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EXPANDING SOURCES FOR BLACK RESEARCH AT ATLANTA UNIVERSITY

Lee G. Alexander

Atlanta University's first archivists and records management coordinators were its founding fathers, who were conscientious, even if unwitting. Staunch in their convictions that the institution they were nurturing would become historically significant, they kept carefully the records of their progress in building the University.

The origins of a diverse collection of primary source materials relative to the Black experience are less clearly defined, but it is evident that the idea for such a collection developed in many minds. In 1932 Dr. Anson Phelps Stokes, President of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, made possible the acquisition of a small but rich group of papers of Thomas Clarkson, the English Abolitionist. Soon thereafter came the acquisition of the John Brown Papers. These manuscript collections were apparently handled as an integral part of the Library's general resources until 1946, when the collection of Henry P. Slaughter, a Washington bibliophile, was purchased. It was then that the archives/manuscripts collection was established in its separate identity as one of the Library's Special Collections. Although the bulk of Mr. Slaughter's collection consisted of valuable printed materials, there were also autographs of such outstanding figures as Frederick Douglass; William Lloyd Garrison; Franklin Benjamin Sanborn; and Toussaint, Christophe, and Pétion of Haiti. These resources, together with a fine group of slavery and Reconstruction documents, cover nineteenth-century Afro-American history in some breadth.

Another pillar on which Atlanta University's collections rest is the papers of Black American writers, musicians, and graphic artists from the Harlem Renaissance to the present. The collection was established in 1942 by Harold Jackman, New York educator and patron of the arts. Now known as the Cullen-Jackman Collection, it is a constantly growing body of papers, periodically receiving additional donations from the Jackman Memorial Committee.

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These earliest collections, together with a number of others that were acquired soon after, are described in the Guide to Manuscripts and Archives in the Negro Collection of Trevor Arnett Library, Atlanta University (1971). This publication was the product of two years of Ford Foundation assistance in processing for research use Atlanta University's rich collections. Since every effort was made to disseminate the Guide widely, it seems useful now to move beyond its bounds to review briefly the University's acquisitions since 1971. To do so, however, is to confront the proverbial horns of the dilemma: on the one hand, these more recent acquisitions are of such quality and quantity that they deserve exposure to the archival profession and to potential researchers. On the other hand, to review these materials is to dangle tempting morsels only to snatch them away again with the reminder that most of them are not processed, nor are likely to be so for at least another two years. Except for a few smaller collections (or additions to previously processed collections) which have been prepared by the class in Archival Management of Atlanta University's School of Library Service, most of the materials to be cited are under only such degree of control as conscientious accession records provide. Despite all these difficulties, it seems not completely futile to glance at potentialities, with a hopeful eye on the future.

Because of the quantity of the material and the rather predictable content of some of it, only a few collections have been singled out for elaboration in the following three major categories: (1) personal papers, (2) archives of Southern socio-economic organizations, and (3) organizational archives of a more general nature.

Additions to manuscript collections reflecting the lives and accomplishments of individuals include papers of Claude McKay, poet and novelist; Owen Dodson, poet and playwright; Grace Towns Hamilton, Georgia legislator and civic worker (and daughter of George A. Towns, whose papers are also a part of the Collection); C. Eric Lincoln, author and educator; Clarence A. Bacote, Brailsford R. Brazeal, Hallie B. Brooks, and Richard A. Long, Atlanta educators and civic figures; David Scott, Georgia legislator and politician; and Russell Atkins, poet and novelist. Although not numerous, papers having to do with the vindication of Henry Ossian Flipper, Atlanta University alumnus and first Black graduate of West Point, are of particular human interest. At the time of this writing, the papers of the Rev. William Walter Mathews, a controversial but richly achieving Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and of Mr. John Hervey Wheeler, former president of the Mechanics and Farmers Bank of Durham, N.C., president of the Southern Regional Council headquartered in Atlanta and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Atlanta University for many years, were just in process of acquisition.
The Claude McKay manuscripts come from the last four years of the poet's life, 1944-1948, and consist of letters to Harold and Ivie Jackman of New York city. Mainly requests for assistance in practical matters, the correspondence also includes allusions to fellow writers Roi Ottley, Richard Wright, and Lillian Smith, as well as to McKay's thoughts on Blacks and Communism. Allusions to his worsening health and finances lend a tone of gloom to the series.

The letters and papers (1943-1974) which constitute the Owen Dodson addition not only cover most of his professional life but reveal his quality of intense enthusiasm, a case in point being his abortive effort to take the Howard University theatrical company to Denmark to perform in Elsinore Dodson's version of Hamlet. The bulk of the material consists of literary manuscripts (both poetry and plays) frequently including an original draft with several revisions.

The focal points of the papers of Dr. C. Eric Lincoln are his teaching activities (he has been a member, successively, of the faculties of Clark College, Union Theological Seminary, and Fisk University), and his wide-ranging writing and publishing enterprises in the areas of Black religious, philosophical, and sociological concerns. These records are supplemented, however, by ample evidence of auxiliary interests such as fiction-writing, musical composition, and the founding and progress of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters. Persons who figure in the collection are the Rev. Albert Cleage, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X.

One other individual collection reveals a very different type of personality and field of operations. Professor Clarence A. Bacote, formerly Chairman of the Department of History of Atlanta University, retired in 1977 and donated his papers to the University. Widely known and revered as an educator, Dr. Bacote amassed a considerable body of records during his 47-year tenure as a member of the Atlanta University faculty, and these will constitute a valuable segment of the University Archives. His personal papers, however, reflect his other multitudinous and highly productive activities. Well before the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Bacote was working with the All-Citizens Registration Committee and the Atlanta Negro Voters League. These organizations functioned on their own and in conjunction with local chapters of the Urban League and the NAACP to expand the rolls of Black voters and to help inform them as to the qualifications of the candidates. As an outgrowth of this work, perhaps, Dr. Bacote became—and still is—an unofficial election statistician, compiling for each election figures indicative of the geographic distribution and relative voting strengths of Black versus White voters in Atlanta. Dr. Bacote's papers are, in addition,
reflective of his civic involvement with the Fulton County Democratic Executive Committee, the Fulton County Jury Commission, the Atlanta Civic Design Commission, and Advisory Boards of the Southeastern Branch of the National Archives and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.

As an adjunct to his teaching, Dr. Bacote has contributed in major ways—as his papers record—to professional organizations such as the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History, the Southern Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, and, by way of numerous published articles, to the Journal of Negro History. Various research materials and galley-proofs of his Story of Atlanta University (1967) may also be found among these records.

Throughout his teaching career, Dr. Bacote habitually saved clippings or other illustrative materials relative to current history. These items form both colorful and useful grace-notes to the collection.

Among outstanding individuals represented—usually as correspondents—in the collection are W. E. B. DuBois, Raiford Logan, Ira DeA. Reid, Dr. Wm. E. Dodd, Dr. Carter G. Woodson, Dr. John Hope, Dr. John Hope Franklin, Whitney M. Young, and Chet Huntley.

Since 1954 the archives of several well-known Southern socio-economic organizations have been the strongest asset of Atlanta University's holdings. The records of a number of such organizations have recently been expanded or have achieved representation in the Collection for the first time. Among them are the Neighborhood Union (an Atlanta social service agency organized by Blacks in 1908); the Atlanta branch of the Urban League; the Kenneth Douty study of Communist influence in the Southern Conference for Human Welfare; the Southeastern Regional White House Conference on Children and Youth; the Southern Regional Council archives from 1941 to 1966 with continuing growth (these materials being sequential to the archives of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation and the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, already features of the Collection); and the Georgia Council on Human Relations (an affiliate of the Southern Regional Council).

The records of the Atlanta Urban League reflect the history of Atlanta's Black community more strongly than any other collection mentioned. With its greatest concentration of papers dating from the late 1950s and 1960s, the collection records the executive directorships of Mrs. Grace Towns Hamilton, Robert A. Thompson, and Harold N. Arnold. Some retrospective materials date as early as the 1940s. The collection is about equally divided between administrative papers (including correspondence, fiscal records, histories, statistics, and maps and charts related to League activities) and records of community services. The latter records cover educational facilities,
health care, family planning and adoption of children, housing, job development and employment of Blacks, voter education (in cooperation with the Georgia Voters League), registration drives, and Atlanta politics. The records also show that the Atlanta Urban League worked cooperatively with other social service agencies (Atlanta University School of Social Work), other ethnic organizations (Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith), and numerous governmental agencies, including the Commissions on Civil Rights and Equal Employment Opportunity.

Regarding the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, the organization was accused throughout the latter years of its existence of being dominated by Communists. In 1954 Professor John Roche of Haverford College was commissioned by the Fund for the Republic to make a study of Communist infiltration into domestic organizations. Kenneth Douty was, in turn, assigned by Roche the task of investigating SCHW. The papers at Atlanta University concerned with the project include a sizable body of correspondence explaining the nature of the project, photostated newspaper material, and several fragmentary versions of Douty’s report. Either none of these versions is complete or Douty’s findings are inconclusive, for he is indefinite as to the presence of Communist activity. The report does, however, incorporate a painstaking study of the Conference’s history and of the attitudes and affiliations of its leading members. So far as can be determined, the report does not exist in printed form.

In 1954 Atlanta University was made the repository for the archives of the post-World War I race-relations organization, the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. It was particularly fitting that this should be so, for many members of the Atlanta University community (including Dr. and Mrs. John Hope) were key figures in the Commission’s work. In 1944 a young and vigorous body called the Southern Regional Council emerged from the aging Commission and addressed itself especially to those social and economic problems peculiar to the South. Although the race problem was by no means the Council’s only concern, it began early on to occupy center stage and continued to do so through the period of the Civil Rights movement.

In March of 1978 the Southern Regional Council agreed to transfer that portion of its archives running from 1944 to 1966 to Atlanta University. With grant support from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the processing of some 300 cubic feet of material is now under way and is expected to continue through the Spring of 1980. This work has already revealed broad and rich sources of information in the areas of voter education, labor, rural health, crime and correction, and urban planning, in addition to race relations and civil rights. Materials relating to the functions of several
semi-detached agencies, such as the Voter Education Project, Fellowship of the Concerned, and the Southern Leadership Project, are also included. Among those Southern leaders who figure in the collection are Howard Odum, James McBride Dabbs, Dr. Charles S. Johnson, Dr. Rufus E. Clement, Ira DeA. Reid, John Hervey Wheeler, Dr. Vivian W. Henderson, Ms. M. E. Tilly, Pat Watters, Mrs. Grace T. Hamilton, John Hope II, Whitney Young, Jr., Dr. Kenneth Clark, and Vernon Jordan.

Organizations of a more general type represented in recent archival acquisitions are the following: Atlanta University itself, with additions in the area of presidential correspondence (Myron Adams, John Hope, Rufus E. Clement, and Acting President Florence M. Reid); administrative records of the School of Library Service and of Trevor Arnett Library; faculty records of C. A. Bacote, Hallie B. Brooks, and Richard A. Long; manuscripts of Phylon articles; records of fund-raising activities of the Office of Alumni Affairs; and, from the Office of Public Relations, extensive records concerning Atlanta University's Black art collection and photographs recording University activities.

Archives of the several schools of Atlanta University Center have been enriched by additions of early Spelman College catalogs, and of assorted Morehouse College publications.

Holdings in the area of women's social-cultural organizations have been augmented by additions to the archives of the Chautauqua Circle, Inquirers' Club, and the Utopian Literary Society.

Particularly significant is the recent promise by the First Congregational Church of Atlanta of its archives. This organization's history is outstanding both in its own right and in its historical relationship to Atlanta University. Three of its founders, Edmund Asa Ware, Erastus Milo Cravath, and Cyrus W. Francis—as ministers and as representatives of the American Missionary Association—had also been moving spirits in the beginnings of Atlanta University and, in the case of Cravath, of Fisk University also. Along with Atlanta University and Fisk, the church in its early years received financial support from AME. In 1894 the Congregational Church acquired its first Black minister in the person of Henry Hugh Proctor, a Fisk Graduate and a student at Yale Divinity School.

It should be reiterated that the larger of the above-mentioned acquisitions, especially the archives of the socio-economic organizations, will not be completely processed for use by the research public in less than two years. On a happier note, Atlanta University Center's new library, in which the archival holdings will enjoy greatly expanded and desperately needed facilities, is on the verge of becoming a reality. Plans are being formulated for a Regional Ethnic Archives Center to be housed there, and donations of appropriate materials are earnestly solicited.