

Funding the Future of African American Religion Archival Collections at the Atlanta University Center's Robert W. Woodruff Library

Abstract

Preparing academically rich collections for access by scholars and students is challenging, costly, and time consuming. Concerns for maintenance, preservation, and access are paramount. Typical of 20th century archival collections, one is likely to encounter deteriorating and brittle documents, photographic prints and negatives, and obsolete formats such as open reel audio tapes, audio cassettes, and video tapes. More recent collections may also contain computer media; the proliferation of formats and media types impacts the complexity of the work in providing access, as well as the costs.

Without sizeable resources, it would take years to process these collections fully, especially those rich with audio and visual materials. Taking all of this into consideration, the Archives Research Center (ARC) and Digital Services Unit (DSU) of the AUC Woodruff Library decided to investigate options for grant funding to expedite the processing and digitization of these underutilized archival collections. This essay concerns the pursuit of a Humanities Collections and Reference Resources (HCRR) grant offered by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

Funding the Future of African American Religion Archival Collections

The Atlanta University Center (AUC) is justifiably proud of its Robert W. Woodruff Library. The library provides information services to four Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's): Clark Atlanta University (CAU), Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), Morehouse College (MC), and Spelman College (SC). Serving over 8,000 faculty, staff, and students in a recently renovated academic commons setting, the AUC Woodruff Library sits near the epicenter of the Civil Rights movement in Atlanta. Street names honoring civil rights leaders frame the library. Memories of events and leaders are called to mind as cars navigate Joseph E. Lowery Boulevard, Joseph P. Brawley Drive, Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, SNCC Way, and Atlanta Student Movement Boulevard on their way to the library. Many of them are coming to the AUC Woodruff Library's Archives Research Center.

The Archives Research Center is the repository of many significant collections. The mayoral records of Maynard Jackson, Atlanta's first African American mayor, can be found here as can rap artist, poet, and actor Tupac Amaru Shakur's. Collections as diverse as the C. Eric Lincoln Papers, the Walter Rodney Collection and Papers, Neighborhood Union Collection, and the Countee Cullen — Harold Jackman Memorial Collection rest side by side. The Archives also serves as the custodian for the Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection.¹

Project Goals

The Archives contain a significant number of collections on African American religion and religious leadership that collectively document churches, denominations, theology, and people in a primarily and wonderfully diverse Southern flavor. Pastors and Bishops abound. The sermons of one of America's preeminent preachers, the recently deceased Gardner C. Taylor, have found a home at AUC Woodruff Library's Archives, as have the writings of Harry V. Richardson, the founder of ITC. Organizations such as the First Congregational Church, U.C.C. of Atlanta are also represented. The list of already established collections is substantial, and will continue to grow even as many more organizations seek to find a home within the AUC Woodruff Library Archives every year.²

¹ [RWLW Archive Finding Aids](#)

² [RWLW Archive Finding Aids](#)

Because of this, the AUC Woodruff Library's Archives staff has developed a particular sensitivity to the issues surrounding religious scholarship. Scholars from diverse disciplines have long recognized the central significance of religion to African American culture. Scholarly studies on African American religion in the United States can be traced to Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Negro Church*, published in 1903; publications and scholarship on the topic continue to emerge today.³ Through organized religion, people of similar beliefs, morals, and cultural systems have united in the practice of relating humanity to spirituality through the worship of a god or gods. Though diverse in religious beliefs and practices — and even further, denominations — African Americans have long relied upon religion and spirituality for survival, as well as to counter oppression and discrimination. For this reason, it is important that primary documents, audio, and visual materials are made available for continued analysis and study.

Although collections documenting the African American religious experience are a particular strength of the Archives Research Center, many of these collections remain unprocessed. Another area of priority for the library is the preservation of obsolete audio and video formats, which are highly endangered due to their fragility and short life expectancy. Coincidentally, many of the prioritized religion collections also contain audio and visual recordings that are underutilized and not accessible to researchers.

Preparing academically rich collections for access by scholars and students is challenging, costly, and time consuming. Concerns for maintenance, preservation, and access are paramount. Typical of 20th century archival collections, one is likely to encounter deteriorating and brittle documents, photographic prints and negatives, and obsolete formats such as open reel audio tapes, audio cassettes, and video tapes. More recent collections may also contain computer media; the proliferation of formats and media types impacts the complexity of the work in providing access, as well as the costs.

Without sizeable resources — including funding for outsourced digitization and server space to store large digital assets as well as specialized staff — it would take years to process these collections fully, especially those rich with audio and visual materials. Taking all of this into consideration, the Archives Research Center (ARC) and Digital Services Unit (DSU) of the AUC Woodruff Library decided to explore grant sources to expedite the processing and digitization of these underutilized archival collections. One program that quickly rose to the forefront is the Humanities Collections and Reference Resources (HCRR) grants offered by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).⁴ These federal grants are presented annually through the Division of Preservation and Access and support projects that propose to both preserve and broaden access to humanities collections through digitization. NEH assigns particular importance to supporting projects that preserve audio and visual formats. This seemed to be the perfect match for the Library's priorities and needs, yet the prospect of writing an NEH grant was daunting especially upon learning that this category on average funds just 16 percent of applications. Funding is provided for either planning or implementation grants. Because Library staff had done some preliminary planning and inventory work was already completed, the decision was made to apply for an implementation grant.

With the encouragement and support of the Library's administration, ARC and DSU staff submitted a proposal for an ambitious project eventually titled *Spreading the Word: Expanding Access to African American Religious Archival Collections at the Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library*. The goal of the project is to organize, describe, digitize, and prepare for access fourteen collections of rare materials on African American religion spanning from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, and from the 1950s to the 2000s. Collections include correspondence, personal diaries, sermons, scrapbooks of missionary work, chapel services, class syllabi and lectures, photographs, televangelism recordings, and speeches and interviews from prominent scholars on African American religion, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, and Pauli Murray. Access to scholarly materials from various denominations within Christianity (such as Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist) to Islam, and, more specifically, Black Muslims and the Nation of Islam in the United States, will be significantly enhanced through this dynamic project.

³ Iva E. Carruthers, Frederick D. Haynes III, and Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., eds. *Blow the Trumpet in Zion! Global Vision and Action for the 21st Century Black Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005; Omar M. McRoberts, *Streets of Glory: Church and Community in a Black Urban Neighborhood*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003; R. Drew Smith, ed. *New Day Begun: African American Churches and Civic Culture in Post-Civil Rights America*. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003.

⁴ <http://www.neh.gov/>

In addition, the reformatting of audio and visual materials previously underutilized or inaccessible is a major component of the project. With funding, a project archivist and graduate student assistant will be hired to prepare the collections for physical and virtual access in the Archives Reading Room and throughout the world via digital technologies. When complete, the three-year project will provide:

- increased accessibility to fourteen collections with subject strengths in African American religion⁵
- organization, arrangement, preservation, description, and creation of online finding aids or inventories for seven unprocessed — or hidden — collections, totaling approximately 126 linear feet,
- reformatting and digitization, stabilization, and creation of access files for 1,163 audio cassette tapes, video cassette tapes, and audio reel-to-reel recordings found within seven collections
- digitization of approximately 2,137 photographs, and 150 lantern slides
- development of a robust, publically accessible digital collection
- creation of online research guides and research aids; and
- promotion of collections through social media outreach and development of a blog.

Many of these collections have never been used by researchers since acquisition by AUC Woodruff Library; access will expand the comprehensive study of human culture — a critical aspect of the humanities. Through completion of the project, an increase in materials made available to the public through both traditional in-person archival reference visits and online access through innovative technology would significantly increase awareness of AUC Woodruff Library holdings, and enhance humanities scholarship on African American religious beliefs and practices.

Proposal Process

Initiating and developing the grant proposal required time, focus, and teamwork. The Archives Research Center (ARC) of the AUC Woodruff Library had a successful track record with pursuit and implementation of grant projects. In late 2012, the Library was awarded a Preservation Assistance Grant from NEH to fund a consultant to conduct a preservation needs assessment in ARC. Though much smaller — \$5,970.00 — project staff had experience with grant writing and submission to this federal agency. One of the most important aspects of receiving grant funding is proper, timely, and clear reporting. The Library's Administration and Finance departments' persistent drive for perfection helped prepare project staff — not only for development of the proposal, but also effective implementation, assessment, and reporting. Library Administration made sure project staff were keenly aware that successful completion of the earlier grant would be a strong indicator that the Library was capable of carrying out more involved and complex projects.

Project staff from ARC and DSU began preparing confidently a substantial proposal for the Humanities Collections and Reference Resources implementation grant. First, a timeline and list of deliverables was created. Working backwards from the deadline, the proposal authors mapped out when each section should be completed, then divided the sections based upon individual areas of expertise. The Head of the Archives Research Center focused on the description of the collections and their significance to humanities research portions of the narrative. Meanwhile, the Head of Digital Services started drafting the more technical sections including the methodology and plan of work. Members of the Library's Administration, Finance, and Information Technology departments assisted with development of the budget, and appendices were divided among the proposal team.

⁵ Several archival collections were selected for inclusion in the *Spreading the Word* project due to religion subject matter, preservation concerns, and inaccessibility. They include: Atlanta-Rome District, Georgia North Region, 6th Episcopal District of the CME Collection; James P. Brawley Collection; Isaac R. Clark Memorial Collection; James H. Costen Collection; Bishop J. Howard Dell Collection; Anna E. Hall Collection; Interdenominational Theological Center Photographs; C. Eric Lincoln Collection; C. Eric Lincoln Lectureship Series Collection; Martin Luther King Jr. Fellows in Black Religious Studies, Inc. Collection; Robert Penn Collection; Society for the Study of Black Religion Collection; Levi and Jewel Terrill Collection; and Hercules Wilson Collection.

Preparing a major Federal grant proposal requires careful planning and can be a multi-year undertaking. Internally, all proposals undergo an extensive review process by managers, administrators, finance experts, staff, and even the library director/CEO. In fact, work on this proposal began in 2013 under a compressed timeline, but it was deemed not quite ready for submission by the Library's administration. Although the proposal's authors were understandably disappointed, all agreed the proposal would be a top priority for the following year's deadline. In 2014, since the "bones" of that earlier project were intact, staff had some extra time before the deadline to revise submission documents. The proposal team jumped at the opportunity to have the narrative reviewed in advance by a program officer at NEH. This is a highly valuable service which is strongly recommended and likely useful to any and all NEH applicants. The program officer who read our proposal offered helpful comments that led ultimately to a stronger final product. Though the deadline to share a draft with an NEH program officer arrived earlier than the final deadline, the project team felt that allotting time for review by an agency professional was an important step that would hopefully set up the Library's grant application for success. After months of conducting research, gathering information, obtaining quotes from vendors, writing, revising, and more writing the proposal was deemed ready for submission. Once the grant application was submitted, one of the project authors attended a panel discussion at the 2014 Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting that included a representative from NEH. The proposed grant project director was able to discuss informally the goals of the project with the NEH program officer in another attempt to advocate for the proposal.

More than six months passed before the AUC Woodruff Library received the exciting news in early 2015 that the *Spreading the Word* proposal was funded, with a reduction in total funding from \$350,000 to \$300,000 in direct funds. The total cost for the three-year project will include contributions from the Library, and is calculated to be \$599,994. The project started in July 2015 and will continue through 2018.

Related Projects

In the meantime, the library was fortunate to receive another smaller grant and collaborate with another institution on projects that are also having an impact on the preservation and access of archival collections documenting African American religion. In 2015, the library received a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and LYRASIS to preserve and broaden access to audio and visual collections. This funding was for the third round of the HBCU Preservation Project, in a series of grants that the Library has received since 2008. The grant project included two different week-long institutes for staff and undergraduate student interns, respectively, to learn about preservation and conservation of archival materials. Additionally, the grant provided funding for outsourced conservation treatment and digitization of several oversize photographic composites and audio recordings, and a workstation for processing and digitization of some magnetic audio and video formats. With funding from this project over sixty reel-to-reel audio recordings of sermons and speeches delivered to Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) students in the 1960s were digitized and are available online through the Library's e-Scholarship Repository.⁶ Oversized photograph composites of graduates of the Gammon Theological Seminary — a predecessor institution to ITC — from 1912, 1915, 1917, 1918, 1924, and 1929 received conservation treatment and new housing, and were also digitized.

As developing a grant proposal independently can be a daunting endeavor, Library staff were excited to partner with another institution that received grant funding to provide increased access to "hidden" collections within Georgia's archives. With the advantage of sharing work and developing standards for collaboration, a partnership can be very appealing to funders. Collaboration with statewide, regional, or even national entities can also bring awareness to shared initiatives. In 2014, the AUC Woodruff Library worked in collaboration with the Digital Library of Georgia (DLG) to digitize over 350 pre-1925 photographs from the Atlanta University, Clark College, and ITC collections. The digitization was funded by a grant from the Knight Foundation⁷ that was administered by DLG. AUC Library staff selected the images, prepared metadata, and packed images for transport to the scanning vendor. Other than staff time, no other expenditures were required in exchange for granting permission for the images to be made available

⁶ <http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/itcaudio/>

⁷ <http://knightfoundation.org/>

on the DLG portal.⁸ Library staff plan to upload the images to the AUC e-Scholarship repository — a win-win for both organizations.

Engagement and Outreach

Beyond concern for global accessibility of these resources is the desire to connect local constituents — the faculty, staff, and students of the AUC — to the materials that have previously been unavailable and underutilized.

The ARC is already regularly used by AUC faculty. Dr. Mark Lomax, Associate Professor of Homiletics at ITC, regularly assigns his students to research and review the sermons of civil rights era pastors deposited in the ARC. He requires his students to compare sermons of the past — heavily laden with social concern — with sermons heard presently in African American churches. Archivists work very closely with subject liaison librarians and faculty to provide instruction on the use of primary resources found within ARC. In 2013-14, archivists taught over 20 classes, reaching over 490 students and faculty. The primary audience for these teaching sessions was faculty and students in the AUC community who conducted research for class assignments.

AUC and other faculty have also found the ARC to be a great reference source for their own writing projects. Professor of Bible at ITC Dr. Love Henry Whelchel used some of the accessible photographs found in one of the collections that benefited from the NEH project extensively to provide the primary documentation needed for his 2011 book *The History and Heritage of African-American Churches: A Way Out of No Way*.⁹

One anticipated outcome from the NEH grant, as well as the other aforementioned projects, is to promote and encourage use of these previously inaccessible collections. This will deepen the collaboration between ARC and AUC faculty as staff assist professors with integration of these newly digitized photographic and audiovisual resources into class assignments and curriculum. Planning for the outreach to the faculty with these added resources will occur in several steps. Staff will

- include links to the digitized resources online on the Library's website and research guides;
- directly engage the faculty to promote these new resources;
- conduct workshops on integration of the archival and manuscript resources — including the digitized Interdenominational Theological Center reel-to-reel recordings collection and Gammon School of Theological Seminary oversized images — into course assignments and curriculum for approximately thirty AUC faculty across four institutions teaching religion during FY 2015-16;
- encourage Distance Learning faculty through emails, flyers and personal encounters at the Interdenominational Theological Center to make use of these publically accessible digital collections by assigning relevant research.

This project will also enable library staff to engage with AUC students. While faculty will be leading the way in using the collection for research and assigning projects and papers for class assignments, staff intend to provide the students with a separate but equally beneficial experience. As part of the HBCU Preservation Project, funding is provided for student internships. Through these student internships, project staff members hope to mentor and provide hands-on experience to students who may want to pursue careers as archivists, preservation administrators, archival educators, and conservators. The training will also be of great importance to *students* who simply wish to provide much needed practical information to their churches as they seek to preserve their rich heritage. The eight-week internship and semester-long work will provide the students with tools for the care, preservation, and conservation of archival, photographic, audiovisual, and art resources. They will also learn about digitization of various formats, creation of metadata, uploading collections to a content management system, and entry of collection finding aids into ArchivesSpace — the Library's information management system. Their internship will also include the completion of

⁸ <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/?Welcome>

⁹ L.H. Whelchel, Jr. *The History and Heritage of African-American Churches: a Way Out of No Way*. St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2011

an article documenting their overall experience, and an article about the newly accessible collections to be included in AUC Woodruff Library's newsletter, Top Shelf.¹⁰

Conclusion

Through proper assessment of collection strengths, evaluation of accessibility, and an understanding of researchers' needs, these projects were initiated to further the archival mission of the AUC Woodruff Library, specifically the cultural preservation of historical materials on the African American and Diasporic experience. The significance of the *Spreading the Word* project to humanities scholarship cannot be overstated, and the scope of this project will contribute substantially to the research, study and learning of African American religion and prominent historical figures. Preservation and awareness of collections and increased accessibility to them will position the Library as a leading institution where researchers — both from the Library's member institutions and from the broader, global community — can access an historically significant body of materials documenting African American religion.

¹⁰ <http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/newslet/>