

Jimmy Cunningham: Compelled to Vote, Arkansas

As told by Jimmy Cunningham
Little Rock, Arkansas

Introduction:

Between December 2019 and January 2020 (just weeks before the pandemic), Smithsonian staff and their storytelling partners at the Peale, Baltimore, traveled to multiple states in the U.S. to ask residents of those states about voting experiences, the current state of American democracy, what issues brought them to the polls, how they made a difference in their communities, and what Americans' civic responsibilities were, among other complex questions.

Story Narrative:

Jimmy Cunningham: The reason that I voted initially, I was always raised in a family that taught us that the vote had come through struggle, and that voting was a way to express yourself, and that the right to vote, you didn't have a right not to vote because there had been too much blood, sweat, and tears attached to the voting process. My parents raised me up on stories about segregation, Jim Crow and the kinds of things that stopped people from voting. And so I almost felt like I didn't have a choice but to vote. Now, that was early on. As I began to grow older, and as I began to do a lot more family research, I discovered that my great-great-grandfather had been elected right in the reconstruction era in South Carolina. He had been elected to the 1868 and 1870 legislature of South Carolina out of Lawrence County.

He was summoned to serve, to provide testimony to the US Congress in 1869, and that's a part of the congressional record because in 18 ... In his election, he was shot at home. Racists came to his home and challenged him because he decided he wanted to run for office. They tried to get in his home, he wouldn't let them in. It was only him and his wife there. They shot him in the shoulder. And my grandmother, great-great-grandmother, just missed getting shot. The testimony is included in the US Congressional record. So, when I read through that, it was chilling, and it just further reinforced the absolute necessity that I have in terms of exercising my right to vote.

So, I often am not pleased with choices. I often think that politicians take votes for granted, but even if I have to choose a candidate that's not a main party candidate, I still will vote because it's that important to me. For family reasons, and just because that's how I was raised. In a family album at home, we have a receipt of my grandfather's poll tax from the 1960s. And of course, poll taxes were put in place to, and ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, to diminish the votes of low-income folks and African Americans. And it disproportionately hit African Americans because they had less money overall than anybody else. However, when my aunt passed, her father, my great-grandfather, we were cleaning up the house and we found this poll tax receipt and we put it in a family album. And it reminds me of the impediments that were put in place to keep people from voting.

And sometimes I just go back and kind of open up that part of the family album and just look at that poll tax receipt.

He wasn't a rich man, who didn't have much money. He was a preacher who got his money from going to preaching a little bit here, and a little bit there. And he was also a carpenter who did kind of side work as well, but like many other people in the community, he didn't have much money and the dollar that he paid would've been a nice little amount considering the fact that this was way back when and a dollar meant it took you a long way then. So, I often think about that as an impediment that was related to my grandfather's experience, and it's something else that also compels me to vote.

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