

THE GILDER LEHRMAN INSTITUTE *of* AMERICAN HISTORY

Inside the Vault: Robert Kennedy's Report to the President on Civil Rights

August 12, 2021

The session will start shortly. Please note:

- Your video and audio will automatically turn off.
- You can participate through the Q&A function.
- If you have technical difficulties, please email collectionprograms@gilderlehrman.org so we can assist you.

Gilder Lehrman Staff

Panelists

- Sandy Trenholm - Collection Director
- Zoya Siddiqui - Curatorial Intern
- Lois MacMillan - 2006 Oregon History Teacher of the Year
- Allison Kraft - Assistant Curator

During the Session



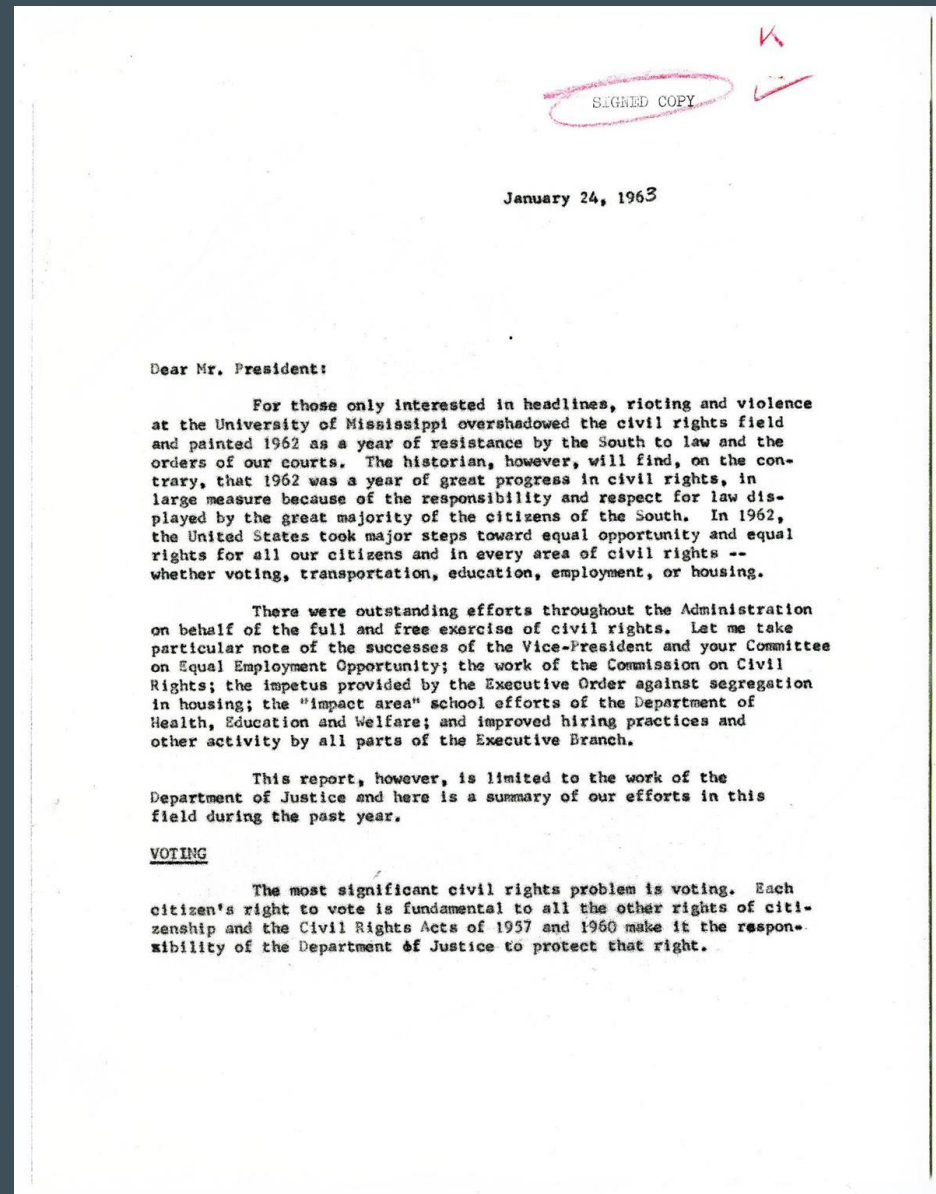
- If you would like to ask a question, you can **use the Q&A feature.**
- We will be answering audience questions throughout the session.

For Security and Privacy

- Your microphone is automatically muted.
- Your camera is automatically turned off.

Today's Documents

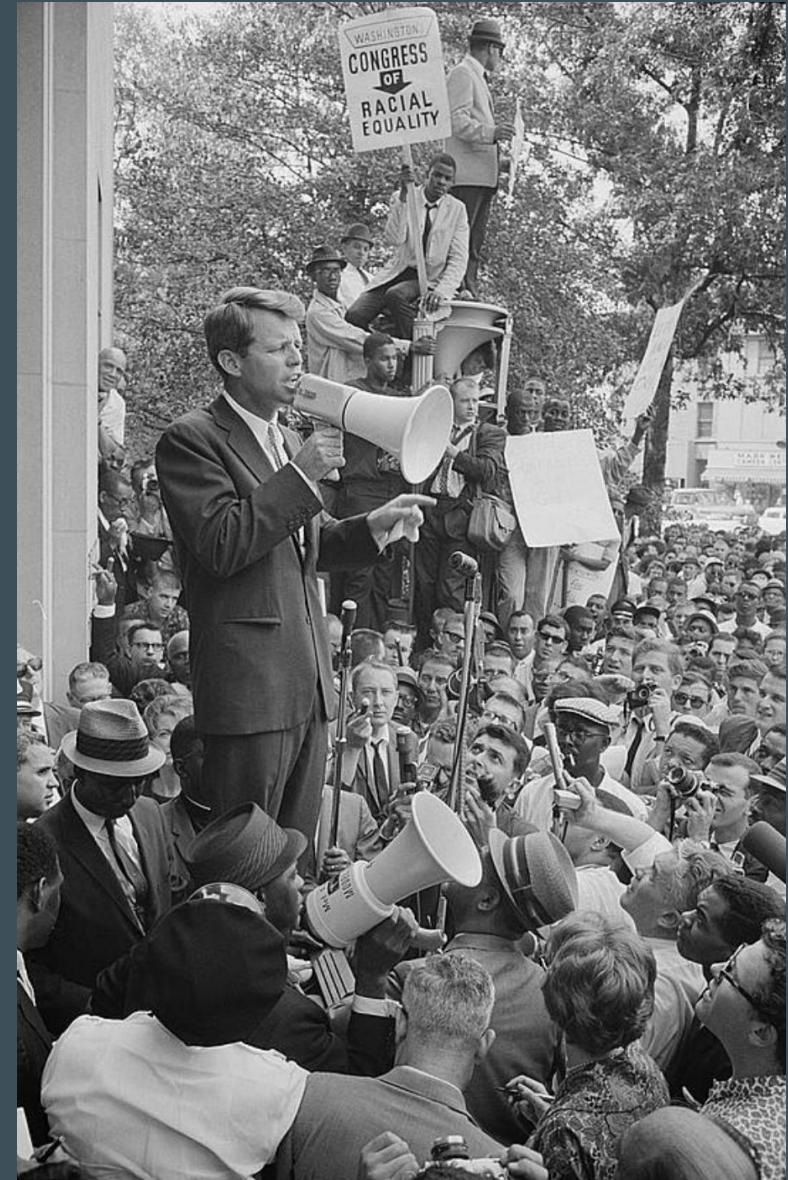
- Robert F. Kennedy's Report to the President on Civil Rights



Robert F. Kennedy (1925–1968)

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- Born November 20, 1925
- Worked on JFK's 1946 Congressional campaign
- Went to law school at the University of Virginia, 1948–1951
- Married Ethel Kennedy in 1950
- Ran JFK's 1952 Senate campaign
- Served as counsel on multiple Senate committees
 - McCarthy's Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Rackets Committee



Library of Congress

Robert F. Kennedy (1925-1968)

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- Ran JFK's 1960 presidential campaign
- Served as Attorney General in the Kennedy administration
- Later served as a US senator from New York
- Ran for president in the 1968 election
- Assassinated June 6, 1968, at a campaign event

The Kennedys and Civil Rights

- Assisted in MLK's release from prison
 - Highly publicized and helped Kennedy secure the Black vote in the 1960 election
- Civil rights became RFK's responsibility within the administration
- RFK used the DOJ to uphold civil rights by
 - Suing voter registrars
 - Petitioning organizations like the ICC
 - Mobilizing the National Guard in times of violence



John F. Kennedy Presidential
Library and Museum

The Kennedys and Civil Rights

Notable Events:

- May–December 1961: Freedom Rides
- September 1962: James Meredith admitted to Ole Miss
- May 1963:
 - Kennedy-Baldwin Summit
 - Birmingham Children's Crusade
- June 1963:
 - Integration of University of Alabama
 - Kennedy's Report to the American People on Civil Rights
 - Proposal of Civil Rights Act
- July 1963: March on Washington
- September 1963: 16th Street Baptist Church bombing

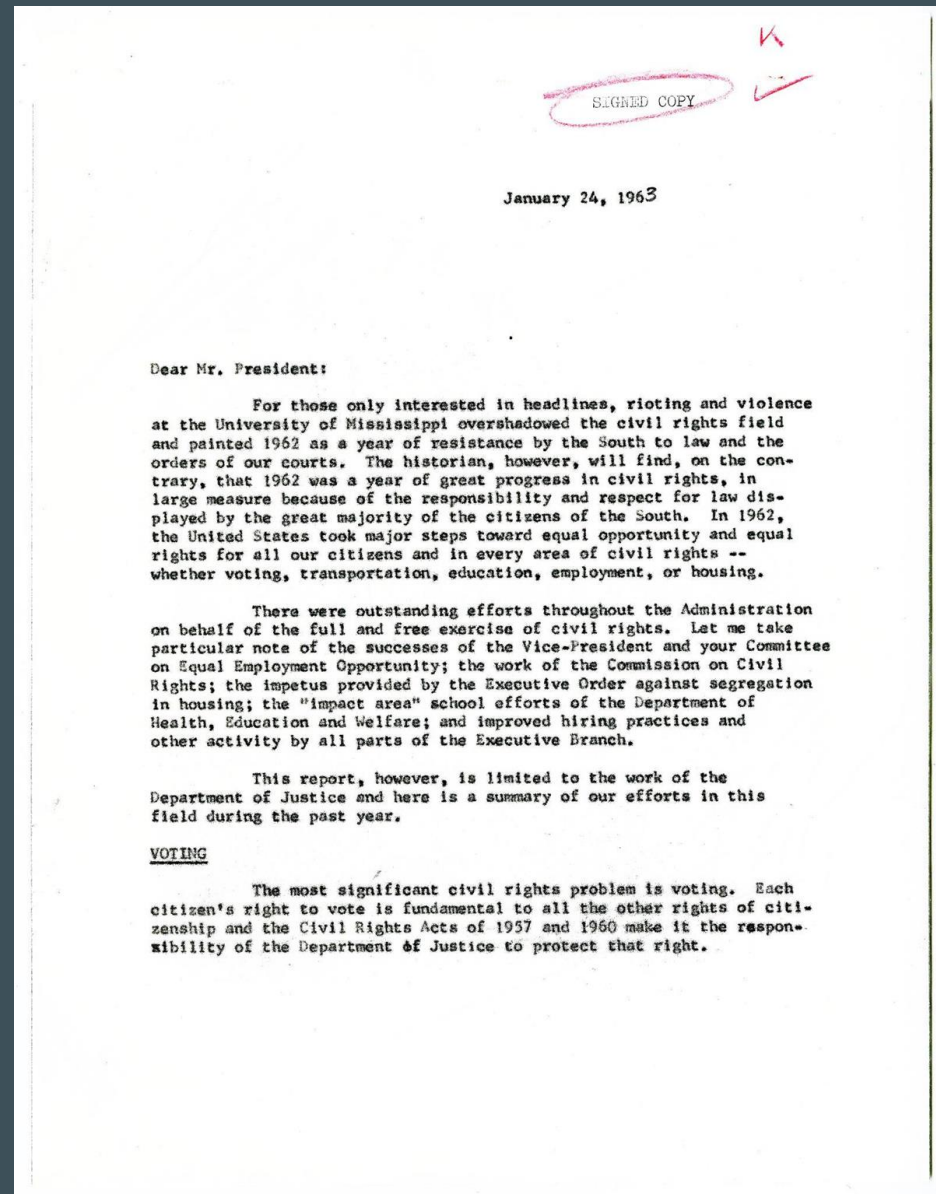


RFK with Civil Rights leaders
John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

RFK's Report to President Kennedy

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- Dated January 24, 1963
- Summary of the Justice Department's work on civil rights in 1962
- Covers topics including
 - Voting rights
 - Education
 - Transportation
 - Employment
- Carbon copy of original report



"A year of great progress..."

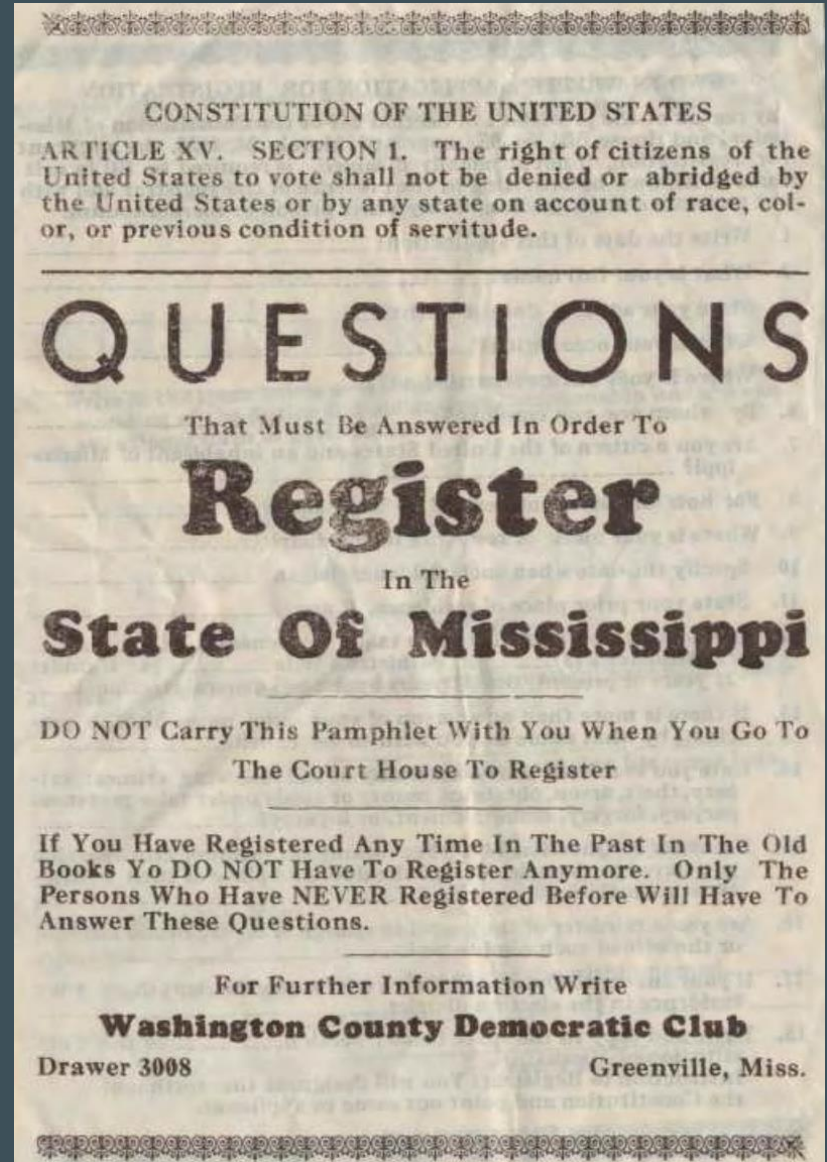
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Dear Mr. President:

For those only interested in headlines, rioting and violence at the University of Mississippi overshadowed the civil rights field and painted 1962 as a year of resistance by the South to law and the orders of our courts. The historian, however, will find, on the contrary, that 1962 was a year of great progress in civil rights, in large measure because of the responsibility and respect for law displayed by the great majority of the citizens of the South. In 1962, the United States took major steps toward equal opportunity and equal rights for all our citizens and in every area of civil rights -- whether voting, transportation, education, employment, or housing.

Voting Restrictions

- Many voting restrictions in the South had been in place since Reconstruction.
- Common types of restrictions included
 - Literacy test
 - Poll tax
 - Grandfather clause
 - Educational requirement
- The legality of these practices was upheld by Supreme Court cases such as *Giles v. Harris* in 1903.



RFK on Voting Rights

“The most significant civil rights problem is voting. Each citizen’s right to vote is fundamental to all the other rights of citizenship and the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960 make it the responsibility of the Department of Justice to protect that right.”
(p. 1)



Signs from the March on Washington demanding voting rights
Library of Congress

RFK on Voting Rights

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RFK meeting with President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson
John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

“In some instances, we have had to take action even after obtaining court orders forbidding further discrimination against Negro registration applicants. In one of our suits, the registrar of Forrest County, Mississippi was ordered by the Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit to register all qualified Negroes. . . . The Department prosecuted him in the first contempt case stemming from a court voter registration order. The case is awaiting decision.” (p. 3)

RFK on Voting Rights

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“In East Carroll Parish, Louisiana, the voting referee provisions of the 1960 Act were used for the first time in 1962. . . . On July 28, five days later, Negroes voted in East Carroll Parish for the first time since Reconstruction.” (p. 3)



Civil Rights Protest outside the White House. Note signs that read “We demand the right to vote everywhere.”

Library of Congress

Education and Civil Rights

“The Department also took action in Prince Edward County, Virginia — the only county in the nation where there are no public schools. They have been closed since fall, 1959, in order to avoid court desegregation orders. That nearly 1,500 of the 1,800

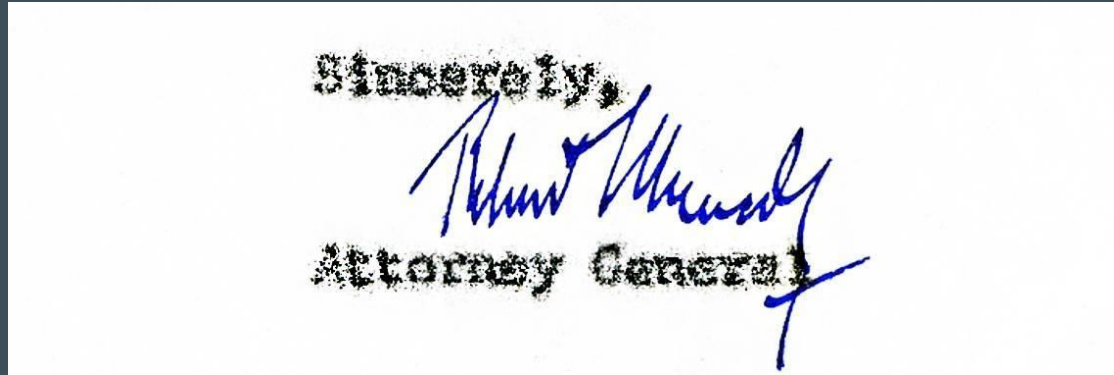
school age Negro children in the county should have had no education in more than three years is a disgrace to our country. Last month, we asked the Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, as a friend of the court, to order the schools opened promptly without racial segregation.”



Civil Rights Protest in Prince Edward County, 1963
Virginia Commonwealth University

Parting Words

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“In summary, 1962 was a year of progress for the United States in the field of civil rights. This is not to say the problems are disappearing. They remain, and they remain difficult – not only in the South, with open discrimination, but throughout the country where Negroes are the victims of school ‘resegregation’, bias in housing, or employment, or other facets of society. Ugly incidents like the Mississippi riot may occur again. But we are accelerating our progress. Again, let me say this acceleration occurs in large measure because of the emerging spirit of the South. In 1962 this spirit was not the brutal one of rioting and violence at the University of Mississippi.”

“We revere the past...”

“The spirit was that exemplified in Georgia last week by Governor Carl E. Sanders, in his inaugural address.

‘We revere the past,’ he said. ‘We adhere to the values of respectability and responsibility which constitute our tradition.’ Then he added, ‘We believe in law and order and in the principle that all laws apply equally to all citizens.’”



RFK at the 1964 Democratic National Convention
Library of Congress

Beyond the Report

- June 11, 1963: President Kennedy delivered his address “Report to the American People on Civil Rights” and first proposed the Civil Rights Act.
 - “We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution.”
- The Civil Rights Act was not signed into law until July 2, 1964, after what remains the longest debate in Senate history.
 - Act protected against discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin.
- In 1965, the Voting Rights Act was passed.
 - RFK supported the bill as a senator and attended its signing.
- Racial justice became a key part of Kennedy’s platform during his 1968 presidential campaign.



LBJ gives RFK a pen at the signing of the Voting Rights Act
Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library

Robert Kennedy's Legacy

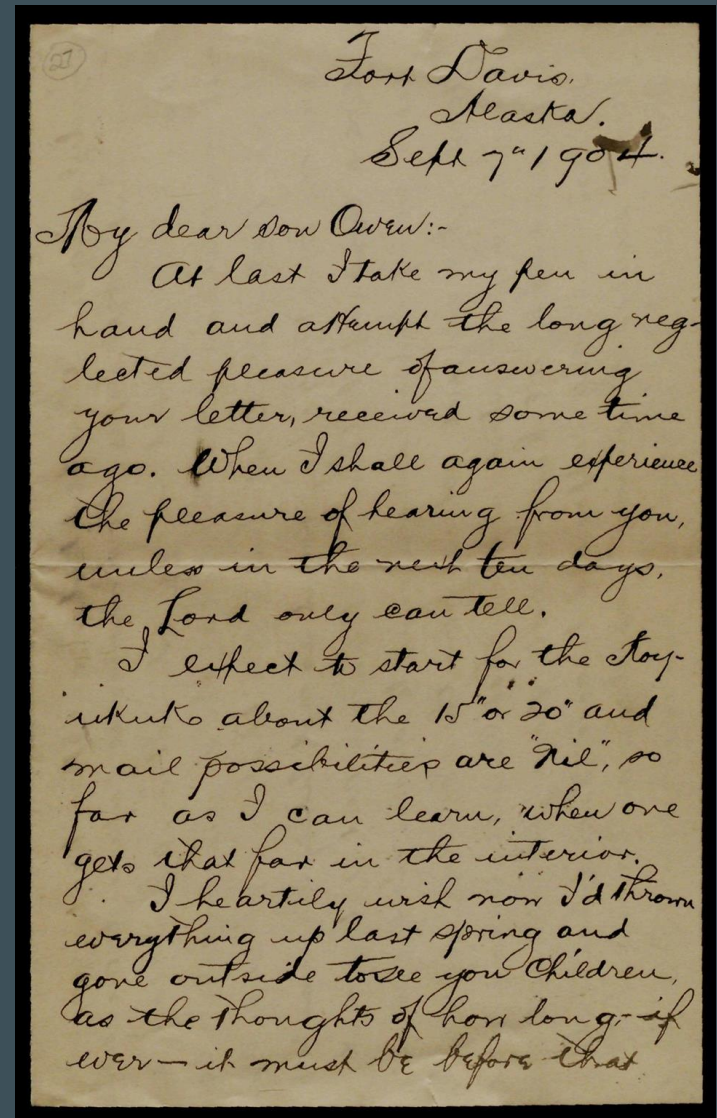
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Transcription Project

Join our team on August 19 at 7 p.m. ET for an introduction to the online volunteer opportunity Transcribe! and stay for a workshop on how to read and transcribe early twentieth-century handwriting from our new Alaska Gold Rush project.



Upcoming Programs

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- *Inside the Vault*, Thursday, August 26 at 7 p.m. ET (4 p.m. PT)
 - We will be looking at maps from colonial America.
- *Book Breaks*, Sunday, August 15 at 2 p.m. (11 a.m. PT)
 - Gordon H. Chang discusses his book *Ghosts of Gold Mountain: The Epic Story of the Chinese Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad*