

Content – Lunch Counter

DRAFT

I've roughly broken out materials into the categories we discussed at the last meeting. Some sources, particularly images, we may want to use in more than one place, such as the introduction movie and the explore section.

Is there a place to put material that seems like a good quote about the purpose of 6 fools in general that doesn't relate to a specific object (curator's view of what they do)?

Introduction Movie

These four students and when they walked in that [00:06:44] day, one was wearing his ROTC uniform, was saying to America live up to your ideals of democracy, citizenship and the promises of [00:07:01] equality.{{BY}}

To many Americans in the 1960s and '70s, they viewed protests as being unpatriotic and un-American when, in fact, this was a tradition that Americans [00:16:00] used for centuries to petition their government for change. Thomas Jefferson said to Americans when— Thomas Jefferson said to people of Colonial America [00:16:21] that when the government no longer meets the needs of the people, it is the right and indeed the responsibility of ordinary people to change that government. People weren't seeking [00:16:33] government change at the Woolworth lunch counter. They were seeking personal and cultural change. They were seeking justice.{{BY}}

Over 30 African American employees worked in the store and many of those worked upstairs in the kitchen or as servers at the lunch counter. [00:20:06] These people— For centuries, African Americans had prepared and served food, but it's the act of sitting down, of breaking bread that was essentially a forbidden [00:20:21] practice in many parts of America and including Greensboro and the south. When the store eventually desegregated six months after— When the manager made the [00:20:37] decision to desegregate the lunch counter six months after the protests began, the first people that were served at the lunch counter were several African American employees.{{BY}}

Image BE066724: CORBIS CAPTIONED AS:

Woolworth's Lunch Counter Protesters

Original caption: 2/1/1960-Greensboro, NC: The participants in the first lunch counter sit-in are shown on the street after leaving the Greensboro, North Carolina Woolworth's by a side exit. The four North Carolina A & T students are (L-R): David Richmond, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair, Jr., and Joseph McNeil. (No photographers were allowed into Woolworth's during this first protest; this is the only photo of all four original protesters together.)

Image BE024641: CORBIS CAPTIONED AS:

African American Man Staging Lunch Counter Sit-in

An African-American student sits at a lunch counter reserved for white customers during a sit-in to protest segregation. Packages of napkins have been placed on nearby stools to discourage other protesters from joining the sit-in.

Object

Curator's Introduction

When we began to look at the counter, you found small [00:13:01] details. On the underside of the counter was a shelf, a little aluminum shelf where people could put their packages that they'd purchased [00:13:10]. Because shopping was a big part of your experience of going to a Woolworth Corporation to a store and then after that, many people would meet there for lunch. [00:13:22] This was part of the whole social dynamic of a small community where people would gather for lunch, they would exchange stories of daily life about how their [00:13:32] family and friends were doing. That is, if you were Caucasian. If you were African American, you didn't have that experience until after the counter was desegregated. [00:13:43] If you look at the stools, each stool has a little hook on it. In this case, the hooks were missing [00:13:49] but the holes were there and we knew that something was there. When we looked at the photographs of the store from 1960, you could see the [00:13:59] hooks with people's hats hanging on the hooks. Small details, but what these small details do is give you that context, that broader understanding [00:14:09] of this object's role, not only in the small southern town, but also it allows us to talk about the Woolworth Corporation [00:14:21] in American business history and very very importantly, this pivotal moment in the African American civil rights movement.{{BY}}

The Greensboro store was one of the flagship [00:25:23] stores in the F.W. Woolworth chain, second only to their New York store. It took about— It occupied about a quarter of a city block. There were 14 windows [00:25:34] on the outside that beckoned shoppers to come in and spend their money at the Woolworth store. A lunch counter ran the entire length of the store and across the [00:25:50] back wall, seating many people. The counter— When you walked up to the counter, you saw this very inviting— Let me start again. When shoppers [00:26:08] walked up to the counter and sat down, they looked into rose-colored mirrors. There were chrome trim and black glass or opalite counter, chrome. [00:26:24] There was African maple wood veneer on the surfaces, a terrazzo floor, marble. This was a very high-end,

inviting environment for people to sit and have [00:26:40] your piece of pie and coffee or a milkshake and a hamburger.{{BY}}

The thing I love above the lunch counter, it's a terrific way to showcase how ordinary people in [00:21:34] the course of their everyday lives helped shaped history and are shaped by history. These four students and countless others ignited [00:21:44] a national mass movement that brought about constructive and highly important cultural change in American life.{{BY}}

Objects have many different [00:24:16] meanings. In this case, you have a common lunch counter that was a part of the F.W. Woolworth's [00:24:25] store in Greensboro, North Carolina. First, it was a lunch counter. Secondly, it became a symbol of this flashpoint in American history that ignited this [00:24:39] student-led challenge to American apartheid and you could go through countless other layers of meaning. It's like peeling back the layers of an onion [00:24:52] and you can do that for virtually any object and find similar, compelling stories about the past.{{BY}}

Tour

Brief

Extended

Explore

Object

I [00:29:20] think its importance isn't visually immediately recognizable. It takes words and as historians— as public historians, our role is to use material culture, [00:29:36] objects, stuff, and we combine that with narrative or words and pictures to tell stories, so in the case of the lunch counter, it's foremost a lunch counter as an [00:29:53] object. When you look at it, that's what it is. It's, you know, a place where they prepared and served food, but it takes the historical record, it takes [00:30:07] the visuals, it takes the film, it takes the personal stories, the oral histories and so on, to give this object its true and probably foremost [00:30:20] important meaning, which is an icon of the African American civil rights movement.{{BY}}

Image BE066727: CORBIS CAPTIONED AS:

African American Students At Woolworth's Lunch Counter

Original caption: 2/1960-Greensboro, NC: Unidentified African American students are shown at the Greensboro, North Carolina Woolworth's lunch counter. (Exact day unknown; this is not the first day of the protest.)

Image BE066792: CORBIS CAPTIONED AS:
Second Day of Woolworth's Lunch Counter Sit-In
Four African American college students sit in protest at a whites-only lunch counter during the second day of peaceful protest at a Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina. From left: Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Billy Smith, and Clarence Henderson.

Context

The scenes of people huddled around [00:03:24] what were initially four students but more people do come and help them and sit with them, but the crowds of people yelling and screaming at them and pouring [00:03:36] things on them and otherwise humiliating them, why were people willing to do that? To be recorded doing that? What about what was so intense? [00:03:47] That's the thing that's really difficult to convey and this is one of the complex aspects of presenting history about the modern civil rights movement.{ [00:03:58]{DR}}

Image BE066745: CORBIS CAPTIONED AS:
Whites Youths at Sit-in on Woolworth's Counter Seats
Original caption: 2/1960-Greensboro, NC: White youths take up counter space at Woolworth's to block sit-ins by blacks.

Image BE024514: CORBIS CAPTIONED AS:
Women Participating in Sit-in Protest
Women at a roped-off lunch counter stage a sit down to protest segregation in Nashville, Tennessee.

Museum

Acquisition

in October of 1993, I was cooking dinner and I was listening to the evening [00:08:54] business report and I heard— learned that the Woolworth Corporation was downsizing and would be closing over 900 stores nationwide, so I had this idea that [00:09:04] perhaps the Greensboro store was one of those, so I got on the phone the next day and called and spoke to the manager of the [Greensboro can audio edits pull this in from above?] store who confirmed that, yes, [00:09:11] indeed, they would be closing the store in three days, so I alerted my colleagues here at the museum and we began to collaborate about how we should [00:09:23] proceed.

The manager at the store directed me to the Corporate Vice President for Public Relations who interestingly was an African American and he confirmed that they [00:09:37] would be interested in having a conversation about possibly donating this

object which I tried to make the point that this was an object of national significance, regional [00:09:49] significance, but also of local significance to the community of Greensboro. He agreed. However, he made the point that he would only agree to this if we had the [00:10:02] buy-in from the community of Greensboro, so a colleague, and I flew down to Greensboro and met with members of the City Council, members of the African American [00:10:16] community and former Woolworth employees to discuss a possible donation.

We looked at the counter which spanned the entire length [00:10:25] of the store and ran across the back of the store and decided that we would ask for an eight-foot section of the counter, four stools, a few [00:10:35] mirrors and a soda fountain that was behind the counter and so this was an area that they were planning to disassemble anyway and make into a museum, so [00:10:48] we were able to reach an agreement. We shook hands and left that day with an understanding that this would become part of the nation's collection. [00:10:58] It would be held in trust for the American people and always cared for and preserved and interpreted. We worked with the local carpenters [00:11:06] union to pack up the material, to build crates, ship it off to Washington and it arrived here and it was prepared for a small exhibition,{BY}

Display

we took the counter, the four stools, a few mirrors and put it within viewing distance of the Star [00:17:42] Spangled Banner, on the second floor of the museum.

Why did we feel that was important? Because a lot of people that come into this museum should— Everybody [00:17:54] that comes into this museum should see their history represented here and it was a very conscious decision on our part to put that counter within viewing [00:18:06] distance of one of the great icons of American history, the flag that flew over Ft. McHenry that inspired the national anthem. That proximity to [00:18:21] the flag said to many African Americans our history is here at the museum.

It was a very simple presentation but one that when people would walk up to the counter, they [00:18:32] saw it as a familiar and comforting object, a lunch counter where for many people they sat, they enjoyed milkshakes, a cup of coffee, shared stories with [00:18:45] family members or community, other people in their community but the first thing you saw when you walked up there was, in 1960, if you were African American, you weren't welcome to sit here. Many people would then look up and [00:19:01] look into a rose-colored mirror that was collected along with the counter and you put yourself in the place of people who walked up to that counter were you, [00:19:15] the African American turned away,

were you, the Caucasian American, who was welcomed to sit down as [00:19:24] an equal and break bread with friends and talk about daily life. {{BY}}

I would want to use film footage, photographs of the protests, protest signs, things that give it that context because when you see the lunch counter, [00:23:44] it is visually a very compelling object that leads you to food. It leads you to community. It doesn't immediately lead you to civil rights, to direct [00:24:05] action campaigns, to sit-ins, to all of these things. That is something that was layered onto the history of this object.{{BY}}