

Lunch counter #1

Q: We'll start sort of with the lunch counter as a counter, so if maybe you could take a few minutes and describe it sort of physically and what you think is important about it as an object.

Response: Okay. Do you mind if I start by talking a little about the role of curator and collecting this sort of stuff.

Q: Absolutely.

Response: Okay. Is there a ready, [00:00:37] set, go?

Q: No. I'm rolling now.

Response: Oh, you're on. Oh, okay.

Q: And obviously you don't pay attention to me. Just talk to me—

Response: Do we [00:00:43] say our name or anything?

Q: No. Well, we'll sort of sidebar that and so we'll do that all in text and so we just conversation and whenever you [00:00:51] need to stop or you feel like you want to back up and say something over, that's all right.

Response: Okay. Good. Okay. I'm a curator at the [00:00:59] Museum of American History and what I do is help the museum form a permanent material record of the American past by collecting objects and [00:01:11] we do this— We're guided in our decisions by the museum's mission, by collecting plans that are developed by curatorial staff and so on and [00:01:23] this is really a pretty important responsibility that we have because it gives us the power to remember or forget people's history and so the choices that we make [00:01:42] are really important. We look for things that will allow us to give a sort of broad representation and give meaning, sort of material meaning, to [00:01:54] historical words and records.

Q: Do you want to talk about the actual collecting of the counter? Start it there?

Response: Sure. One thing that has always [00:02:08] interested me is the role of young people and specifically ordinary people in helping shape history and how they were shaped by history, so in 1960, if you were African American, you [00:02:26] weren't welcome to go in and sit down at a lunch counter and order a hamburger or a milkshake. You had to go to the carry-out section and take your food [00:02:35] and eat it elsewhere. Well, on February 1st, 1960, Ezell Blair, Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond walked [00:02:47] in to this F.W. Woolworth store in Greensboro, North Carolina, sat down and asked to be served. When they were refused service, they stayed— remained seated. [00:03:02] They left at the end of the day and returned the

next day with fellow students and this went on for a period of six months. Eventually, the economic impact [00:03:15] of this caused the Woolworth Corporation to make a decision to desegregate their lunch counters, so it was really an economic victory but a really important victory for American [00:03:30] society. Racial segregation pervaded American society at this time, so it wasn't just the Woolworth Corporation. It was true in many cities across America. [00:03:42] It was true in movie theaters, public facilities and so on.

Q: Let's try it and _____ ambience.

Q: We should do the whole thing [00:04:06] again I suppose. I'm sorry about that.

Response: That's okay.

Q: Just about sort of thinking about the preface to collecting.

Response: Okay. [00:04:17] I'm a curator at the Museum of American History and one of my jobs is to help the museum form a record of the American experience by collecting stuff, objects, from [00:04:29] everyday life. We look for things that are— give us broad representation and allow us to tell really compelling stories about the American past. It's a power that we have to wield sort of openly and judiciously [00:04:46] because we have the power to select objects, tell stories and offer interpretations that in effect decide on the scope of our national memory, so we decide [00:05:03] which stories are important to record for American history. Pretty daunting responsibility, but one that we enjoy and one that we try to use openly with our colleagues, [00:05:17] our communities and our audiences.

And, let's see now. Let me think about this. Something that has interested me has been the role of young [00:05:30] people in helping bring about cultural change in American life, specifically the contributions that ordinary people in the course of their everyday lives make to [00:05:44] history, because it's ordinary people much like ourselves that shape history and are shaped by history, whether it's on a battlefield or at a F.W. Woolworth store in Greensboro, North Carolina, [00:05:59] where on February 1st, 1960, Ezell Blair, Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil and David Richmond walked in and sat down at a lunch counter, a very [00:06:15] ordinary act that for many Americans was their right to do. In 1960, if you were African American, you were not welcome to sit down at the lunch counter. It [00:06:29] wasn't a law that prevented you, but in many areas and Greensboro included, it was the local custom.

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. Let's see. Where do we go from there?

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about how a lunch counter fits into a community like Greensboro in 1960?

Response: Okay. [00:07:20] Let me just make one other point here. Do you want me to go into the sort of collecting it?

Q: Yes.

Response: Let me do this sort of quick. [00:07:29] Okay. As curators, we have often a list, if not written down, in the back of our minds, of objects that are pivotal and seminal but [00:07:41] also ordinary and everyday, things that help us form this record of American life. Now, we're guided in part by our museum's mission and the intellectual [00:07:54] framework, but a lot of it comes down to the passion of individual curators and the collecting vision and the collecting plans that they develop and the— [00:08:06]

Let's see what else. In October 1993, . . . One evening 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 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, so it was actually [00:11:22] on February 1st, 1994, 34 years after the initial sit-in exactly that the museum finally signed the deed of gift and we had an agreement that [00:11:35] this would become part of the collections.

Q: That's great. Is the deed of gift in the records?

Response: It is. I think you can scan that. [00:11:46] You'd have to clear it with the registrar people but as far as I'm concerned.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about that first exhibition, what was there [00:11:55] and what was in it?

Response: When we arrived in Greensboro and started looking at this lunch counter, you can imagine, this was something that had been [00:12:03] exposed to food for decades and talk about grease and grime and dirt and bugs and so on, they were everywhere, so this was a real challenging undertaking [00:12:18] to take this apart and get it cleaned up and shipped here to Washington, but as curators, we're used to looking at stuff. We're really detectives [00:12:31] and so what we do is look at objects as evidence and so we get down on our hands and knees with our flashlights and our magnifying glasses and [00:12:40] really try to look for things that link us to part of the story of how this object fit into history, its broader context so that we can [00:12:50] interpret that and tell those stories to our publics here at the museum.

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.

Why was it pivotal? Because these were students, these [00:14:38] were four 18-year-old, 17- and 18-year-old college students who essentially stepped into history that day with the support of many family members, community members, and thousands [00:14:51] of people who had supported them previously, to help bring about cultural change in American life. So, their action ignited this student-led protest [00:15:03] movement where thousands and thousands of students over the course of six months

joined them and other members of the community in helping to challenge this injustice of [00:15:15] American apartheid.

Q: Great. That's wonderful.

Response: I'm blathering on, but I don't know what else to say.

Q: You've got all sorts of good stuff to [00:15:27] tell us about it. We spoke earlier and now a number of months ago about sort of the connections between these objects through history and [00:15:39] you mentioned earlier today that you thought there was really a great connection between the Jefferson desk and the lunch counter and I wondered if you wanted to talk about [00:15:48] that.

Response: 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. They were seeking equality and they [00:16:45] were seeking the promise of democracy that America offered.

Q: If you were to take the lunch counter as a curator and you wanted to sort of set up an exhibit [00:16:59], sort of a small exhibit around it, what would be your— What would you put with it?

Response: When we collected the counter, we decided that we needed [00:17:08] to put it on exhibit fairly quickly because it came with a lot of expectations. Once something like this gets in the media, people want to see it. [00:17:18] They want to come here. We really didn't have the financial resources to do a large exhibition about the American civil rights movement or African American history in which it [00:17:31] could've been a centerpiece. Instead, 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.

Q: That's great. The other person that I think that we don't ever really [00:19:33] think about and talk about and I wonder if this has been sort of an aspect of thinking about the lunch counter is that the folks who're standing behind the lunch counter doing [00:19:45] the refusing or accepting.

Response: 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.

The [00:20:51] manager was in an awkward position in that the corporate officials in New York left the decision to him when and if to desegregate the counter because it wasn't [00:21:08] the law that determined if people were allowed to be served. It was social customs in these local communities.

Q: That's very good. So what do you personally [00:21:23] think is sort of the most interesting about the lunch counter?

Response: 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.

Q: That's a perfect answer. That's like the perfect [00:21:59] length. That's great. That's wonderful.

Response: I had media training a long long time ago.

Q: Okay. Let me see what else do we have here?

Response: Do I [00:22:15] get to go now?

Q: Yeah, in just a second. I wonder if we can go back to sort of the exhibit question, if there are other things that are not in [00:22:30] the collection that you would like to put it

with or if there are pieces in the collection— If you had it to exhibit now, what sorts of things [00:22:39] you would put with it?

Response: Okay.

Q: Like if you were to do that—

Response: I had a thought and I lost it.

Q: That exhibit on sort [00:22:52] of more broadly on students and—

Response: One of the challenges is finding ways to connect objects with people or re-connect objects with people because it's the [00:23:05] stories that interest most people. We are a museum of objects, of stuff, everything from Barbies to Tupperware to the first and the famous, but it's really [00:23:19] the actions of people that I find interesting and compelling to share with our publics, so if I were to take the lunch counter today, I [00:23:30] would be— 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.

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.

Q: Great.

Q: Could you ask him to visually describe [00:25:08] the lunch counter.

Q: We've got sort of the eight feet but if we could just a sense of that about what it looks like.

Response: Okay. 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.

Q: Good.

Response: Let's see, what else can I say about it?

Q: The last time we talked you [00:26:51] said that we think that the covering that's on the seat now is not the original.

Response: Right.

Q: Can you sort of talk about the sort of change in the lunch counter over [00:27:04] time?

Response: Yeah. When I first— When I called the manager of the store in October of '93, he confirmed that much of the lunch counter was still intact, [00:27:19] that there was one alteration that occurred to expand the seating, but by and large it was unchanged from the 1960s. When they increased [00:27:29] the seating, they changed the upholstered seats on the stools. This is evidence of change. It's not something that we would get rid [00:27:43] of because history is all about change, whether it's material change or change in the actions of our society, our culture and so on, so as curators, this is [00:27:55] really evidence of how objects— Objects offer evidence of how things change over time and if we're creative, if we're smart curators and [00:28:07] we look at this evidence, it can really help us understand change.

Q: Great. How we doing here? We're a little bit late. Questions from the peanut gallery? [00:28:26]

Q: _____ encountered what do you want people to notice when we see this object or what the _____ missed originally.

Q: Ah, yes.

Q: And then how does [00:28:48] interpretation change?

Q: They're good questions. They're on my list but I forgot about them, so if the [00:28:56] average sort of visitor to the museum approaches the counter as it is now, is it still in place? You haven't taken it down yet?

Response: It's in Brown. [00:29:07]

Q: They approach the lunch counter in Brown. What do you feel like is the most important thing for them to take away from their encounter with the object?

Response: 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.

Q: That's a good bite-size answer.

Response: I'm kind of talked out here. I don't know if that—s

Q: No, [00:30:36], that's great and we appreciate _____ to do it.