

Source, Story: History

: Teaching U.S. History in the Archives

Another School Year, Another Lynching: African American Communities During the Great Depression

Context

This collection of documents from the Horace Mann Bond Papers helps students and teachers to explore:

- The Great Depression in the American South (1929-1939)
- Lynching in African American Communities (1930s)
- Using photographs as historical evidence

Introduction

Horace Mann Bond (1904–1972), the grandson of slaves, was an African American educator, scholar, and college administrator best known for his leadership at historically black colleges. Bond's papers were acquired by the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 1979. The complete collection thoroughly documents Bond's two primary interests: the history and sociology of education for African Americans, and the educational and political conditions of Africa. The document collection for *Source, Story, History* draws from Bond's early career, but highlights the subject of Bond's work and the environment in which he lived, rather than the man himself.

Bond's letters and portions of his diary published in *The Star Creek Papers* give a chilling portrait of the days immediately following Jerome Wilson's death at the hands of a lynch mob. In contrast, Bond's photographs and Griffin's reports document everyday life in hundreds of towns like Franklinton, when no dramatic event like a lynching drew attention to them. The contrast between these two visions of Southern black communities invites students to consider the social, economic, and political tensions in towns like Franklinton, which periodically erupted in violence and tragedy.

Background Information for Students

Provide students with a brief overview of Horace Mann Bond's work for the Julius Rosenwald Fund, as well as lynching in Southern communities after Reconstruction. See both the introduction to *The Star Creek Papers*, an edited collection of Bond's writing during the year he spent in Franklinton, Louisiana, and the finding aid for Bond's papers at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, for background information. For a more detailed analysis of the Rosenwald Fund's impact on education in the South, see *The Rosenwald Schools of the American South* by Mary S. Hoffschwelle.

Discussion

Two central questions should guide the conversation about this document collection:

- What do these documents tell us about life in the South for African Americans in the 1930s?
- How do these documents present contrasting or conflicting visions of life in southern African American communities in the 1930s?

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Discussion (continued)

Present both questions, and give students time to explore the documents. Consider dividing the class into three groups, with each group examining one set of sources (correspondence, photographs, or reports), or create document packets that include examples of each kind of source for small groups. Remind students that their answers to both questions should be grounded in evidence from the documents.

After groups have reviewed their documents, open the floor to discussion. Project images of the documents for the entire class to see while each group summarizes their findings for the class. Guide the discussion to help students synthesize each groups' conclusions.

Sample Document Comparison

If students have difficulty articulating contrast between the groups of sources, use the following, or a similar, example. On the one hand, Griffin frequently refers to the enthusiasm of teachers and community members for the building of schools. See, for example, his July 1931 report:

“July forth, we spoke to an enthusiastic group at Thomaston, Marengo County in the interest of the Vocational Shop. We found a fine spirit, and a willingness to work and cooperate, but the finances were very scarce, yet the patrons are determined with the help of the County Board of Education to put this project over during the year.”

On the other hand, the captions for two of Bond's photographs make it clear that the schools are not always managed with such enthusiasm and competence. Of schools in Union County, North Carolina, Bond writes:

“Taught by an old man who has never been to high school.” and “No, this is not a vine-covered cabin with the happy little pickanannies playing around it, but a school for 'em.”

While Griffin's reports suggest communities that rally around the possibility of educating their children, Bond's photographs demonstrate the reality of some communities where teacher training and school facilities are far from sufficient. Ask students to evaluate this apparent contraction: is it the result of regional and local variance in commitment to schooling? A question of different men telling different stories? What conclusions can be drawn about these differences? Remind students that this limited document collection may raise as many questions as it answers, and discuss the parameters of what we can know, based on these documents alone.

Assignments and Additional Questions for Discussion

- To what degree is Bond an outsider in the communities he observes and photographs? Does his position influence the kind of photographs he takes? What evidence supports your claim?
- Based on Griffin's reports for the Rosewald Fund, what evidence is there to suggest that African American communities were negatively affected by the Great Depression in 1931 and 1932?