

FONER (THOMAS) FREEDOM SUMMER PAPERS

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<http://da.mdah.ms.gov/series/foner>

This collection consists of correspondence, a voter registration plan, photographs, and news clippings from Thomas Foner's work as a volunteer with the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project in 1964. The collection documents his work with the project and contains substantial information about the conditions faced by volunteers during the summer.

Note: This activity can be done as a full class discussion or as individual student work. A fillable PDF student version is provided at <https://www.mdah.ms.gov/learning-lagniappes>.

Subjects that can be addressed within this Digital Archive:

- Civil Rights Movement (national and statewide)
- Voting rights
- The murder of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner
- Political activism and political activists

Curricular Connections

Below are key standards featured in this Learning Lagniappe.

Mississippi Studies

- MS.8.1: Analyze the significant figures, groups, events, and strategies of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi.
- MS.8.3: Evaluate the lasting impact of the Civil Rights Movement on Mississippi.

U.S. History: Reconstruction to Present

- US.11.3: Explain contributions of individuals and groups to the modern Civil Rights Movement, including: Martin Luther King, Jr., James Meredith, Medgar Evers, Thurgood Marshall, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the civil rights foot soldiers.
- US.11.6: Describe the accomplishments of the modern Civil Rights Movement, including: the growth of the African American middle class, increased political power, and declining rates of African American poverty.

U.S. Government

- USG.7.1: Evaluate the effectiveness of citizen efforts to influence decisions of state and local governments by examining historical or contemporary events.
- USG.7.3: Compare the means that citizens use to participate in the political process, including: voting, campaigning, lobbying, filing a legal challenge, demonstrating, petitioning, picketing, and running for political office.

Directions: Use items from the MDAH Digital Archives entitled Foner (Thomas) Freedom Summer Papers found at <http://da.mdah.ms.gov/series/foner> to lead your class in analyzing and interpreting the following items. For more information about Freedom Summer, explore <https://snccdigital.org/events/freedom-summer/> and <http://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/articles/403/The-1964-Mississippi-Freedom-Schools>.

Note: Navigate to items by going to <http://da.mdah.ms.gov/series/foner>, selecting the noted series, clicking on the first picture, and then entering the desired item number in the box below the image.

Questions:

1. Select Series 3 and navigate to Item 13. This is a photo of a large group of people outside of the COFO office.

- a. Based on clues in the photo, explain who the people could be and what could be happening. Pay attention to the chalkboard in the background and the packages on the ground.

Answer: This shows people arriving in Mississippi to help the Civil Rights Movement. They look young, so they are probably college students or people in their early twenties. The boxes in the stack of luggage look beat-up. This could indicate that their owners either don't have financial resources to purchase additional suitcases or that they have come a lengthy distance, perhaps changing forms of transportation frequently and the cardboard boxes have deteriorated accordingly.

- b. What is the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party?

Answer: The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was a political party organized by African Americans during the 1960s as an alternative to the white-only Democratic Party.

2. Select Series 3 and navigate to Item 17. This is a picture of three signs, read the descriptions below the photo.

- a. The second poster refers to the three Freedom Summer workers (James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner) who disappeared during the early days of the Freedom Summer Project. Their bodies were found several weeks later buried in an abandoned dam site. Why would “pull the lever down” as seen in the photo be relevant to their work in Mississippi?

Answer: At the time that they were killed in the summer of 1964, the three men were preparing to work at a Freedom School in Mississippi. One initiative of Freedom Schools was voter education programs. The sign saying “...Now With Your Hand, Pull the Lever Down: Did They Die In Vain?” is referring to the voting lever used to cast ballots at this time. The message is a push for people to keep working for the right to vote, and then exercise their vote, so that the voter education work that the three men did would not die with them.

- b. What Mississippi laws does the third sign oppose? Use Foner's letter in Items 12-15 in Series 1 and the transcribed letter below.

Answer: This sign refers to various laws, described in Foner's letters, that targeted African Americans. This included laws that prohibited the distribution of leaflets calling for economic boycotts; laws prohibiting picketing of public buildings; laws allowing police to restrict freedom of movement of individuals and groups; laws to treat as adults juveniles arrested in a civil rights case; and laws allowing the sterilization of parents of two or more illegitimate children.

3. Select Series 2 and view Item 1 and Item 2. These photos describe a program for voter registration in Canton.

- a. Describe the process used to increase voter registration.

Answer: Foner has met with local youth groups to gain their support in promoting voter registration. With these volunteers they canvas African American neighborhoods and then fill out a card for each person based on whether or not they are interested in registering.

- b. What major obstacle do the activists face? Why would this pose a major problem?

Answer: Foner's group has been unable to set up a carpool. This was a difficulty because it slowed down the canvassing process and made it harder to contact potential voters in rural areas outside town.

- c. Why would high school teachers make a good target?

Answer: High school teachers had a direct link to and influence on the young people in the community. Because the Civil Rights Movement was driven largely by young people, gaining the support of their teachers could help gain more Freedom Summer workers.

- d. What is Foner's definition of success?

Answer: Having fifty people at the courthouse each day.

Foner Letter Transcription

[Note: Governor Johnson's name is actually Paul Burney Johnson Jr. There is no evidence confirming President Lyndon Johnson's relation to Governor Paul Johnson.]

Dear Mom + Dad,

I am going to relate to you, ~~the~~ among other things the incidents that have occurred in one eventful day in one area of Mississippi. Allen Dulles, Dick Gregory and James Farmer arrived in Jackson today, and I was part of their COFO escort. They left for Meridian soon after. Also today two children in our area were poisoned by candy thrown ~~fro~~ from a white man's car, one died. Two COFO volunteers were jailed on a trumpeted [*sic*] up rape charge. Forty M-1 rifles and one thousand rounds of ammunition were stolen from the local National Guard Armory. As I write this letter a Negro church is burning down the street; the fire department is nowhere to be found. Two other volunteers have just been arrested. Last night a Negro Freedom worker was shot by white hoodlums. He was taken to the white University Hospital where he was released ~~a few hours~~ about an hour later with the slug still in his head. Also last night Reverend Smith's house was shot into at about 1:30 A.M. by white men. The Negro guards fired back as the men got into a city [unintelligible] truck. As you can see there is what is tantamount to a race war going on down here. This is but one area, and but one day in this long hot summer. It is heartening news to hear that the North is mobilizing a strong protest movement in our defense.

A letter from the president of the Jackson Mississippi Junior Chamber of Commerce has been brought to my attention; ~~It says~~ it says in part "how could anyone vote to give our Federal Government such power?" It is interesting to note against this report a report on the powers the Mississippi legislature has given the state government. The legislature has passed bills to prohibit the distribution of leaflets calling for economic boycotts; to prohibit picketing of public buildings; to allow police to restrict freedom of movement of individuals and groups, to treat as adults juveniles arrested in civil rights cases; to sterilize parents of two or more illegitimate children. These are bills to outlaw economic boycotts of economic businesses that discriminate, to outlaw passive resistance in demonstrations; ~~to~~ bills to illegalize freedom schools and Community Centers, to punish teachers, parents or civil rights workers who "entice" minors "to violate the laws and ordinances of the state" by participating in civil rights activities; to revoke the charter of integrated Tougaloo College etc. This is just a partial rundown of Mississippi's efforts to curb the activities of her "happy" Negroes and their supporters. Apparently this power exercised by the state government doesn't worry the local Jaycees. It also seems that these new bills or the not-so-new wave of terrorism hasn't worried the Justice Department or any other Department of our Federal Government. I realize that this is an election year and that ~~Ly~~ President Lyndon Baines Johnson doesn't want to upset his cousin Governor Paul Baines Johnson but that hardly seems reason enough to let innocent people get killed, or turn up missing in a "democratic" country. Mississippi is as integral a part of our United States as any other part is. None of us are free while Mississippi is a carbon copy Union of South Africa. This is why I have definitely decided that I shall stay in Mississippi after the summer is over to work for the freedom of our ~~no~~ country, my freedom, and your's [*sic*] as well as the Negroes [*sic*] freedom.

There is a place in Mississippi called Liberty

There is a department in Washington called Justice

My address has not been changed, and will not be changed. Start sending me my traveler's checks. show this letter to the kids at the camp so that they can gauge what is happening here.

Love,
Tommy