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Fieldwork in Yalobusha County

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Fieldwork in Yalobusha County, Mississippi
September 29, 2019
Led by Dr. Wilkerson and Ms. Dottie Chapman Reed
With Southern Studies 560 students

We started our morning at the Inn at Ole Miss at 7:30am, where we met Ms. Reed, piled into a van with six students, and headed to Spring Hill North Baptist Church in Water Valley, Mississippi, where we were welcomed by Reverend Townes and a small congregation. We were invited to share with the congregation our plans for an oral history project documenting Black family and community history in Yalobusha County. After the service, several congregants signed up to participate.

We then headed to Coffeeville, where we attended “fifth Sunday” services at the Mount Moriah Missionary Baptist Association. Again we were welcomed warmly, and the moderator gave us the opportunity to share our project with the over one-hundred people in attendance. We stayed after the service and attended lunch with the congregation. We ended up with over ten more people interested in sharing their family history, and several more who expressed interest.

We were nearly the last to leave Mount Moriah, as the pastor who serves as moderator for the district, along with Ms. Reed, showed us the photographs on the walls that document the district’s history.

In the afternoon we headed back to Water Valley, where we gathered at the Davidson Elementary School building—the former colored school. Ms. Reed’s former classmate from Davidson, Emma Gooch, joined us as well. They told stories about the school, and students asked questions about their childhood and school years. We then headed over to “the block,” the former Black business district of Water Valley, where we took a walking tour and heard stories of what the block once looked like—with Black-owned businesses such as a laundry mat, grocery store and juke joints.

Without Ms. Reed’s connections, and her willingness to introduce us to community members, we would have many more hurdles to starting this project. In oral history work, we often discuss the importance of “gatekeepers,” the people who can help to vouch for a project and make introductions. Ms. Reed is without a doubt our gatekeeper.

Students now have the contacts to begin the project and will be conducting around eight interviews with individuals this semester. These interviewees range from the keeper of Water Valley’s Black history (Calvin Hawkins) and the first Black person to register to vote in Yalobusha County (Lilly Mae Caldwell Roberts).

At the end of the semester, students will share their research in various formats with community members, possibly in written form and through a presentation or performance.

We have an opportunity to expand this project and meaningfully engage Black communities that neighbor Oxford and the University of Mississippi. Consistency is key. Right now we are not certain how the project will continue in the spring semester and beyond, but we hope that with
institutional support, we will be able to continue our collaboration and document these rich histories of Black families in North Mississippi.

Ideas for expansion:

- Experiential-learning models
- Internships through History or Southern Studies
- Graduate Research Assistant
- Regular course-offerings (right now I can teach my oral history seminar only about once every two years)
- Other ideas?

Bios

Ms. Dottie Chapman Reed grew up in Water Valley, Mississippi, and she entered the University of Mississippi as a freshman in the fall of 1970. She graduated in 1974 and soon was hired as the first Black undergraduate admissions counselor at the University, where she remained for three years. She spent four years as assistant director of the Student Center at East Tennessee State University. She has more than 20 years corporate experience with two Fortune 500 companies. She writes a bi-weekly column “Outstanding Black Women of Yalobusha County” for the North Mississippi Herald. In 2009 she received the Dr. Jeanette Jennings Trailblazer Award, which recognizes UM alumni or former students who served a vital role to the progress of black faculty, staff, alumni and/or students on campus. She lives in Atlanta, Georgia, but maintains ties in Water Valley.

Professor Jessie Wilkerson is an assistant professor in history and southern studies. She has worked on numerous oral history projects, including the Civil Rights History Project for the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture and the “Long Women’s Movement Project” for the Southern Oral History Program (UNC). She regularly teaches a course on oral history methods.

Ms. Reed and students at the Davidson Elementary School.