

SOVEREIGNTY COMMISSION ONLINE SERIES 2515: MISSISSIPPI STATE SOVEREIGNTY COMMISSION RECORDS, 1994-2006

<http://da.mdah.ms.gov/sovcom/>

On March 29, 1956, in the wake of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Mississippi Legislature created a new state agency, the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, to “do and perform any and all acts deemed necessary and proper to protect the sovereignty of the state of Mississippi, and her sister states” from “encroachment thereon by the Federal Government or any branch, department or agency thereof.” From 1956 to 1973, the commission promoted segregation in Mississippi and investigated its perceived enemies, mainly those associated with the Civil Rights Movement.

Investigators combed the state for 17 years, meeting with local police, communicating with Citizens’ Council members, cultivating paid Black informants, and sharing information with other states. Agency files brimmed with investigative reports documenting Movement activities and personnel. Movement reports, letters, leaflets, news clippings, and other materials confiscated in raids by local police were turned over and preserved in Sovereignty Commission files. Sorted by place and person, the files reveal just how far Mississippi was willing to go to preserve white supremacy.

In 1977, the Mississippi Legislature abolished the Sovereignty Commission and ordered that the records be sealed at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History until 2027. This filing cabinet sealed with metal bands was one of several cabinets that held files. After years of litigation, the files were opened to the public in 1998.

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
- Sovereignty Commission
- Medgar Evers
- Ross Barnett
- James P. Coleman
- Ku Klux Klan
- White Citizen’s Council
- NAACP
- Voter Registration
- Confederacy

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.

U.S. History: 1877 to Present

- U.S.3.2 Trace the development of political, social, and cultural movements and subsequent reforms, including: Jim Crow laws, *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, women's suffrage, temperance movement, Niagara movement, public education, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Marcus Garvey.
- U.S.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.

African American Studies

- AAS.8.5 Assess the extent to which the Civil Rights Movement transformed American politics and society.

Directions: Use the Sovereignty Commission Online collection from the MDAH Digital Archives found at <http://da.mdah.ms.gov/sovcom/> and <https://mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/mississippi-sovereignty-commission-an-agency-history> to lead your class in analyzing and interpreting the following items. For more information about the Sovereignty Commission, explore <https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/mississippi-state-sovereignty-commission/>.

Note: Navigate to items by going to <http://da.mdah.ms.gov/sovcom/> and following the instructions in the specific question. Refer to <https://da.mdah.ms.gov/sovcom/help.php> for additional assistance in navigating this collection.

Questions:

1. Select the link under Browse Photograph Collection. Open the second photograph, Item 1-14-0-5-2-1-1ph.

- a. Where was this image taken? Who do you think took this photo?

Answer (part 1): Farish Street Newsstand and Studio. **Potential Answers** (part 2): An investigator for the Sovereignty Commission; this photo could have been taken by a citizen and then the Commission acquired it.

- b. What stands out in the image? What are the people doing?

Answer: It appears that one part of the store is a shoe shine station and the other part of the store is a small shop that sells magazines and newspapers. One man in the picture looks like he is a shoe shiner. He is looking directly at the camera. One of the women is browsing through magazines, while the other woman leans against a jukebox looking at her.

- c. Why might the Sovereignty Commission have this image on file?

Potential Answers: These individuals may have been involved in civil rights activities and were being spied upon; someone may have given the commission this picture because these individuals were suspected of civil rights activities. Some students may also discover through related documents that the Armstrongs carried many African American publications in their store, and it was also a popular hangout for African American youth in Jackson.

2. Search for “Dennis Fortenberry” under Basic Name Search. Select “Fortenberry, Dennis” and click on SCR ID# 2-52-0-17-1-1-1.

- a. Who wrote this? Who did they send it to? What is the point of this report?

Answer: This was a report to the Sovereignty Commission from Zack J. Van Landingham. It explained that Jefferson Davis County Circuit Clerk Daniels had sent an informant to an NAACP meeting in Prentiss where Medgar Evers was the main speaker. It details the informant’s report of the meeting, and then notes how many African Americans are coming in to pay poll taxes in the area where the meeting had taken place. It concludes with other information about informants for the Sovereignty Commission.

- b. Why do you think certain individuals’ names are underlined throughout the document?

Potential Answers: These are the people aiding the Sovereignty Commission and giving them information on civil rights activity.

- c. Who does the document say the secretary of the NAACP is? What does this person tell other African Americans to do?

Answer: Medgar Evers is named as the secretary of the NAACP. He tells them to go register to vote and pay the poll tax; however, he also said not to cause disruptions if they were unsuccessful.

3. Search for “James Coleman” under Basic Name Search. Select “Coleman, James” and click SCR ID #99-40-0-20-1-1-1. Read the letter online or at the transcript below.

- a. Who wrote this letter? Where is he from? Who is this letter sent to? What is the basic premise of the letter?

Answer: The letter is written by John Gottlick of Chicago, Illinois. He is writing to Mississippi Governor James P. Coleman. Gottlick writes this letter to praise Governor Coleman, particularly regarding his administration’s dealings with race. He wants information on white supremacist organizations because he believes in “the Southern policy.”

- b. In the letter, what organizations does Gottlick ask Governor Coleman for information on?

Answer: He asks about the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizen’s Council.

- c. Notice the terminology Gottlick uses in the letter, particularly when he says “righteousness of the Southern policy.” What does that mean?

Answer: Gottlick among many others believed that the segregated views of the South were correct and commendable. The South predominately practiced segregation and promoted severe consequences to anyone who tried to challenge that ideology.

- d. At the bottom of the letter, Gottlick writes, “P.S. I’m still saving my Confederate money.” What do you think this means?

Potential Answers: It appears that Gottlick is expressing solidarity with the views expressed by the governor and aligning himself with the ideology of the Confederacy, namely white supremacy. This includes support for all Jim Crow laws and especially racial segregation. Gottlick is hinting that he would prefer to keep the status quo of Black Americans as second class citizens.

4. Open <https://mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/mississippi-sovereignty-commission-an-agency-history> and read the paragraphs titled “Coleman administration,” “Barnett administration,” and “Waller administration.”

Each of the five total gubernatorial administrations involved in the Sovereignty Commission took a different approach on the organization’s purpose. Compare the approaches of the J.P. Coleman, Ross Barnett, and Bill Waller administrations regarding the Sovereignty Commission.

Answer: Coleman took a quiet approach, largely dealing with public relations. He wanted the rest of the country to believe that Mississippi’s race relations were great. Therefore, he would not allow the commission to give money to pro-segregation organizations.

Barnett promoted the commission, giving money to the Citizen’s Council and dramatically expanding the investigative branch. Barnett was very eager to find individuals who were engaged in civil rights activities and shut them down.

Waller, the final governor, was technically in charge of the commission but had no involvement because at this point it was not politically beneficial. Under his administration, the commission stopped meeting officially.

Transcription

[This letter is written on John D. Gottlick's letterhead.]

John D. Gottlick

2525 W. 115th Street

Chicago 43, Illinois]

Hon. [Ray?] Gore

Hon. James Coleman,

Governor's Mansion,

Jackson, Mississippi

Your Excellency:

Allow me to wish you greetings and the best of health and luck.

I write to congratulate you and your fine administration on your marvelous conservative administration and heartily agree with your every policy and cannot begin to praise you and it enough. I want you to know that we in the North are not all a bunch of radical liberals and "one racers."

In regard to the latter, could you supply me with information regarding the Ku Klux Klan and more so the White Citizen's Councils of the South. I believe we could use one here in Chicago to cope with our race problem.

Having seen your appearance on the television program "Meet the Press" I am more convinced than ever of the righteousness of the Southern policy. Please send me any information or literature about it. I would greatly appreciate & put to good use.

With every possible good wish, I remain,

Most Sincerely,

John D. Gottlick

P.S. I'm still saving my Confederate money.