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Thomas N. Gardner Papers

1962-2015

7 boxes (9.5 linear feet)

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Read collection overview

Background on Thomas N. Gardner

An activist, journalist, and educator, Thomas N. Gardner has spent his life fighting for important social causes; from protesting the Vietnam War, to anti-racism, to labor activism, to nuclear disarmament, to civil rights, he has put his principles into practice through his tireless commitment to social change.

Born in New Orleans in 1946, Gardner began his involvement in social and political causes as a student at the University of Virginia (UVA) in 1964. He joined the burgeoning civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements and eventually dropped out of school to become a full time activist. Gardner successfully applied for conscientious objector status, and continued to work as an activist for several years before returning to school. During this time, he was the chairman of the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC), an organization based in the south which opposed the Vietnam War, fought for civil rights for black Americans, and supported the rights of women and workers. He returned to UVA in 1969 and completed his bachelor's degree in sociology in 1971.

Following UVA, Gardner worked as a staff member at the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE) as an organizer. Concurrently, he joined the Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF) and became a board member. SCEF was active in numerous causes in the south, dedicated in particular to civil rights and electoral reform. At that time, SCEF was led by Anne and Carl Braden, who were prominent civil rights activists. SCEF worked to dismantle racial discrimination in the south, and utilized educational journalism and collective action to document the suffering caused by discrimination. Gardner also worked with the Center for United Labor Action (CULA) around this time, an organization that focused on supporting labor unions and opposing unethical practices, particularly targeting the Virginia Electric and Power Company (VEPCO).

Beginning in the 1970s, Gardner began work on prison issues, working with a number of politically and unfairly convicted prisoners, and advocating for an end to the death penalty. Gardner, and the groups he

worked with, challenged the institutional racism of a southern justice system that had existed since the days of Jim Crow. The most prominent of these cases was that of Johnny 'Imani' Harris, who was originally sentenced to five life terms for 4 small robberies and an alleged rape in 1970 and eventually given the death penalty under Alabama's capital offenses law due to an inadequate defense by his court appointed lawyers. A separate SCUA collection, the 'Committee to Defend Johnny Imani Harris Collection', documents this work.

Concurrent to his work as an activist, Gardner has worked as a journalist and photographer, writing articles for a number of commercial publications as well as some independent work. While working for the Montgomery Advertiser, Harvard Divinity Bulletin, and others, he covered local, college, and political news. Gardner has also used journalism to bolster his activism, writing for left-wing publications such as Workers World and The Great Speckled Bird. He used his talents in photography by taking photos of protests and events he attended for use in articles by him and others.

Gardner began working with the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) as the Director of Communication and Public Education in 1986. During his time with the organization, he worked with the media and the public, facilitated outreach efforts and events, and designed media campaigns. Years later, Gardner served as the Managing Director for the Media Education Foundation (MEF), a nonprofit organization founded by UMass Communication Professor Sut Jhally that produced educational documentaries to explore a range of social issues such as racism, gender inequities, politics, and the environment through the lens of mainstream media coverage and representation. In this position he was instrumental in developing the organization into a leading producer of educational videos in the US.

Gardner returned to school several times after originally graduating from UVA in 1971. He received a masters degree in Journalism from the University of Georgia in 1982, a masters in Public Administration from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard in 1985, and later a Ph.D. in Communication from UMASS Amherst in 2005. Throughout his PhD program and since its completion, Gardner has been a professor of Communication at Westfield State University, using his experience from a life full of activism to continue educating a new generation of students and activists.

Scope of collection

This collection illustrates much of Gardner's activism and journalism work throughout his life. It contains correspondence, articles, press releases, meeting minutes, photographs, pamphlets, newsletters, publications, notes, and newspapers. The collection documents the full scope of Gardner's life; from his time as a student activist at the University of Virginia to his more recent achievements as a professor at Westfield State University.

The collection contains a large amount of material written by Gardner himself, as well as publications, newspapers, and articles that either relate to causes he was directly involved in or the political issues of the day.

Series descriptions

[Series 1. Activism](#)

1962-2015

1.75 boxes (1.75 linear feet)

This series documents Gardner's activism, beginning with his time in college and continuing throughout much of his life. There is information about many of the organizations Gardner was a part of, and includes correspondence, articles, pamphlets, notes, meeting minutes, press releases, legal documents, and newspaper clippings. Some of these organizations include the Gulf Coast Pulpwood Association (GPA), Grassroots Organizing Work (GROW), and the Virginia Students Civil Rights Committee (VSCRC).

The series includes a large amount of documents related to SCEF, UCS, and SSOC. There are a number of UCS folders that contain correspondence with specific individuals. Bud Ris, the executive director of UCS during Gardner's tenure there, is frequently mentioned by his first name.

[Series 2. Journalism](#)

1968-2015

0.75 boxes (.75 linear feet)

This series documents Gardner's work as a journalist, which spanned a number of years, and included work with several different organizations. Namely, he did a significant amount of writing for the Montgomery Advertiser while living in Alabama, and worked as the editor of the Harvard Divinity Bulletin during and after his attendance at Harvard for his second Master's degree. Throughout his career, he also wrote numerous freelance articles for various publications. This series includes clippings of his pieces, published articles, research materials and notes for articles, as well as some correspondence.

[Series 3. Personal](#)

1962-2015
1.25 boxes (1.25 linear feet)

This series documents Gardner's personal life, including interviews, personal correspondence, personal writing and talks, as well as his extensive FBI file, created during his active years in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movement in the late 1960s to early 1970s. The series also includes a number of newspapers and other publications he collected throughout the years, many of which relate to groups he was a part of.

[Series 4. Photographs](#)

1972-1983
0.25 boxes (.25 linear feet)

This series includes a number of photographic prints and negatives taken by Gardner throughout his career as an activist and journalist, documenting numerous protests, marches, rallies, and other important events.

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Affidavit written by TG about GE sent to the National Labor Relations Board

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Box 1: 4

Alabama Prison Project: Agendas, documents

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Atlanta Jr. College: Documents, newsletters, correspondence, notes, and petitions

1977-1979

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Atlanta Jr. College: Struggle against racism in GA higher education

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"Attica 1991-1997 chronology of events"

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Boston busing: Correspondence, notes

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Bratislava meeting: Artwork from BRV + NLF presented to participants

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Bratislava meeting: List of participants

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Gardner, Tom: "Inmate says he doesn't want to die", The Montgomery Advertiser Alabama Journal
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Gardner, Tom: "Legislative track record shows Hubbert, AEA holding the baton", The Alabama Journal and The Advertiser
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Rally against Medicaid cuts in Montgomery, AL: Negatives
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Tennessee and Georgia anti death penalty protest: Photos, negatives
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Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

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- The [Committee To Defend Johnny Imani Harris Collection](#)
- The [Thomas N. Gardner Papers](#) at the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.

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- Capital punishment
- Civil rights
- Civil rights movements
- Civil rights--Atlanta (Ga.)
- Civil rights--Montgomery (Ala.)
- Civil rights--University of Virginia
- Conscientious objectors
- Draft
- Durr, Virginia Foster
- Labor movement
- Labor unions
- New Left
- Prisoners--Civil rights
- Vietnam War, 1961-1975--Protest movements

Contributors

- Gardner, Thomas N. [main entry]
- Southern Conference Educational Fund
- Southern Student Organizing Committee (Nashville, Tenn.)
- Union of Concerned Scientists

Genres and formats

- Affidavits
- Articles
- Booklets
- Calendars (documents)
- Correspondence
- Dissertations
- Drafts (documents)
- Essays
- Fliers
- Legal documents
- Magazines (periodicals)
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