The collection was part of Colson Whitehead's research for his Pulitzer-winning novel "The Underground Railroad," which features a runaway slave ad from the database in its opening pages. Whitehead (left) has praised the project and came to UNCG in February to talk about his work and speak with students.

Stolen Names

One undeniable vestige of American slavery is that 4 million people remain nameless, lost to a brutal era that stole everything, including their identities.

Over the past 25 years, a team at UNC Greensboro has been chipping away at this forgotten history, working painstakingly to uncover and publish the names of those held in bondage. Thanks to this effort, UNCG now houses one of the largest databases of slave names on the internet.

With references to more than 170,000 people, the Digital Library of American Slavery still represents just the tip of the iceberg. But it's making a difference to 60,000 users each month, including African American genealogists, academic researchers, and best-selling authors.

IT BEGAN WITH PAPER – LOTS OF PAPER

The seed for the project took root decades ago, with the ground-breaking work of Dr. Loren Schweninger, professor emeritus of history at UNCG. Schweninger, then a protégé of renowned historian Dr. John Hope Franklin, received a grant to study court documents related to slavery, such as petitions for freedom, wills, and bills of sale.

Between 1991 and 1994, Schweninger traveled to 160 county courthouses and 14 state archives in Southern states. On the road nearly every other day, he brought reams of photocopied documents back to his office in the McIver Building. "We had documents piled up to the windows, and my wife Patricia put them in order," Schweninger recalls.

He and two assistant editors spent the next 15 years summarizing the data, which was eventually transferred to 168 reels of microfilm. Over the years, Schweninger received $1.47 million in grants and eventually shared a prestigious Lincoln Prize for his work. But as he neared retirement, he wondered what would become of the information – and how it could be preserved and used by future generations.

FROM MICROFILM TO THE WORLD WIDE WEB

Schweninger approached UNCG Libraries, which took the project and ran with it.

Led by Richard Cox, digital technology consultant, the team built a searchable database of the material known as the Race and Petitions Project.

"For genealogists, for historians, for people interested in slavery and American history, it's a really terrific resource," Schweninger says.

People have used the database to uncover names of enslaved relatives. Others have made the harsh discovery that their own ancestors were slave owners. Historians and the public can search its wide index of more than 150 topics ranging from education, religion, and marriage to farming, disease, and economics.

"This database truly gives a snapshot of life at that time," Cox says. "It's the only single location where you can find that amount of data originating from public records. The only comparable web application is ancestry.com, and that's behind a paywall."

Today, Cox and the library staff continue to add information from other sources, including slave ship registries compiled by Emory University and insurance company records that list slaves as property.

The digital library also has more than 2,300 runaway slave ads published in North Carolina newspapers from 1751 to 1840. UNCG has shared these ads with Cornell University, which is building a national registry of similar materials.

CARRYING THE WORK FORWARD

UNCG history majors are now reviewing microfilm of newspapers from the 1850s and 1860s and entering images of additional ads into the digital library, says Dr. Lisa Tolbert, associate professor of history. Other students are using the database to learn research methods and to compile digital exhibits.

The brutality of the ads — some seeking slaves returned dead or alive and others juxtaposed alongside mundane reports such as livestock notices — have deepened students' understanding of what it means to treat people as property, Tolbert says. They have also inspired students to conduct further research, she says, "to recover the human stories of the runaways."

"This gives students real-world experience with history on the web," she explains. "The library at UNCG sees teaching as a vital part of its mission, and I feel lucky to be working here because of the support we receive."

For Cox, the quest for more names continues. He recently applied for a three-year grant to gather slave deeds from 30 North Carolina counties. For him — as it was for Schweninger — uncovering the past is a labor of love.

"Taking care of this — and expanding this database — is something I take very seriously," he says. "I feel I have an obligation to the people named in the documents."

WORK IN PROGRESS

Dr. Schweninger (center) and his two assistant editors Nicole Mazgaj and Marguerite Ross Howell — a UNCG history graduate — as well as several graduate students spent 15 years analyzing and summarizing the original data. The work was supported by agencies such as the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

Now, Cox (left) is partnering with universities such as Cornell and Emory to further the library's reach, while UNCG history students working under Dr. Tolbert (right) continue to expand the runaway slave ad collection. Some students have been inspired to begin their own research, with topics ranging from an exploration of the experience of female runaways to a look at the constructs of African American masculinity.