Stolen Names

Once unacknowledged vestiges of American slavery are 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 UNCG Libraries has been chipping away at this forgotten history, working painstakingly to uncover and publish the names of people held in bondage. Thanks to this effort, UNCG now houses one of the largest databases of slave names on the internet.

With reference to more than 1.7 million 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.

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IT Began WITH PAPER —LOTS OF PAPER

The seed for the project took root decades ago, with the groundbreaking work of Dr. Loren Schweninger, professor emeritus of history. 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.

He and two assistant editors spent the next 25 years summarizing the data, which was eventually transferred to 168 reels of microfilm. It took 15 years. The project was inspired by students like Dr. John Hope Franklin, professor emeritus of history at UNCG. Schweninger, then a protégé of renowned historian Dr. John Hope Franklin, received a grant to study court records related to slavery, such as petitions for freedom, wills, and other sources, including slave ship registries compiled by Emory University.

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 with Cornell University, which is building a national registry of similar materials.

EVEN THE WORK PROGRESSED

UnCG history majors have now scoured microfilm of newspapers from the 1700s and 1800s 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.

Kim 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.

For Cox, the quest for names never ceases. He recently applied for a three-year grant to gather slave ads from 120 North Carolina newspapers, the him — as it was for Schweninger — inaugurating the pursuit to be 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.”

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 coordinator, the team built a searchable database of the material known as the Race and Slavery Petitions Project.

“We’ve used the database to uncover names of enslaved individuals. UnCG Libraries has shared these ads with Cornell University, which is building a national registry of similar materials.

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

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“This gives students real-world experience with history on the web,” she explains. “The Library at UNCG was teaching us a vital part of our mission, and I feel lucky to be working here because of the support we receive.”

WORK IN PROGRESS

Dr. Schweninger (center) and his two assistant editors Nicole Mazgaj and Margarita Risa Havel — a UNC 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.