

The following is excerpted from the 2024 Basic Preservation grant application submitted by Washington University Libraries Film & Media Archive. The archive has graciously allowed the NFPF to make it available online as an example for new grant applicants.

The Washington University Libraries Film & Media Archive (FMA) requests \$_____ to preserve two short films directed by Jacqueline Shearer (1946-1993): *The Unemployment Test* (1978, color, sound, 14 minutes) and *Easy Street* (1979, color, sound, 13.5 minutes). Henry Hampton's Blackside, Inc. produced the two films for the federal government to, respectively, promote the United States' social welfare programs and improve health outcomes for Black Americans. Though the shorts were works for hire and not passion projects originated by Shearer herself, they are important additions to the all-too-short filmography of a significant Black documentarian.

1. Research significance

When it made *The Unemployment Test* for the U.S. Department of Labor in 1978, Henry Hampton's Blackside Inc. had been producing business and promotional films for a decade. While best known for its award-winning documentaries from the 1980s and '90s - including *Eyes on the Prize* (1987 and 1990) and *I'll Make Me a World* (1999) - Blackside started out in 1968 as a small company of media activists cutting their teeth on short PSA spots and industrial films.

Hampton founded Blackside to document the great civil rights stories of the twentieth century from the viewpoint of a Black-owned media company. As Mr. Hampton said in a 1973 newspaper article, "We are selective about what we will do...Our projects are almost always [on] some social question."¹

That mission carried over into how their films addressed their audiences. In an undated proposal for *Easy Street* in the Blackside collection, the company tied their filmmaking practice to the "emotional and intellectual revolution taking place in the nation's several minority communities." Blackside's films were "a revolution in film approach" as they "really spoke to this audience of minority young people."

Blackside's primary client was the United States government. Hampton's company partook in the federal government's efforts to hire minority-owned companies. This provided needed financial security for Blackside. Thanks to this steady government work, and the later funding by granting institutions and the CPB for its major documentary series, Blackside became a place of employment and on-the-job training school for a new generation of Black documentarians. Examples include Orlando Bagwell, Billy Jackson, Michelle Materre, Judy Richardson, Sam Pollard, and Louis Massiah.

¹ Quote from Kay Bourne's article "The Callboard" in the *Bay State Banner* from March 29, 1973.

And, also, Jacqueline Shearer, who directed these two films for Blackside. Ms. Shearer was a native of the Boston area. She got her start in film with the local chapter of the documentary activist group, Newsreel. Before she worked for Blackside, Shearer made *A Minor Altercation* (1977). That short, which dramatizes efforts to desegregate Boston schools by focusing on how a fight between two high school girls became a racial flashpoint, is still included in series on Black Women's cinema. The filmmaker returned to the topic when she co-produced two episodes of the second series of *Eyes on the Prize*, "The Promised Land (1967-68)" and "The Keys to the Kingdom (1974-80)," the latter of which covered white protests against desegregation busing. In 1991, PBS broadcast Shearer's *The Massachusetts 54th Colored Infantry*, which the director intended as a corrective of the white savior narrative presented by Hollywood in *Glory* (Edward Zwick, 1989). In addition to making documentaries, Ms. Shearer played an important role in getting them funded through her role as the President of the Independent Television Service (ITVS).

In a 1992 interview with Phyllis Klotman, founder of Indiana University's Black Film Center/Archive, Shearer discussed how growing up in a working-class Black family in Boston made her keenly aware that race, class, and gender "always intertwine." Shearer's films reflected that intersection to ensure that the voices of Black women and the working class were included.² Shearer's interest in making a more inclusive cinema is at the core of these two films despite being works for hire.

The Unemployment Test is presented as a quiz to judge the audience's knowledge about the welfare system, albeit one backed by a funky disco synth soundtrack. Viewers of the film take the test alongside onscreen people in a classroom who are evenly split between those who have benefited from unemployment insurance and others who have not. Short, dramatized scenes with non-professional actors play out in two phases. Each skit ends with a question by the narrator. The audience's answers are scored at the end of each phase.

The first round of case studies shows three people complaining that the unemployment system is a financial drain on the U.S. economy. After each statement - the last one shows an accountant sneering "It's just another form of charity" - the narrator asks the audience if they agree or disagree. The film's goal here is to get the viewer to confront their biases about welfare. It does so with a scene between that accountant and a manager, the latter of whom convincingly argues that workers actually earn unemployment insurance - it is certainly not charity - and that it is a net good for the economy as it allows laid off workers to continue to spend money at local businesses.

In the second round, dramatized case studies provide factual information on how workers can benefit from the unemployment system. In one, four different workers are fired or laid off, but only one of them is eligible for unemployment benefits. The other three were fired for cause, quit on their own, or refused to look for another job. This round of questions informed the audience on when they can apply for unemployment insurance, how much money they receive per week from it, and the number of weeks that it lasts.

In its closing argument, the film reproduces Dorothea Lange's heartrending 1936 photograph *Migrant.Mother* to re-emphasize that the government's reasoning behind unemployment insurance was to prevent the suffering that another major depression would cause. In this film, Ms. Shearer and Blackside confront ignorance and thinly-veiled racism with logic, facts, and emotion.

² See page xxiii in *Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video*, edited by Dr. Phyllis Klotman and Janet K. Cutler, and published by Indiana University Press in 1999.

Easy Street is a remake of sorts of Blackside's early film *Code Blue* (1972), the preservation of which the NFPF funded in 2017. Like that first film, *Easy Street* was part of a larger effort to redress racial inequality in the healthcare system. The film was a recruitment tool to interest Black and Latino high school students in becoming healthcare professionals.

However, despite having already made a film on the topic, Blackside did not simply update their earlier script. According to the film's undated proposal, they took the opportunity to analyze how the subject had changed in the seven years since *Code Blue*. Unfortunately, they found that if anything, things were only getting worse. And they took some of the blame. Naively, they had assumed when making the earlier film that simply increasing the number of Black and Latino doctors and nurses would result in better outcomes for those communities. But they found that inequality persisted.³ Other barriers had to be overcome.

Shearer incorporated the findings from Blackside's analysis of *Code Blue* into the making of *Easy Street*. The title is an ironic one. Instead of becoming a medical professional to make a lot of money, the film suggested that Black and Latino high school students should become doctors, nurses, radiologists, and anesthesiologists to work hard, make a decent living, and, most importantly, serve their communities.

The film follows four Black medical professionals - a pediatrician, a respiratory therapist, a registered nurse, and a surgeon - as they go about their workday. The film's lesson is shown in the scenes where these caregivers interact with their patients in ways that build trust. Though not made explicit in the film, the implication of these scenes is that providing patients with a place where they feel secure enough to be honest about their medical needs is easier to accomplish with a shared cultural competency.

The film ends with the pediatrician answering the question of whether she lives on easy street. She answers, "I'd rather say I live on happy street. I'm happy with what I do every day." The footage playing alongside that quote shows her caring for a Black teenager with diabetes. Medical care is community activism.

2. Uniqueness of the Archive's copy

The FMA was founded in 2001 when Washington University was gifted the Henry Hampton Collection containing tens of thousands of film reels, videotapes, and audio recordings, as well as hundreds of boxes of business and production papers. Hidden amongst that vast collection until their recent identification as part of working on this grant were the production elements for *The Unemployment Test* and *Easy Street*. These production elements - the negative for *The Unemployment Test* and a CRI for *Easy Street* - are the sources for this preservation project.

³³ Unfortunately, they still do. You can read Dr. Uche Blackstock's recent book *Legacy: A Black Physician Reckons with Racism in Medicine* or watch Eric D. Seals' new documentary *Bike Vessel* to see current day examples of the problem *Easy Street* was created to solve.

Projection prints of these two films are known to exist elsewhere as they were distributed by the federal government. While a search for these titles in WorldCat returns zero returns for *The Unemployment Test*, twenty-two collecting institutions have catalog records for *Easy Street*. FMA also holds a print for each title.

Despite the existence of these other copies, our printing elements are the best existing sources for this preservation project.

3. Physical film description

The source material for the preservation of *Easy Street* is approximately 500 feet of acetate, color Eastman CRI stock, dated 1978. The film has a shrinkage reading of .4%. The soundtrack is a negative variable area optical track on acetate film, dated 1979, with a shrinkage reading of .4%.

The source material for the preservation of *The Unemployment Test* is approximately 490 feet of acetate, color Eastman negative stock, dated 1977. The film has a shrinkage reading of .4%. The soundtrack is a negative variable area optical track on acetate film, dated 1977, with a shrinkage reading of .4%.

Please note: the attached images of frames from both films have a blue or green cast to them that will be removed by color correcting the files during and after digitization.

4. Description of preservation work and cost estimate

No preservation work has previously been completed for these films. Vendor X has recommended a DI workflow for the project. They will scan both titles at 4K. From this scan, each film will be output as a 16mm Color Negative and a 16mm Color Sound Answer Print. The soundtracks will be preserved as a 16mm Negative Optical Track, as well as on full-coat 16mm Magnetic Stock. Digital files will be output as a 4K DPX sequence, a ProRes 4444, and an access MP4; the sound will be captured as a WAV file. Blu-ray access copies will also be made. Vendor X has provided an estimate of \$_____ for the preservation work.

English language closed captioning will be generated by Vendor Y at the quoted rate of \$_____/min. At approximately 30 min, the total comes to \$_____ for captioning.

The total cost for preservation and captioning is \$_____. Please see the attached estimates.

5. Storage

New preservation elements will be placed in archival polypropylene film containers and stored in the Film & Media Archive's (FMA) on-site, climate-controlled vault. FMA employs two Image Permanence Institute Preservation Environment Monitors and the E-Climate Notebook Software to ensure that vault temperatures remain within the ISO "cool" standards and that relative humidity remains between 30% and 50%. Temperature and relative humidity are monitored twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Over the last three months, the vault has averaged 45 degrees Fahrenheit and a RH of 47%. In addition to temperature/humidity controls, the vault has security and fire alarms.

6. Access plans

The Washington University Libraries will make the preserved versions of *The Unemployment Test* and *Easy Street* widely available for educational and research purposes. Upon completion of the grant project, we will upload streaming versions of the films on our Vimeo page. Access copies will be made available for loan to outside institutions wishing to use the film for educational purposes. Additionally, the Washington University Libraries is currently planning for a 2027 exhibit celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Henry Hampton Collection. These two films, and the three other Blackside shorts preserved thanks to the NFPF, will play an important role in the in-person exhibition and a related screening series.

7. Public Service mission

The Film & Media Archive is dedicated to the preservation, understanding, and shared experience of documentary film and television. We focus on documentaries that promote democracy and which resist social injustice. Our collections place a strong emphasis on the African American political, artistic, and lived experience. In addition, FMA collects and preserves educational films and audiovisual materials related to Washington University and St. Louis history.

FMA preserves the documentary filmmaking process in its entirety. In addition to collecting the theatrical or broadcast version of a documentary, we also acquire production elements and supporting materials such as original filmed interviews and outtakes, rare stock footage, photographs, producers' research and notes, treatments, scripts, storyboards, correspondence, awards, and more.

FMA holds over 7,500,000 feet of film, 1,800 linear feet of manuscripts, approximately 30,000 videotapes, and more than 15,000 audio recordings. It opened its doors to the public in 2002 with the acquisition of the Henry Hampton Collection. Hampton, a St. Louis native and Washington University alum, operated Blackside, Inc., the venerable documentary production company responsible for the PBS classic *Eyes on the Prize* (1987-1990). Other major collections include those of William Miles, who made a series of documentaries about Black history for public television including *Black Stars in Orbit* (1990); the Jack Willis Collection that contains his civil rights era documentaries *The Streets of Greenwood* (1963); documentaries by Rick Tejada-Flores and Ray Telles including *The Good War and Those Who Refused to Fight It* (2000); and the long-running documentary production company/collective Kartemquin Films, whose collection transferred to WashU in 2021.

To fulfill its mission, FMA engages in ongoing preservation, digital projects, and community outreach activities. FMA is devoted to the free, online delivery of film material for educational use by students, scholars, and the community, as evidenced by the online availability of the complete interviews to Blackside's programs *Eyes on the Prize*, *The Good War*, and *The Great Depression*. Other major projects include the digitization and reassembly of the original full-length interviews from William Miles' 1986 program *Black Champions* and ten successful NFPF grants such as Jack Willis' *The Streets of Greenwood*; Blackside's sponsored educational shorts *Code Blue*, *Listen to a Stranger: An Interview with Gordon Parks* (1972), and *A Matter of Respect* (1980); and the earliest known student film *The Maid of McMillan*, which was produced by Washington University students in 1916.

8. Tax-exempt status

Washington University is a nonprofit institution. Its tax identification number is _____.

9. Supplemental funds

Washington University Libraries is committed to this project and is prepared to provide supplemental funds, if necessary.

