Race Relations in America
Overview

Discover a wealth of primary source material on the Civil Rights Movement, segregation, discrimination and racial theory in America during three pivotal decades of the twentieth century.

The Race Relations Department, based at Fisk University, was a highly influential think tank offering a forum for discussion and research on racial topics. The work of the Department highlighted topics such as poverty and inequality, class, housing, employment, education and government policy. Its programme attracted many well-known figures in the Civil Rights Movement, including Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King Jr., Bayard Rustin, Charles Houston, and Marguerite Cartwright.

This resource sheds light on the fascinating work of the Department through the digitisation of extensive records from the Department’s archives, now held at the Amistad Research Center in New Orleans.

About the Race Relations Department

Based at Fisk University from 1943-1970, the Race Relations Department of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries emerged as a national centre of scholarly investigation and public conversation about civil rights in this pivotal era.

The Department was set up by the American Missionary Association to identify problem areas in race relations and develop courses of constructive action, under the leadership of the eminent sociologist and civil rights activist, Charles S. Johnson.

The era’s leading social scientists, religious leaders, educators, government officials, and other notable figures participated in its work, publishing a range of critical papers on racial discrimination.

Alongside its research work, the Department also held its famed annual summer school, known as the Race Relations Institute, in which participants presented and discussed research on racial issues. This helped to create and educate leaders for the Civil Rights Movement, attracting many famous and influential figures including Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen, Rachel DuBois, William J. Faulkner, John Hope Franklin, and Martin Luther King Jr.

“A rare opportunity to track the fight for racial justice in the modern era. There are few collections that can rival it for tracking the evolution of civil rights thought and effort over time.”

John Giggie, Associate Professor of History and African American Studies, and Director of the Summersell Center for the Study of the South

Introduction

Explore three pivotal decades in the struggle for civil rights in America.
Collection Highlights

- Over 100 hours of audio recordings of speeches given by prominent members of the Civil Rights Movement, eminent sociologists, economists, industrial experts and psychologists
- A wealth of survey material covering school desegregation, church integration, employment practices, housing and recreation
- Detailed case studies and community self-surveys on key cities across the United States
- Campaigns against voter suppression in African American communities to stop poll taxes, unfair literacy tests and intimidation

- Photographs of the participants at the annual Race Relations Institute; a desegregated, interracial phenomenon in the otherwise deeply segregated city of Nashville, Tennessee
- Scrapbooks for several of the annual Institutes, collating rosters, photographs, publicity material, media coverage and key speeches
- Posters from the Cranbrook travelling exhibition, which was circulated around the country in schools, churches and civic organisations

Additional Features

To aid classroom engagement and student usage, this collection is enhanced with the following tools:

- Interactive map allowing users to browse the extensive survey material produced by the Race Relations Department
- Data association tool to explore attendance and participation at the Race Relations Institute
- Interactive chronology offering contextual information to support the documents
- Visual highlights gallery showcasing photographs across the key themes of the collection
- Contextual essays commissioned from academics on our editorial board
- Video interviews with academics to guide users through the history of the Race Relations Department

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Key Themes

This digital collection provides essential primary source material documenting key issues in race relations and civil rights during the twentieth century, supporting teaching and research in the following areas:

- Crime and police brutality
- Community protests and race riots
- Poverty and discrimination
- Voting rights
- Urban renewal and housing problems

- Health care and welfare programmes
- Migration from the South into northern cities
- Demographics
- The role of the church in African American communities
- Labour movements
- Student protests and other non-violent demonstrations
- African American culture
- Ethnic groups such as American Indians, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Chinese and Japanese citizens

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Editorial Board

The following scholars have provided essays, advice or feedback:

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