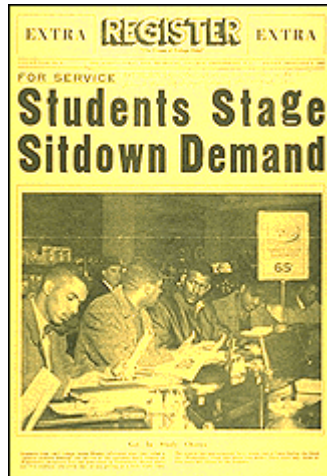


Sitting for Justice

By William Yeingst, with contributions from Lonnie Bunch



Seated at the Woolworth's lunch counter in one of the first days of the Greensboro sit-ins are Ezell Blair (now Jibreel Khazan), Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond.



Front page of the North Carolina A&T University student newspaper.

Throughout American history, effecting social change often required personal initiative, sacrifice, and courage.

The story begins in a familiar setting. It was 6:25 pm on October 13, 1993. I was in the kitchen preparing dinner. The TV was droning in the background, when near the end of the local news program's business report, I caught word that executives of the F.W. Woolworth Corporation planned to close over 900 stores in a nationwide downsizing move.

The immediate question that flashed into my mind was whether the Elm Street store in Greensboro, North Carolina was included in the corporate restructuring. Was the luncheonette intact after thirty-three years? This was, after all, the common lunch counter at the local five-and-dime that for African Americans across the South symbolized something terribly wrong in American life - the inhumanity of racism. This same lunch counter later come to symbolize Americans' ability to reform their political system through largely peaceful means. This daily gathering place, a setting familiar to many Americans, was the flashpoint in the struggle over integrating public facilities in America.

To understand why the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History was interested in the luncheonette, it is important to know the history, symbolic value, and significance of this object. In 1960, if



A Woolworth's promotional shot from the 1960s showing an all-white clientele sitting at the lunch counter.

The lunch counter and related artifacts strengthen collections representing African American and youth cultures - documenting the role of both in bringing about social, cultural and political change in America.



Woolworth's promotional shot from the 1960s.



you were African American, you were not allowed to sit at the lunch counter of the F.W. Woolworth store in Greensboro. Racial inequality pervaded American life. But throughout the South, things were worse. A system known as "Jim Crow" segregated people by race in restaurants, hotels, restrooms, and most other public accommodations. When African Americans tried to find a house or apartment, register to vote, or even order lunch, they were denied equal rights. The Woolworth's in Greensboro, like other stores in the community, refused to seat and serve African Americans at its luncheonette.

Throughout American history, effecting social change often required personal initiative, sacrifice, and courage. As Frederick Douglass said on August 4, 1857, "Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did, and it never will."

On February 1, 1960, four African American students sat down at the Woolworth's lunch counter and politely asked for service. Their request was refused. When asked to leave, they remained in their seats. Ezell A. Blair, Jr. (now Jibreel Khazan), Franklin E. McCain, Joseph A. McNeil, and David L. Richmond were all enrolled at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro. Their "passive sit-down

Site of the now-closed Woolworth's store in downtown Greensboro, North Carolina.



The four original members of the Greensboro sit-in movement leaving Woolworth's after the first day of protest.

demand" began one of the first sustained sit-ins and ignited a youth-led movement to challenge injustice and racial inequality throughout the South.

In Greensboro, hundreds of students, civil rights organizations, churches, and members of the community joined in what became a six-month-long protest. They challenged Woolworth's company policy of racial discrimination by sitting at the lunch counter and, later, organizing an economic boycott of the store. Their defiance heightened many Americans' awareness of racial injustice and ultimately led to the desegregation of the F.W. Woolworth lunch counter on July 25, 1960.

The morning after overhearing the TV news spot about Woolworth's, I tracked down the manager of the Elm Street Woolworth's store to find out if it would be affected by Woolworth's corporate restructuring. He confirmed that the store was to close in three days. He said the lunch counter was, for the most part, unchanged from the time of the sit-ins.

I then notified my colleagues at the museum, including Curator Lonnie Bunch.

After talking to the Greensboro store manager, Lonnie and I called the Woolworth's public relations office in New York. We were directed to Aubrey Lewis, Vice President for Corporate Relations. We stressed to Mr. Lewis the historical significance of the sit-in, and the way the Woolworth Corporation would be portrayed should a portion of the lunch counter become part of the Smithsonian collection. We emphasized the importance of the events of February through July 1960, and said the counter would be held in trust for the American people, forming a lasting record of one of the most significant events in recent American history.

We cast our interest in broad terms: the symbolic power of the lunch counter would help the museum interpret not only the history of the Civil Rights Movement, but also aspects of recent Southern history, Woolworth's role in American business history, and the process of urbanization in the South. We also stressed the museum's ability to provide

long term care and preservation of the objects. And though we could not promise that these artifacts would be exhibited, we felt that eventually the nearly six million visitors who come to the museum each year would have the opportunity to see them. After several lengthy discussions, Lewis made it clear that, while the corporation supported this donation, it would not act without joint approval from the Greensboro community.

Outfitted with cameras, tape measures and business cards, Lonnie and I flew to Greensboro to meet with members of the Greensboro City Council, employees of Woolworth, and representatives of the African American community. At all of our meetings we emphasized that the story of the sit-in was of national significance and should be celebrated and preserved both in Greensboro and in Washington, DC - and that changes wrought by the Civil Rights Movement, though costly, painful and incomplete, made America a better, more democratic nation.

The final hurdle involved negotiations with Sit-in Movement Inc., a small local organization formed by African American residents of Greensboro to purchase and preserve the Woolworth store, and eventually convert it into a national civil rights museum. We were concerned that they might want to retain all the artifacts for their exhibits. And we had no intention of storming into Greensboro, taking what we wanted and leaving, with little regard for the community. We spent much time discussing with Sit-in Movement Inc. their plans for the site. We reviewed with them the funding, exhibition, interpretive, staffing and collections challenges that any new museum faced. We made suggestions about sources for information and support such as the Association for State & Local History, the American Association of Museums and the North Carolina Humanities Council. And most importantly, we echoed their enthusiasm for the creation of their museum.

We then discussed our needs. We requested four stools, a corresponding eight-foot section of counter, mirrors, a soda fountain and a section of cornice, all as close to the original sit-in site as we could determine using historic photographs. Recognizing the national attention that would come with a donation to the Smithsonian, Sit-in Movement Inc. agreed to our request. The Woolworth Corporation, now comfortable with the reaction of the local community, also supported the donation. Woolworths agreed to dismantle and crate the objects with the assistance of a Greensboro carpenter's union whose members would donate their labor. We shook hands with all parties and asked for their support of any future NMAH public programs about the sit-in. The deal was done. Lonnie and I walked away elated.

During a follow-up trip to Greensboro, Smithsonian staff oversaw the dismantling, crating and transport of the artifacts to the museum. Now part of the collections of the NMAH, the lunch counter acquired another layer of meaning-- it became a museum artifact that would help shape our understanding of the American past.

Bringing new acquisitions to the National Museum of American History combines theoretical, historical, and practical considerations. What the museum collects is guided by the museum's mission statement and curatorial collecting plans. On the practical level, curators' efforts are influenced by funds, storage space, and staff support. The National Museum of American History Mission Statement:

"The National Museum of American History dedicates its collections and scholarship to inspiring a broader understanding of our nation and its many peoples. We create learning opportunities, stimulate imaginations, and present challenging ideas about our country's past."

The National Museum of American History's mission statement emphasizes the importance of forming a lasting material record of America's diversity. The lunch counter and related artifacts strengthen collections representing African American and youth cultures - documenting the role of both in bringing about social, cultural and political change in America.

The student-led sit-in at the Woolworth's store was the beginning of the largely youth-led social reform movements of the 1960s. Four 17- and 18-year-old African American students inspired a generation of Americans in the pursuit of equal justice and equal opportunity. Energy from the Civil Rights Movement sparked and greatly influenced a number of campaigns seeking social and cultural reform, such as the anti-war movement and the women's movement.

The Greensboro sit-ins were a landmark in the American Civil Rights Movement that should give all Americans hope. Many people view protest and dissent as threats to the American political system; but the struggle to improve the American way of life through reform has been part of the nation's history since the American Revolution. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson warned that when government no longer meets the needs of the people, "it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government." Public protest has led to the abolition of slavery, the extension of the right to vote to women, the establishment of food and health standards, the enactment of child labor laws, legal protection of the environment, the end of the war in Vietnam, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Like the right to vote, the freedom to protest gives Americans a means to influence their government and the hope that government will respond to their actions.

This is the first of a two-part series about documenting contemporary history.

This article originally appeared in *increase & diffusion*, a Smithsonian online publication.