
History Unclassified

Freedom Summer “Homos”: An Archive Story

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AFTER A DECADE OF political anti-LGBT demagoguery, it was left to the integrity and the judicial reasoning of U.S. District Court judge Carlton Reeves to strike down as unconstitutional Mississippi’s ban on same-sex marriage in 2014. In his written opinion, Judge Reeves—the second African American appointed as a federal judge in Mississippi—drew a critical connection between contemporary Mississippi LGBT discrimination and the civil rights movement of the 1960s: “Any claim that Mississippians quietly accommodated gay and lesbian citizens could no longer be made in the 1960s . . . Segregationists called their opponents ‘racial perverts,’” he wrote. “Being homosexual invited scrutiny and professional consequences . . . The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission . . . singled out Rust College, a private historically black institution, on reports that instructors there were ‘homosexuals and racial agitators.’”¹ In his opinion, Judge Reeves focused, as few ever have, on the intersection of Jim Crow and the animus-drenched persecution of Mississippi homosexuals: “Klan propaganda tied together ‘Communists, homosexuals, and Jews, fornicators and liberals and angry blacks—infidels all.’” He continued, “Mississippians opposed to integration harassed several civil rights leaders for their homosexuality.”²

Inspired by Judge Reeves’s decision, as an LGBT “archive activist” I set out to document how a small Methodist liberal arts institution in the city of Holly Springs, Mississippi, was targeted in the 1964 “Freedom Summer.” Who ordered it? What was the strategic idea? What were the consequences for Rust College, its faculty, and its president, Dr. Earnest Andrew Smith? And why had I never heard of this homosexual investigation before? Historians like Taylor Branch and Calvin Trillin had combed these papers. Hadn’t the records of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission (MSSC) been thoroughly examined and reported on for more than a decade?

Documents discovered as a result of my archival digging suggest that, despite its absence from most scholarship on Freedom Summer, homophobia, coupled with a “politics of exposure,” was an important weapon in the arsenal that Mississippi used against civil rights activists.³ Mississippi homophobia was harnessed in this fight by politicians

¹ Carlton W. Reeves, United States District Judge, Memorandum Opinion and Order, *Campaign for Southern Equality v. Bryant*, November 25, 2014, 33, 36, 37, <https://www.clearinghouse.net/chDocs/public/PB-MS-0004-0002.pdf>.

² *Ibid.*, 33, 34.

³ The most important, and searing, study written on the use of homosexual investigation to thwart integration and the civil rights movement is Stacy Braukman’s *Communists and Perverts under the Palms*:

in league with highway patrolmen, paid informants, government and private investigators, and newspaper publishers to maintain the racial status quo.

The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission was created by the Mississippi legislature in 1956 to fight integration, impede the registration of black voters, and obstruct the activities of civil rights organizers. Dubbed the “segregation watchdog agency,” the MSSC paid spies and informants to conduct investigations, which it would then use in a range of clandestine activities, including blackmail, to “protect the sovereignty of Mississippi.” The commission was abolished in 1977, but its files were supposed to be sealed for fifty years by legislative act. Responding to the ACLU of Mississippi, however, in 1989 a federal court ordered the files opened. Years of wrangling over privacy issues prevented their final release until 1998. In stark archival detail, the MSSC files reveal the state-funded investigations, including a humiliating investigative report on Dr. Smith and the Rust College faculty.⁴

The single-spaced five-page document was written by MSSC investigator Tom Scarbrough, a former sheriff in Chickasaw County, Mississippi, who was later appointed the state commissioner of public safety and head of the Mississippi State Highway Patrol.⁵ The subject of the report was “known or suspected homosexuals” at Rust College. Its purpose was to expose President Smith as “queer” and his faculty and student activists as “odd balls and homos” in order to shut down civil rights activism at the college. Rust, the report stated, “ha[d] become a place for instructors who are homosexuals and racial agitators.” It listed the names of each one of the accused “homos” and perverts and identified by name twelve morally unfit “screw balls.” Six of them were supposedly consorting with “a single man” who was “presently teaching English at Rust”; they reportedly “ha[d] been seen going in the window to his room at night.” Others had been fired for “homosexual activity” in their previous teaching jobs. They fought over homosexual rivals, and one had been “beaten up by his boy friend” and had subsequently attempted suicide. An anonymous informant charged that youth had been “molested” in the library. “Students, both boys and girls,” were said to be “having unnatural relations.” Straight couples in the lurid report are “caught in the act.” There is a claim of gender insubordination regarding a “Dr. Harrison” who “had a room in the girls dormitory,” but who “the girls say . . . is or was a man.” As for Smith himself, “Informant No. 3 stated that Smith is a known liar and ladies’ man and it has been rumored that Smith might have other queer impulses.”⁶

I BEGAN WITH A SEARCH of the literature, starting with *Reconstituting Whiteness: The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission*, the source cited by Judge Reeves in his opinion.⁷

The Johns Committee in Florida, 1956–1965 (Gainesville, Fla., 2012). I am indebted to Braukman’s analysis of the “politics of exposure” as “central to the . . . segregationist and antisubversive ethos well into the 1960s” (7).

⁴ Tom Scarbrough, Investigator, “Marshall County (Rust College),” June 30, 1964, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission records, Sovereignty Commission Online, http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/, SCR ID # 2-20-1-78-1-1-1 to 2-20-1-78-5-1-1.

⁵ Yasuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States’ Rights* (Jackson, Miss., 2001), 69.

⁶ Scarbrough, “Marshall County (Rust College),” SCR ID # 2-20-1-78-4-1-1.

⁷ Jenny Irons, *Reconstituting Whiteness: The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission* (Nashville, Tenn., 2010).

Jenny Irons's study of white privilege and identity mentions the investigation, but she does not discuss in depth what happened at Rust College. Taylor Branch's *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years* examines the MSSC, but without addressing how it played the "homosexual agitator" card. Branch tells the story of Tougaloo College, where the MSSC forced the trustees to fire the school's activist president, Dr. Adam Daniel Beittel, because the college had become "one of the state's few havens for integrationists."⁸ In that case the investigators focused in their arguments and threats on subversives, Communists, and outside agitators. Branch quotes an MSSC memorandum as saying, "We have put into action a plan for Rust College similar to the plan we used at Tougaloo College."⁹ However, his narrative does not include the MSSC's subsequent assault on Rust, based not on Communism but on sexualized grounds of homosexuality.

More recently, Calvin Trillin republished "State Secrets," his 1995 *New Yorker* essay on the MSSC, without updating it to include the attack on Dr. Smith as a "queer."¹⁰ In this essay, Trillin "de-gays" the MSSC investigation of Rust College. He quotes the description in the Scarbrough memorandum of Dr. Smith as "a known liar and ladies' man," but not the accusation that Smith and the faculty were "queer" and "homo." This is a revealing omission, but perhaps understandable given how Trillin wrote about homosexuality in an elegiac remembrance of a closeted Yale friend who later committed suicide. "Until the day Denny died," Trillin wrote, "it had never occurred to me that he might be gay . . . For me, Denny was in a compartment in my mind that had to do with Yale in the fifties, and there simply weren't any gay people in the compartment."¹¹ Writing more than twenty years after the Stonewall riots, he still believed that his bachelor friend Denny could not have been gay? Like Trillin and Branch, historians generally place gay African American activists, students, and faculty in a straight sixties "compartment." Additional online searches confirmed my suspicion that what happened at Rust indeed simply stayed at Rust, and those involved, who were humiliated and fired, might have wanted it that way in a compartment of their choosing.

How was it possible for historians like Branch and journalists like Trillin who were actually there in the sixties to simply delete Mississippi's assault on pervert-agitators? In their writings, one senses what historian John Howard described as "historians' restraint and reticence around deviant sexuality, particularly homosexuality and . . . queer leadership in the [civil rights] movement."¹² Oftentimes, outdated notions of "privacy" or public shame are used to justify such erasure. Worse, the old-school erasure may come from the notion that homosexuality has nothing to do with identity, that it is only a behavior, with no relationship to civil rights. The inadequacy of "don't shame an exposed homosexual" historiography comes into sharpest relief in connection with the outing of Bayard Rustin. Overnight, Rustin was transformed into the most famous homosexual in America after being outed in a diatribe on the floor of the Senate in August

⁸ Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–1965* (New York, 1998), 240–241, quote from 240.

⁹ Erle Johnston Jr., Director, Sovereignty Commission, Memorandum to Honorable Herman Glazier, Administrative Assistant, Office of the Governor, June 9, 1964, Sovereignty Commission Online, SCR ID # 2-20-1-77-1-1-1; quoted in Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 241.

¹⁰ Calvin Trillin, "State Secrets," in Trillin, *Jackson, 1964: And Other Dispatches from Fifty Years of Reporting on Race in America* (New York, 2016), 253–275; originally published in *The New Yorker*, May 29, 1995, 63.

¹¹ Calvin Trillin, *Remembering Denny* (New York, 1993), quote from 57.

¹² John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago, 1999), 157.

1963 by South Carolina senator Strom Thurmond, who submitted proof that Rustin had been convicted of “sex perversion,” laid out evidence of his “Communist connections,” and emphasized “the position of prominence which Mr. Rustin commands” in planning the March on Washington to be held later that month.¹³ It is impossible to grant the magnitude of Rustin’s ordeal while erasing the role of openly gay African American activist students and faculty members in the civil rights movement.

TO FIND THE DOCUMENTS and get some answers, I “went down to the crossroads” in Clarksdale, Mississippi, where legend has it that the bluesman Robert Johnson met with the Devil. There I visited with a lifelong friend, former Clarksdale mayor Bill Luckett, at his Ground Zero Blues Club for insights and introductions as an openly gay friend seeking to document what happened to the queer Rust faculty. Luckett, a former candidate for governor, and his partner at Ground Zero, the actor Morgan Freeman, understand Mississippi as few others do, especially those who oppose the anti-LGBT thrust of Mississippi politics and law. Luckett made the crucial introduction for us to Leslie Burl McLemore. A longtime professor of political science at Jackson State University and one of the founders of the Fannie Lou Hamer National Institute on Citizenship and Democracy, Les McLemore served on the Jackson City Council from 1999 to 2009 and as the city’s acting mayor in 2009. Incredibly, he had been the president of the Rust College Student Council in 1964 and was the founding president of the NAACP chapter there, installed by Medgar Evers himself, one year before Evers’s murder.

At his home in Walls, Mississippi, I shared with McLemore what I had learned about the investigation of the Rust College homosexuals. He was surprised that he had never seen the report or even heard of its existence. At first he laughed. Then he fumed. “These individuals were all my friends!” he exclaimed. “Of course, they were gay, and we all knew that back then. It was not an issue for us . . . we all came from small towns in Mississippi, and we all knew gay folks.”¹⁴ The son of Mississippi sharecroppers, McLemore was harkening back to the small-town African American queer South brought to life in E. Patrick Johnson’s collection of oral histories celebrating black gay southerners’ “unrelenting resilience and bravery . . . co-exist[ing] in communities throughout the region as long as there has been a ‘South.’”¹⁵ “These gay faculty members were competent scholars and our friends!” he added. “The rightwing rednecks would figure out any way to get at Rust, and this is how low they went.”

Les McLemore related the story as he knew and lived it. The president of Rust, the South’s oldest historically black college, was “the coolest dude in the room,” according to McLemore, when he allowed Rust’s student leaders, national civil rights organizers, and openly gay African American faculty members to operate out of a “Freedom House” on campus. During “Freedom Summer” in 1964, students from across the country converged on the building at 100 Rust Avenue. Dr. Smith permitted the Rust campus

¹³ Statement by Senator Strom Thurmond, “‘Washington Post’ Article on Bayard Rustin, Leader of March on Washington,” August 13, 1963, *Congressional Record*, Senate, 88th Congress, 1st Session, vol. 109, pt. 11 (August 5, 1963 to August 20, 1963), 14836–14844, quotes from 14837, 14838; John D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago, 2003), 348.

¹⁴ Interview by author with Leslie Burl McLemore at his home in Walls, Mississippi, 2015.

¹⁵ E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2008), 546, 1.



FIGURE 1: Bill Luckett (left), co-owner with Morgan Freeman of the Ground Zero Blues Club, with Charles Francis. Photo by Stephen Bottum.

and dormitories to be used by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the NAACP, as a base from which to organize and fight for their voting rights as part of the Mississippi Freedom Schools project—thirty-five miles and a world away from Memphis. The *Wall Street Journal* editorialized, “we think it understandable if people in Mississippi should resent such an invasion. The outsiders are said to regard themselves as some sort of heroic freedom fighters, but in truth they are asking for trouble.”¹⁶

“Dr. Smith was there, in the moment, aware of the pressure brought to bear on him,” says McLemore. “If you picked up your cues from Ernie, he stood his ground, protecting us from the politics of it all while taking the heat. He is a forgotten hero of that summer.” Indeed, what happened to Dr. Smith had been forgotten. I learned later that he would have wanted that.

In the Rust College Archives in the Leontyne Price Library on campus, I pored over what was left of the minutes of the Rust College Board of Trustees.¹⁷ There was no

¹⁶ “The Long Summer Begins,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 30, 1964, 16. See also Bruce Watson, *Freedom Summer* (New York, 2010), 159.

¹⁷ The Leontyne Price Library is named for the world-famous soprano, whose mother attended Rust College. Price performed at a benefit concert for the college in 1967, which raised money to build the library. “About the Library,” <http://lplarchives.org/>. She also toured and recorded an album with the Rust College Choir, *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free* (RCA Red Seal, LSC-3183, 1971).

mention of the MSSC investigation, which I know from the report had been presented to the board in time for its July 1, 1964, meeting. The report stated that the board members had been informed about the findings—"I will say that the proper Trustees have been apprised," Scarbrough noted—and they were "going to take a strong position in insisting that President E. A. Smith be dismissed from Rust College because of his personal conduct and inability to run the college on the level which the trustees and founders of the institution expect."¹⁸

All of this was missing from the minutes. Rust was founded in 1866 by northern missionaries with the Freedmen's Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the trustees of the college would certainly have wanted the MSSC investigative report to simply vanish in order not to inflame the Methodist Church, which remains conflicted to this day. "The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching," the church declared in 2016. "Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church."¹⁹

"Dr. Smith was kicked upstairs," according to McLemore. "He clearly had to leave town, but did not reveal how or why." After ten years of service at Rust, Dr. Smith and his wife, Milverta, relocated to Washington, D.C., to work for the Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church. For thirteen years he served as director of human relations, establishing a life of service with the church—a new life in a kind of civil rights exile. There is no record at the Price Library of how this unfolded.

Documents at the library reveal how the school attempted to put the best face on things. Dr. Smith wrote in his report to the trustees, "Holly Springs was one of the centers of the COFO Freedom School operations during the summer. Approximately 50,000 books passed through our campus . . . at odd times, several young men lived with our young men in a regularly used dormitory." The report continues, "Unfortunate publicity, which attended the early days of the program in Holly Springs, created the impression that COFO and Rust College were one and the same. This same publicity gave rise to many rumors which became rather widespread over the state."²⁰

I did find a rich archive in the Price Library documenting the history of the college and discovered how revered Dr. Smith was during his years at the school, and still is today. His office and private library, which he left to Rust, have been preserved as a reading room (the President's Conference Room) in the library near a small, precious collection of "Freedom School Books" that coursed through Rust that summer.

DECADES LATER, FRIENDS would ask Dr. Smith to write about his life, but he always declined. Even as he and Milverta celebrated their seventieth wedding anniversary in 2009, just two weeks prior to his death, he never spoke publicly about the MSSC attack. Whatever anger or resentments he may have felt about the investigation, he never dis-

¹⁸ Scarbrough, "Marshall County (Rust College)," SCR ID # 2-20-1-78-5-1-1.

¹⁹ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2016* (Nashville, Tenn., 2016), 304, nmoumc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/2016-Book-of-Discipline.pdf.

²⁰ Dr. Earnest A. Smith, President's Report to the Trustees, Rust College (1964), Rust College Archives, Leontyne Price Library, folder: "Rust Trustees Board Meeting and Minutes, 1964." Copy in author's possession.

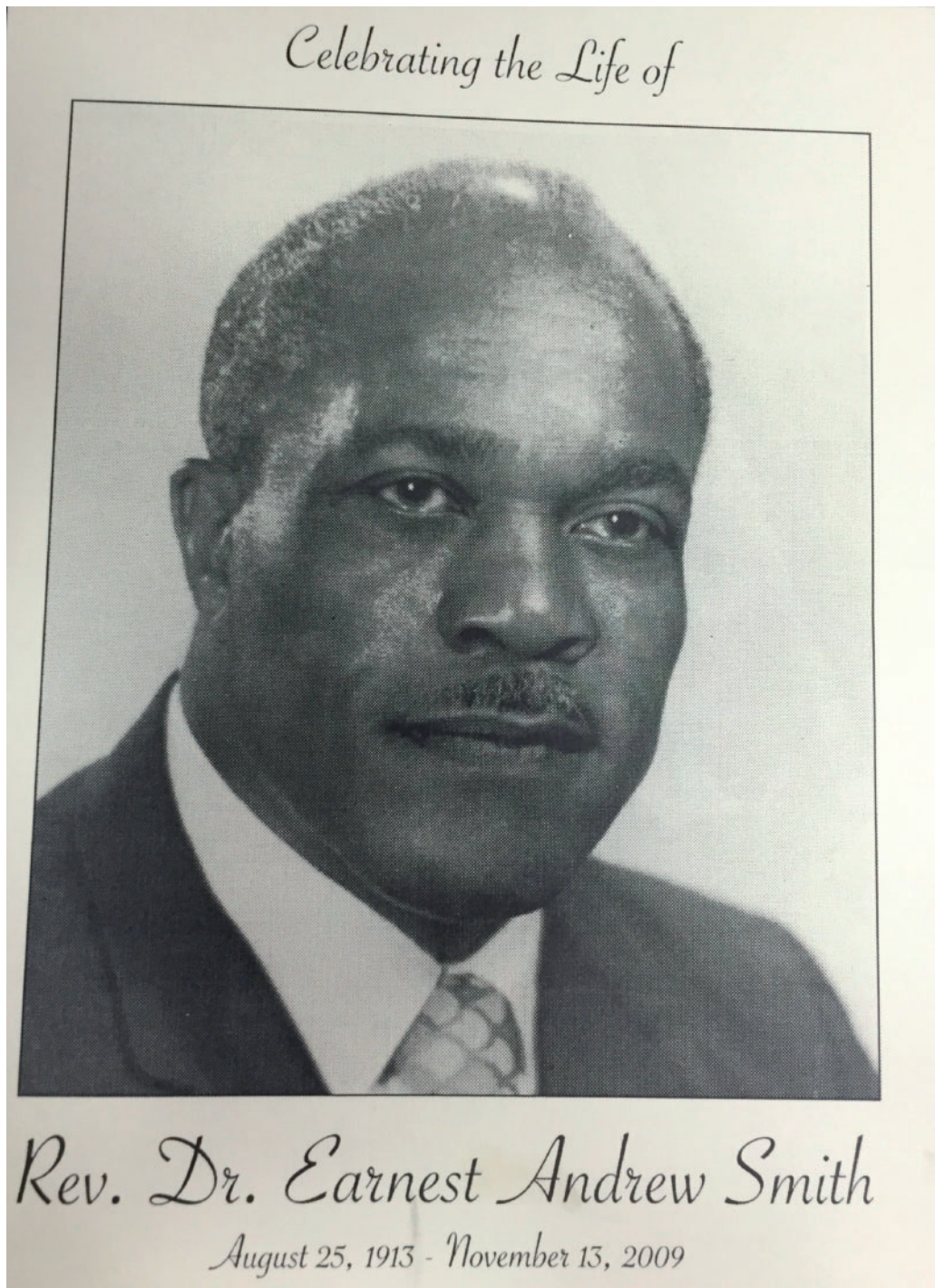


FIGURE 2: Dr. Earnest Andrew Smith, Rust College president, 1957–1966.

cussed it except to say that he could not have allowed the discrimination or the injustice he had suffered to destroy him as it had others. “I was never consumed. I saw so many civil rights people consumed,” he said in an oral history videotaped by Holly Springs native Roy DeBerry Jr. and Les McLemore. DeBerry remembers, “This opening up of Rust to SNCC and the others put Dr. Smith in some jeopardy. He was risking his job or worse with that Freedom House. We were so impressed with his courage.”

Recorded in Yazoo City in 2003, this oral history was rediscovered in storage in 2017.²¹ It is a treasure, because it provides the texture—in Smith’s own words—of his life prior to his time at Rust College, where he graduated as a member of the class of 1937. “I arrived at Holly Springs in the early morning, still dark, on a bus with exactly fifty-five cents. When I saw the first black fellow, I asked, ‘Where is Rust College?’” DeBerry and McLemore did not ask Dr. Smith about the MSSC attack on the Rust “homos,” because even they did not know about it then. Everyone who was aware of it had an incentive to keep it quiet. They did question him about the hardships of growing up in Alabama, where he had been stricken with polio at an early age; and how he coped with racism there in the 1920s, when people openly wore their Klan robes.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 did not apply to “the problems of homosexuals,” wrote Vice President Hubert Humphrey to gay civil rights pioneer Dr. Franklin E. Kameny in 1965.²² African American gays and lesbians would have had no claim to make, and indeed would have jeopardized themselves if they had discussed the report. The late Thomas Bibbs, at the time the chairman of Rust’s Division of Language and Fine Arts, was identified in the report. Decades later in retirement, after learning about the investigation, he confided to his lifelong friend Frank Moorer, “Imagine if this report had gotten out back in the day! We would have had no teaching career. I could not have been hired as a teacher, anywhere. This thing would have followed *all of us* for life.”²³ One SNCC field organizer remembers, “We had SNCC organizers who were gay, and it had zero to do with anything, but still one of the worst things you could say about somebody was he was queer . . . besides being a Communist.”²⁴ How would it have benefited Dr. Smith to speak out about the investigation? Would it have helped if he had asserted, “I am not a homosexual”?

Gloria Clark, one of three female SNCC organizers at Rust that summer, was given the approval to live in the women’s dormitory by Dr. Smith. “I knew he got a lot of heat for doing that. I thought we were accused of being flaming heteros!” She laughs about it now, noting “the sexual hang-ups of the white Mississippi males.”²⁵ Clark was not named in the MSSC investigation.

Straight white males in Holly Springs seemed obsessed with the co-ed, interracial Rust dorms that summer, and they could not stop sexualizing the student activism. The city’s mayor, Sam Coopwood, wrote a letter to the Methodist bishop of Mississippi asking him to investigate: “As you probably know there are about 100 white and colored students from Oxford, Ohio, and other parts of the country living on the Rust campus.

²¹ DeBerry had stored the VHS videotape in a private locker. He allowed me to make a copy.

²² Hubert Humphrey to Dr. Franklin E. Kameny, June 9, 1965, Frank Kameny Papers (MSS85340), box 5, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²³ Telephone interview by author with Frank Moorer, 2015, during which Moorer quoted his friend Thomas Bibbs.

²⁴ Telephone interview by author with Larry Rubin, November 30, 2015.

²⁵ Telephone interview and e-mail exchanges between author and Gloria Clark, December 2, 2015.

White boys and girls are living together with the colored." Dr. Smith responded, "I won't bother to answer particular charges, but if he or anyone else wants to know the truth he is welcome to come to the campus and look and ask questions. All that we are doing is in line with the creed of the Methodist Church."²⁶

THE BREAKTHROUGH IN my archive activism to discover how Dr. Smith could have been so quietly and effectively removed as president came in the Paul B. Johnson Family Papers at the McCain Library and Archives at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) in Hattiesburg. Paul Johnson Jr., a Hattiesburg native, served as lieutenant governor under Governor Ross Barnett and was an ex officio board member of the newly formed Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission. In 1964, he was elected to succeed Barnett as governor.²⁷ His winning campaign slogan was "Stand Tall with Paul," a reference to his having "physically blocked federal authorities who were attempting to get [African American student James] Meredith through the cordon of men resisting his entrance" to the University of Mississippi in 1963.²⁸ As governor, Johnson received regular reports on the activities of the informants and the investigations that were underway from MSSC director Erle Johnston, a former "newspaperman" and publicist who had worked for Barnett. The Johnson Family Papers are a trove of information on MSSC dark operations, and Branch and Trillin are only two of the many writers and historians who have studied and written about them.

I began by looking through scores of well-worn folders in the Sovereignty Commission boxes, without success.²⁹ Among those thousands of pages, I found nothing about Dr. Smith's ordeal. In a final effort, thanks to the persistence of Carla Carlson, the library's assistant curator of historical manuscripts, I pulled a folder in an entirely different series, titled Governor's Subject Files, which included a box containing folders with names such as "Institutions of Higher Learning," "Junior College Commission," and "Latin American Trip: Governors." And there, amidst numerous irrelevant others, was folder 2, bearing the label "Investigations." Carlson had never seen the document inside this folder before. Three single-spaced pages long, it revealed all. The subject, in all caps, was "INFORMATION ON DR. EARNEST A. SMITH, NEGRO MALE, PRESIDENT OF RUST COLLEGE, HOLLY SPRINGS, MISSISSIPPI."³⁰ "Negro male"—as if Dr. Smith were in a Jim Crow lineup! It took my breath away.

The raw investigatory report begins, "On June 7, 1964, the writer received a telephone call from Highway Patrolman Jimmy Warren of Holly Springs, Mississippi, requesting that I contact him . . . [stating] that he could furnish information on Dr. Earnest A. Smith . . . On Sunday afternoon, June 7, 1964, he made arrangements for an in-

²⁶ Alan Bussel, "Probe of Rights Workers at Rust College Asked," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, July 3, 1964, 1.

²⁷ Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission*, 67.

²⁸ Paul Burney Johnson Jr., "Biographical/Historical Sketch," Johnson (Paul B.) Family Papers, 1910–1973, Collection M191, University of Southern Mississippi Libraries Special Collections, http://www.lib.usm.edu/spcol/collections/manuscripts/finding_aids/m191/.

²⁹ Johnson Family Papers, Series II, Sub-Series 9: Sovereignty Commission, boxes 135–143.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Sub-Series 7: Governor's Subject Files, boxes 108–121, here box 115, folder 2: Investigations; https://digitalcollections.usm.edu/uncategorized/digitalFile_4c3e49f6-c067-4cf9-82a1-b5b8ffe02e9a/. My thanks go to Carla Carlson and the USM digital team for digitizing and posting this document.

formant (designated as Informant No. 1) to meet him in a white home in Holly Springs. The informant furnished Patrolman Warren the following information.” It continues, “This informant also advised Patrolman Warren that Dr. Smith was a homosexual and had had unnatural relations with both sexes; and at the present time, and for some time past, had been attempting to get rid of a number of the professors in the College and replace them with teachers of his type.” Dated June 10, 1964, the report was signed “D. B. Crockett, Investigator, Mississippi Highway Patrol.” Of course it would begin with the Mississippi Highway Patrol! The Highway Patrol was actually a partner in the MSSC’s investigative police-state tactics of the time. “There is much overlap between materials in the Sovereignty Commission series and those in the Highway Patrol series,” wrote USM archivist Bobs M. Tusa in a description of the Johnson Family Papers, “since the two organizations worked together to monitor Civil Rights activities in the state from 1960 to 1968.”³¹ To monitor such activities, or to investigate them?

From the Mississippi Highway Patrol’s raw intelligence sprang the plan to attack Dr. Smith and the gay students and faculty. The operation and its result were duly reported to Governor Johnson by Erle Johnston, who wrote: “We made a thorough investigation of the policies and activities on the Rust College campus. Some of the information was rather shocking and we gave it to the college Board of Trustees. The president of the college later resigned.”³² The deed, the action, and the planned result were all connected.

Jubilant about what I had found, but saddened by what it meant, I took some time to decompress with a walk about the USM campus, where I came upon the student activities building, “The Hub.” In what thankfully seemed a universe away from the racist, homophobic papers of Paul Johnson Jr., there was a welcoming open door with an LGBT rainbow flag graphic marked “PRISM LGBTQ+ Resource Office.” Inside that office, staffed by a graduate student from the School of Social Work, I learned all about USM’s commitment to an open and affirming environment.

“WE HEARD ABOUT the resignation of Dr. Smith one day in chapel,” said Frank Moorer, a student at Rust at the time who was outed and smeared during the investigation. “We were all sad and disconcerted about his departure.”³³ Moorer, a retired professor of humanities at Alabama State University, lives in Montgomery near the campus, surrounded by his many books and photographs of a life well-lived as a professor, a father of adopted children, and an ordained priest in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Ensconced in his armchair as we spoke, he used a cane to steady his huge frame when he rose. Now well into his eighties, Moorer reminded me of the queer heroes described by historian John Howard who have traveled “the dirt-road-cum-boulevard to gay self-actualization—to identity, community, and political movement—[who began] in the dark hinterlands of naïveté and deprivation, and end[ed], happily, in the bustling corridors of wisdom and

³¹ Bobs M. Tusa, “State Sovereignty Commission Materials in the Paul B. Johnson Family Papers in the Archives of the University of Southern Mississippi,” *The Primary Source* 21, no. 1 (1999), Article 1, 1, <https://doi.org/10.18785/ps.2101.01>.

³² “Report on Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission (1964–1967),” Johnson Family Papers, box 135, folder 1; Sovereignty Commission Online, SCR ID # 99-131-0-20-1-1-1 to 99-131-0-20-18-1-1, quote from 99-131-0-20-7-1-1.

³³ Interview by author with Frank Moorer at his home in Montgomery, Alabama, September 12, 2018.

illumination.”³⁴ One of ten children, Moorer was raised on a farm in rural Pink Bottom, Alabama. “I did not sit at a desk until the sixth grade, an awful school without electricity, so I was fighting that summer for our freedom, fighting for our rights.”

Moorer worked in the library at Rust in 1963 and is prominently mentioned (albeit misidentified) as “Frank Morrow” in the MSSC investigation report. When it was first presented to him, he said, “To be honest, I am taken aback by this. I did not know this document was out there, and have absolutely no idea what they are talking about except to besmirch me.” According to the report, Moorer had been caught with two boys in the library. “This is comical were it not for such an evil purpose,” he said. “The state would do anything to stifle dissent,” he thundered, “rendering us beyond the pale, as [Negro] sissies and faggots for registering voters and fighting for our rights . . . rights we won back in 1865!” He added, “At the time, people at Rust knew who the gay faculty members and students were; it just did not pop up as an issue for us.”

“I always knew Frank Moorer was gay; he was my roommate that summer in the Rust dormitory,” recalled Frank Smith Jr., a founding member of SNCC, who later served for sixteen years as a city councilman in Washington, D.C.³⁵ An MSSC document described Moorer as Frank Smith’s “right hand.”³⁶ “We were risking our lives and knew that white Mississippi was not going to give up power without a fight. I loved Frank Moorer. Being gay in that context was of no concern to us. We were literally guerrilla organizers, together.”

“Our concern,” said Moorer, “was getting people to vote and protest the conditions they were living at the time . . . I was raised in Alabama by Seventh-day Adventist parents, and they were especially hard on gay people, but our fight for civil rights remained the focus,” he said. “Certainly Dr. Smith was not gay, but he was not bent out of shape about hiring gay people. Dr. Smith was a generous man. He had come up the hard way, been through too much; he was very student-oriented and with us all the way.”

So, Dr. Smith was not queer after all—only fearless with grace.

When did Frank Moorer actually “come out” as a gay African American in the civil rights movement? “Simply, it was always who I was. The only standard is, what does God require of us? Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God,” he said, quoting Micah 6:8, looking with his bright white beard like an Old Testament prophet himself. “Dr. Smith inspired that.”

“President Smith had a great command of the language and the gospel of liberation,” remembers Frank Smith. “As radical as we thought we were, we were not so. In the context, though, we were risking our lives. They weren’t going to give up power without a fight, and Dr. Smith stood with us all the way. This campaign of gay-bashing was one of the things they used, and he had to endure that. Thanks to Dr. Smith, Rust is still a leadership school.”

SO THIS IS HOW the deed was done: the Rust College queer investigation slithered up the state’s old segregationist ladder, starting with Patrolman Warren and Investigator

³⁴ Howard, *Men Like That*, 27.

³⁵ Interview by author with Frank Smith, Executive Director of the African American Civil War Museum, Washington, D.C., December 9, 2015.

³⁶ Student activist directory, Sovereignty Commission Online, SCR ID # 99-159-0-21-1-1-1.

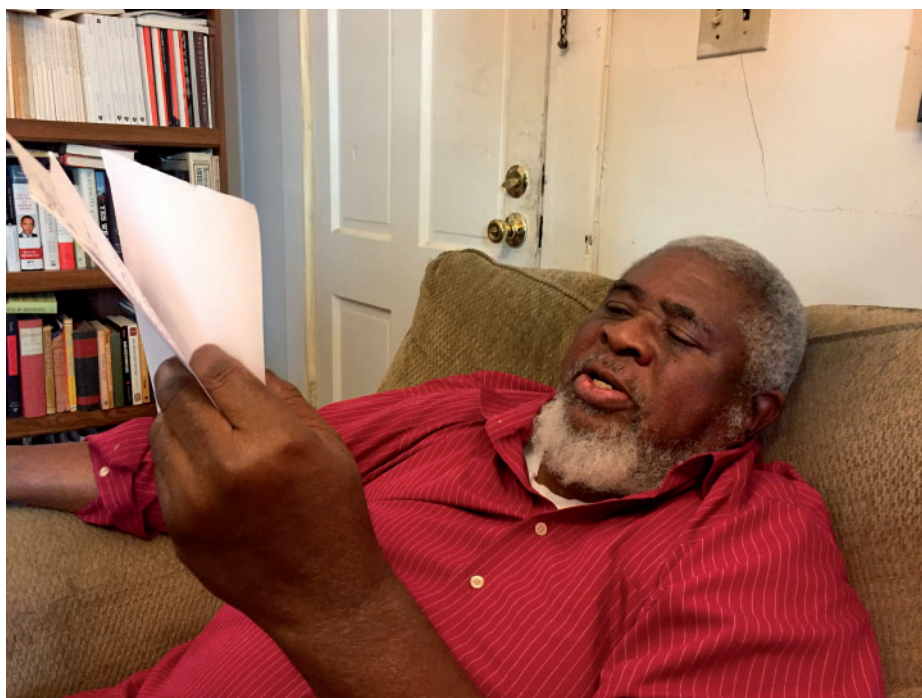


FIGURE 3: Frank Moorhead confronts for the first time the Sovereignty Commission's investigation of him and the Freedom Summer "homos": "This is comical were it not for such an evil purpose."

Crockett of the Mississippi Highway Patrol. The raw intel was all about the sexual and moral denigration of President Smith, an accused "queer," and his faculty, the depraved "homos," "odd balls," and "suicidal" "molesters." This message was delivered in a "white home" in Holly Springs by "Anonymous Informant No. 1," and packaged into a formal investigatory report by MSSC investigator Tom Scarbrough. The report was transmitted to the governor's executive assistant, Herman Glazier, then presented to the Rust College Board of Trustees at their board meeting on July 1. The "Negro male" Dr. Earnest A. Smith was allowed to resign with dignity, which was not formally announced until 1966.³⁷ The silence was a kind of shroud for decades. The MSSC's strategic idea, the way to handle Rust College as opposed to the "Communist" agitators at Tougaloo, was to harness homophobia in service to state racism to maintain the status quo.

All of this was mooted, but not undone, that Freedom Summer with the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Decades later, Les McLeMore, with the perspective of a former student leader and a lifetime of public service and teaching, concluded about his mentor, "Dr. Smith laid the groundwork for the survival of Rust with equal dignity for everyone."

As an archive activist, I can only wonder how the Rust College "queer" papers survived destruction—and be grateful for it. Perhaps they were saved by a filing anomaly or an archivist's mistake that allowed them to escape a Johnson family staff culling? Within a year of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the MSSC was "in the process of withdrawing from Sovereignty Commission files all reports, documents, etc.,

³⁷ "Rust College Losing Its President," *Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, Miss.), November 15, 1966.

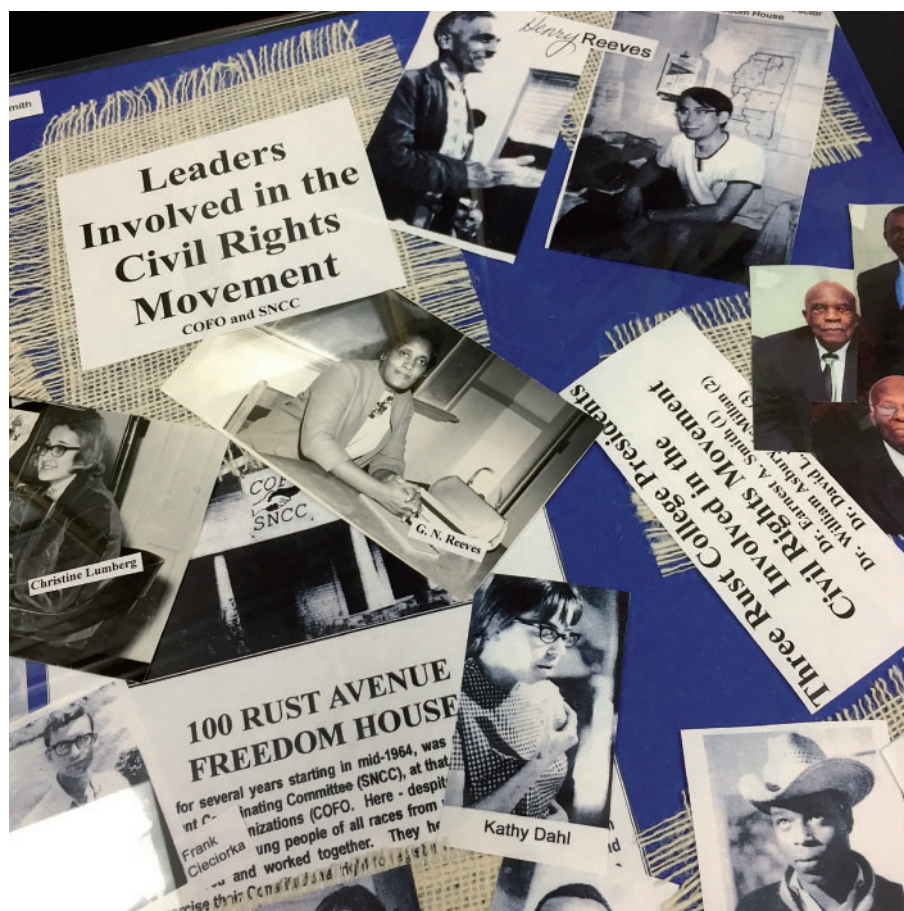


FIGURE 4: Rust Freedom Summer collage. Rust College Archives, Leontyne Price Library.

which could be considered incriminatory.”³⁸ As LGBTQ Americans, no matter our race or heritage, we can now trace a direct line from the family papers of Governor Paul B. Johnson Jr. to Judge Carlton Reeves’s words at another “crossroads” of discrimination in Mississippi.

³⁸ Erle Johnston Jr., Director, Sovereignty Commission, Memorandum to Honorable Herman Glazier, Executive Assistant, Office of the Governor, February 11, 1965, Johnson Family Papers, box 137, folder 2; Sovereignty Commission Online, SCR ID # 99-62-0-196-1-1-1.

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