

THREE HISTORIANS EXPLORE SERVICE LEARNING: THE AMISTAD RESEARCH CENTER CASE STUDY

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Across the country, faculty and students are encouraged to create and participate in service-learning projects that combine high-quality service with high-quality learning. Four elements make a solid service-learning project. First, the project must incorporate a clear sense of reciprocity between service providers and those served, making clearly articulated goals crucial to any high-quality service-learning experience (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). Second, the service to be rendered must be dependent upon the task and the skill level of the participants. Third, learning objectives that accompany the service-learning experience must be explicitly stated for the students and community partners. Fourth and finally, a reflective component must help participants place their actions within a context of personal development while cultivating civic and social responsibility (Wade, 1997). Despite the overall benefits of service learning, historians have been slow to become involved in these types of projects. For us, two questions readily come to mind: "What is the connection between service learning and the historian?" and more importantly, "How can an historian incorporate community-engaged learning into his or her research/scholarship?"

As historians who deal with interpretations of the past, we encountered our first dilemma when we decided to participate in the New Orleans learning community, a community whose needs are current and pressing. It was not immediately apparent what role a historian could play in addressing community problems such as poverty, poor schooling, hunger, homelessness, and urban crises. Further thought and reflection led us to recognize that the complex, interrelated real world problems of real communities are, of course, historical problems as well – current problems profoundly shaped by past events and experiences. This realization led to our involvement with the Amistad Research Center.

Two years ago hurricanes Rita, Katrina, and Wilma devastated New Orleans, Louisiana. The recovery effort has been very slow, which means it is critical for those outside of New Orleans to continue to engage in the revitalization process. President George W. Bush on several occasions encouraged citizens of the United States to participate in volunteer programs to help rebuild the

city. While some may argue that service-learning is simply volunteerism, Defiance College's New Orleans learning community has taken service-learning further. Our work with the Amistad Research Center, the nation's oldest, largest, and most prestigious independent archives specializing in African-American history, has allowed our members to participate in the recovery of one of America's most culturally unique cities, a chance to work with an important community partner, and the pleasure of helping an organization in need.

The Amistad Research Center is the nation's largest independent archives with the mission "to preserve original documents and provide resources for research on America's ethnic history, African diaspora, human relations, and civil rights" (Amistad Research Center, 2006a). The Amistad Research Center developed out of the American Missionary Association (AMA), an organization formed during the late nineteenth century to bring equal rights to the African-American population (American Missionary Association, 2008). During World War II, the AMA established a race relations department, with the goal of striving to "improve human relations through research and education" on the campus of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. The Amistad Research Center was set up as a division of the



race relations department in 1966. In 1969, it became the official repository for the archives and institutional records of the AMA. It was also in 1969 that the research center was incorporated as an independent archive. In 1970, the center relocated to Dillard University, but with the continued growth of its collections, the institution had to move to a larger facility, located at the United States Mint building in New Orleans's French Quarter. The center's resources have assisted in furthering interpretations of the history of slavery, the African-American community, and the

Civil Rights Movement (Amistad Research Center, 2006a).

Currently, the Amistad Research Center occupies 11,500 square feet of Tilton Memorial Hall on the Tulane University campus. Among its archived materials are a total of 700 manuscript collections that include the papers of numerous individuals, families, organizations, and institutions; a library comprises 20,000 volumes; 250,000 photographs that date back to 1859; and 800 works of art by African and African Americans from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Center has welcomed scholars from around the world, school systems both public and parochial, as well as tourists. The Center measures its success by the numerous citations in articles and books along with film productions researched at the center. They have received grant awards from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts, and have received a National Leadership Award (Amistad Research Center, 2006b). The Amistad Research Center also publishes a newsletter entitled *Amistad Reports*, which reviews current donations and highlights special collections. The variety of collections donated by numerous individuals from the New Orleans community demonstrates the success of the Amistad Research Center's mission.

Prior to arriving in New Orleans, we worked to familiarize ourselves with archival processing methodologies and preservation strategies. For basic understanding, it was essential to define an archive and identify the variety of archives that exist within our society. In his book *Developing and Maintaining Practical Archives: A How-to-Do-It Manual*, Gregory Hunter states that the word "archives" has three meanings. "Materials," the first meaning, refers to the noncurrent records of an institution preserved because of their long-term value. "Place," the second meaning, is the building or part of the building where the archival resources are placed. "Agency," the third and final definition, is the office accountable for identifying, preserving, and making available records of long term value (2003, p. 2).

METHODOLOGY

The mission or purpose of an archive involves three elements, which according to Hunter are "to identify records and papers of enduring value, to preserve them, and to make them available to patrons" (2003, p.3). In the identification process, an archivist conducts surveys and appraises the objects. The surveys/appraisals are used to determine the items' value. Before the preservation process can begin, two sub-steps must occur: acquisition and accessioning. Acquisition refers to donor relations and the policies for collecting the papers and records. Accessioning refers to the actual transfer of records to the archive, including legal rights regarding the physical and intellectual property.

Preservation involves providing arrangement, safeguarding, and security of the records. Arrangement refers to the organization of the archives according to the individual institution's guidelines. Safeguarding is the protection of the records from deterioration as well as the restoration of the damaged records. Security means keeping the records safe from natural and human disasters. Preserving the collection gives the archivists the opportunity to record what is known about the collection and arrange it in a way that is accessible to researchers. The final process of making the records available involves access and reference, and outreach and promotion. Access and reference ensures that the records will be used in an appropriate manner that will not result in physical damage or violation of copyright and/or privacy laws. The outreach and promotion of the collection attempts to make researchers aware of the valuable information contained in the records via websites, newspaper articles, newsletters, videotapes, and other means of distributing information (Hunter, 2003, pp. 3-6).

We employed this methodology while working at the Amistad Research Center. During our time in New Orleans, we worked with part of the Dent family's collection, which includes documents from the patriarch Albert W. Dent, the guestbook of his wife, Jesse Covington Dent, and the artifacts of their son Thomas C. Dent. Since 1970, the Dent family has supported the Amistad Research Center and their collection represents one of the many success stories. The late Albert W. Dent was a prominent educator, community leader, and president of Dillard University from 1941 to 1969, while his wife, Jesse Covington Dent was a renowned pianist trained at the Julliard School of Music and an advocate for social reform. The Dent family welcomed many prominent visitors, including Eleanor Roosevelt, Thurgood Marshall, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. into their home. Thanks to the Amistad Research Center's archive, Mrs. Dent's guestbook, which contains the signatures of their many prominent visitors, is accessible to the public (*Amistad Reports*, 2005, p. 1). By preserving this family's entire collection of documents, photographs, diaries, newspaper clippings, correspondence, audio tapes, and impressive guestbook, the Amistad Research Center's important role as an independent archive is evident. Through the processing of the Thomas C. Dent collection, we gained insight into the importance of preserving the individual's history and realized our role in the New Orleans recovery process. Dent's collection, a collection that would likely be lost in a larger archive, illustrates the role of the individual's history within a community and provides interesting insight into the city of New Orleans.

As a prominent African-American figure in New Orleans history and as a writer and cultural activist, Dent's cache is extensive, measuring forty linear feet. Our work consisted of processing Dent's collection of audio cassette



tapes by organizing them into alphabetical order and by recording the scope of collection. The audio recordings that we processed were from the Jazz and Heritage Festival, various interviews with musicians and writers from the African-American community, and interviews he conducted for Dent's book *The Southern Journey*, which examines the Civil Rights Movement forty years later. The audio tapes we processed contained the voices of many well-known individuals in history, including well-known jazz artists such as Ellis Marsalis and his son Wynton, writers such as James Baldwin, and important African American women, including Annie Devine, who cofounded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

Thomas Dent was a well connected resident of the New Orleans community. Dent was born in New Orleans in 1932. He left the community to further his education and returned in 1965 to commence his lifelong career in writing and cultural activism. Upon returning to New Orleans, he co-created and managed the Free Southern Theater (FST), which "was a cultural response to the growing interest in identity issues, as artistic backlash to the integration movement that flowed out of the Civil Rights Movement." Dent worked with Kalamu ya Salaam to develop "a writing arm of the theater that complemented its performance arm" (Breaux, 2006, p. 341). While working with the FST, he wrote five plays. Throughout the 1980s, he led the Congo Square Writers' Union, a black writers' workshop, and published two works of poetry. Beginning in 1974, Dent served on the board of directors of the

Jazz and Heritage Foundation. This organization was established as the nonprofit owner of the Jazz and Heritage Festival “with a mission to sow the seeds of [Louisiana’s] unique culture for generations to come” (New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival and Foundation, 2007). From 1987 to 1990, he was the executive director of the Jazz and Heritage Foundation. Dent left his position as executive director to begin work on his book *The Southern Journey: A Return to the Civil Rights Movement*. In 1991, he began traveling throughout the South visiting locations of important Civil Rights events and recording the histories of the many individuals involved. These travels and recordings led to the 1997 publication of his book that documents how the Civil Rights Movement is remembered and what impact it had on the Southern outlook within the African-American community. Thomas Dent was an archivist and a historian at heart.

Oral history – defined by Alice Hoffman as the process of collecting, usually by means of tape-recorded interviews, accounts and interpretations of events from the past that have historical significance – was of central importance to Thomas Dent. Live music, interviews, conferences, funerals, and other personal narratives represented a major segment of Dent’s recordings. Hoffman also mentions the connection of ethnic history and oral history, stating “ethnic history finds significant representation in the Oral History Association . . . one very important recent development is a number of projects focused on black history” (Hoffman, 1984, p. 69). Oral history holds an advantage over written documents in that there are no doubts about authorship. In addition, oral history “makes possible the preservation of the life experience of persons who do not have the literary talents. . . . In this way it facilitates a new kind of history – a history not of captains, kings, and presidents but of farmers, workers, immigrants, and the like” (Hoffman, 1984, p. 69).

The preservation of the Thomas C. Dent audio tape collection exemplifies the kind of oral histories worth preserving because it allows researchers to study not only the prominent figures that Dent interviewed, but also Dent’s life and influence within the New Orleans community. In a *Journal of Academic Ethics* article, Nancy Janovicek illustrates the importance of preserving oral history and supporting the ordinary person’s view when she writes, “Oral history gave people who had not written memoirs or produced documents an opportunity to provide their accounts of the past” (2006, p. 158). This is further demonstrated by Janovicek’s claim that “at the personal level, the process of conducting oral history enhanced an individual’s sense of dignity and self-confidence” (2006, p. 159).

The Amistad Research Center offers excellent examples of ordinary people doing everyday work to further the history of New Orleans and the surrounding area. Independent archives play an important role in preserving history. The Center's work illustrates that important elements of our nation's history would be lost if not for the efforts of the independent archives across the U.S.

CONCLUSIONS

Hurricane Katrina's influence did not stop with the storm but spiraled into a disastrous series of events, including the diaspora of the African-American population of New Orleans. African-American citizens of the Crescent City spread far and wide throughout the United States and for a variety of reasons cannot or will not return. As a result, many regional institutions, especially scholarly organizations such as the Amistad Research Center, have suffered. In the wake of the hurricane, twelve of their full-time staff members were unable to return to the research center, creating a backlog of materials for processing. Our project exemplifies some of the best elements of service learning. Head librarian and archivist Brenda Billop-Square identified a need for assistance with processing information, and we as historians were able to prepare ahead of time in Defiance, Ohio, so that we could begin working immediately when we arrived in New Orleans. The work that took place in New Orleans embodies the best practices of applied research in that it moved the work out of the classroom and forced us to adapt our goals to the needs of our community partner.

New Orleans's recovery depends on people who are willing to contribute to the process with deliberate speed. Colleges, more than any other societal institution, have the broad array of intellectual resources needed to take the lead toward finding solutions. Service-learning can be a powerful instrument in connecting colleges to their surrounding communities and, by so doing, help restore higher education as an important participant in the discussion of regional and national problems. In fact, this might be the best strategy we have to counter the increasingly shrill attacks made on higher education. Moreover, it might be the only strategy we have that can ensure that a future audience will exist that values the study and reading of history.

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