL) was a cooperative civil rights project drawing together the most significant resources on race relations in six of the state's historical repositories. With funding awarded in December 2003 by the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services, the library began as a partnership between the University of Southern Mississippi, Delta State University, the University of Mississippi, Tougaloo College, Jackson State University, and the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. The collaboration originally focused on materials associated with the civil rights era.

The *Mississippi Digital Library* has since expanded to include collections from Beauvoir, First Regional Library in Hernando, the Gulf Park Women's College Alumni organization, the Katrina Research Center, the Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, and Mississippi State University. More collections will be added soon. The ultimate aim of the *Mississippi Digital Library* is to provide access to primary source materials covering a wide range of subject areas from Mississippi museums, archives, libraries, and historical societies. Cultural heritage institutions throughout the state are welcome to participate. The web site can be accessed at <http://www.msdiglib.org/cdm4/about.php>.

Diane DeCesare Ross is currently Curator of Manuscripts, Archives, and Digital Collections at The University of Southern Mississippi Libraries. Her educational background is in American Studies, photography, anthropology, and Library and Information Science. Diane also serves as Director of the Mississippi Digital Library.