February 2004

Accessing Historic Africana Collections at HBCU Libraries

Akilah Nosakhere

Atlanta University Center Woodruff Library, Akilah@auctr.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nosakhere, Akilah (2004) "Accessing Historic Africana Collections at HBCU Libraries," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 16: Iss. 1, Article 6.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5409>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Accessing Historic Africana Collections at HBCU Libraries

by **Akilah Nosakhare** (Atlanta University Center Woodruff Library) <Akilah@aucr.edu>

Column Editor's Note: This article is a review of digital Africana (Black) collections created by Archives and Special Collections departments at HBCU Libraries. It is an examination of the processes leading to the planning and funding of these digital initiatives. Also presented are results of a survey and telephone interviews of Archives and Special Collections staff regarding their experiences with digital technology, and lessons learned and tips intended for use by libraries considering and/or preparing to expand access to unique special collections at their institutions through digital technology. In addition, Web-based special collections holdings at HBCU libraries are critiqued for link prominence, ease of use, unique content, appeal to larger community and presentation. —AN

Research Methodology

Survey of HBCU Libraries

Libraries belonging to the **HBCU Library Alliance** (www.hbculibraries.org) were surveyed in an attempt to gather information regarding their experience with digital projects and their plans to digitalize unique Africana collections owned by their institution. In September 2003, surveys were mailed to the 96 member libraries linked to the **HBCU Library Alliance Website**.

Only 12% of the libraries responded to the mail survey. Follow-up was conducted in the form of Website review and telephone interviews. Review of the 96 Websites revealed that a majority of library Websites have links to archives and/or special collections departments. Eighteen of the examined HBCU libraries have prominent links to digitized special collections providing world access to collection descriptions and selected images. Several of these 18 libraries were contacted and telephone interviews were conducted to gather information requested in the initial mail survey.

In addition to supplementing the scant results of the mail survey, the telephone interviews yielded insightful advice related to the experiences of these libraries in the planning and execution of digital projects. The thirteen-question survey instrument served as the basis for the telephone interview. Information related to digital policies, the purchase of equipment, staff training, and specific plans for future digital initiatives was provided by archivists, special

collections librarians, and appropriate administrators (See Appendix A).

Design and Procedures of the HBCU Digital Initiative Survey

The short thirteen-question survey instrument was designed to identify any common experiences related to the design and execution of digital projects that may be helpful to others. Inquiries concerning future plans to digitize unique Africana collections were also made to gain insight into what unique collections are on the horizon (see Appendix B).

Critique of Existing Web Access to Special Collections

A review of HBCU library homepages was conducted to identify access points and recognize innovative online presentation of Africana collections. Libraries with prominent access points to Archives or Special Collections departments were selected for closer examination. In addition to "accessibility," the information architecture of the site, i.e., arrangement, clarity of information, and usability (ease of use) were also important considerations in the review process. The use of unique historical photography, imagery, and the overall esthetic presentation were also examined. Finally, the extensiveness of digital holdings was noted. These elements served as general guidelines to provide a framework to access strengths and use of best practices in library Web design (see Appendix B).

Each of the 96 library Websites reviewed typically have prominent access points to the online catalog and electronic resources. However, eighteen libraries have prominent links to archives or special collections departments where digitized finding aids, collection summaries, biographies, scanned documents and images, or historical photographs could be accessed.

Commonly found among the HBCU libraries with special collections and archives were online listings of unique collections with brief text descriptions. Using the review process described, a group of eighteen Websites has been selected as ideal for in-depth review and follow-up conversation with appropriate library staff about their experience and plans for other digital projects.

Findings of the Study

Of the 103 libraries that make up the **HBCU Library Alliance**, 98% have Web presence of some kind.

The Web design used by a number of libraries could be described as the standard electronic shingle providing a basic introduction to the library environment, access to the online catalog, the routine electronic resources, and links to special collections where a great variety of digital access is found. The library Web pages of **Arkansas Baptist College**, **Benedict College** in Columbia, South Carolina, and **Bethune-Cookman College** in Daytona Beach, Florida, are examples of this "minimalist" approach while other libraries continue to expand their use of new digital technologies as illustrated in the variety of applications found.

Most historically Black colleges and universities were established in the late 1800's and soon after began collecting African Americana. These early activities resulted in some very extensive collections with national and international appeal. Many of these libraries provide access to special collections and archives Web pages. They link mostly to online text descriptions of holdings and provide little or no digital access to the actual holdings. Some libraries choose not to digitize archival content for a number of reasons, including the "co-opting" of historical images from their collections without credit given to the institution. Others intend to digitize as much as possible with goals of increasing services and the use of the collections through online promotion of holdings.

Xavier University of Louisiana (www.xula.edu/Library_Services) and the **Atlanta University Center Woodruff Library** (www.aucr.edu) are two examples of the "text only" approach used to promote archival holdings. Their respective Websites provide access to archival descriptions and represent the basic first step in digitalization. **Xavier** has no plans to digitize historical photography at this time. **Lester Sullivan**, University Archivist at **Xavier University**, expressed concern about "losing control" over the use of historic photography on the Web. He believes that unauthorized use of digital images is problematic and deprives owners of recognition and revenue. For example, **Sullivan** references a **Xavier** archives collection of **Marcus Garvey** photographs he described as being the "last photographs taken of **Garvey** in the United States." One photograph from this collection was used in a textbook without permission or acknowledgment of the **Xavier University Archives**. **Sullivan** said that such incidents are all too common now with digital photography and such practices raise important issues of copyright, the protection of intellectual property and privacy.

Conversely, **Atlanta University Woodruff Library** Archives and Special Collections will add digital photography to the Web-based collections descriptions sometime in the near future. **AUC Woodruff** owns scanning equipment and Archives staff has attended metadata train-

continued on page 22

Accessing Historic Africana ... from page 20

ing workshops and are eager to begin planning.

An early adapter, **Cheney University** of Pennsylvania (www.cheney.edu), some four years ago mounted photographs of encased library exhibits to promote use of the institution's rich archives. As expected, use of the archives increased but unfortunately plans to expand digital projects at **Cheney** have not. The University Archivist at **Cheney** reported that until governance policies are in place, their digital projects have been placed on hold. **Cheney** created their Websites using photographs of historical documents in exhibit cases. Although digital photography has become more sophisticated since then, the technique used by **Cheney** does protect the detail of these documents from unauthorized copying, while highlighting available resources.

Carter Cue, Archivist at Winston Salem's **C.G. O'Kelly Library**, does not think the copying of digital images from library Website is a major concern for archives. Digital watermarks or ownership labels can be applied to ensure proper credit is given to the owner of the photograph. Like most archivists, **Cue** prefers the use of public domain images in Web design, however, he said that the limited use of unique historic photography in Website design "promotes the collection worldwide and can influence users to come into the archives to have a closer look."

In summary, most **HBCU** libraries with special collections do provide some online access to holdings via text descriptions. Some libraries enhance online descriptions and finding aids with digital photography thereby increasing access to archival holdings. It is also clear that historic photography from special Africana collections can now be protected from unauthorized duplication by adding watermarks and other innovative techniques used in digital Web design.

Discussion

The Websites of **HBCU** Archives and Special Collections exhibit profound historical holdings relating to the African American experience. However, the use of digital technology to promote these collections has not been widely employed by many of these libraries either by choice or due to other circumstances beyond their control.

The absence of extensive digital access to some of the collections at libraries such as **Hampton University** and **Fisk University** was surprising given the breath and depth of their holdings. The online descriptions of special collections show extraordinarily rich archives that date back to the early nineteenth century. Described as one of the "oldest African American library collections in the country," **Hampton University's** Peabody Collection (<http://www.hamptonu.edu/UniversityServices/library/PeabodyCollection.htm>) contains thousands of anti-slavery pamphlets and documents from the enslavement and reconstruction periods. **Hampton University** is a major collector of African American historical materials; their Archives houses approximately 2 million items

and 19,000 historic photographs relating to the American Indian Education Program in addition to their massive Africana collection. Digital access to just a fraction of Hampton's special collections will definitely increase awareness and use of the **Hampton Museum** and Peabody collections and provide worldwide visibility for the entire institution.

The same holds true for **Fisk University**. **Fisk** Special Collections department houses the papers of celebrated faculty members such as **W.E.B. Du Bois**, **John Wesley Work**, **Arna Bontemps**, **James Weldon Johnson** and **John Mercer Langston**. The digitalization of key documents and photographs in these collections alone would enhance research in several areas while increasing the visibility of **Fisk University's** unique, varied, and extensive Africana collections.

Some of the **HBCU** library Websites examined display prominent links to the Archives or Special Collections Web pages, where text descriptions of holdings or scanned images are accessed. For example, the Libraries and Media Centers of **Tennessee State University (TSU)** (www.tnstate.edu/library/digital/digits.htm) offers an impressive digital vault of biographies, photographs, and shelf list descriptions. Since 1997, **TSU** Special Collections has moved steadily into the development of an extensive digital archive where the notable achievements of outstanding alumni are featured and the history of each building on the **TSU** campus is documented in text or digital image. This site provides users from all parts of the world an opportunity to view the main campus, as well as examine some of its archival holdings. The digitized collection provides electronic access to the rich traditions of the **TSU** Olympic track teams, yearbooks, profiles and biographies of prominent Black Tennesseans, and a retrospective of **TSU** Beauty Queens. The Special Collections Department publishes a digitized version of its newsletter, *Special Collections Renaissance News*.

Southern University and **A&M College** in Baton Rouge, LA (www.lib.subr.edu/history) has employed digital technology to give quick access to a massive collection of African American biographies and general facts related to African American culture. "*Timelines In Black History*" makes extensive use of links in the presentation of over 200 references under such headings as "Arts and Education," "Slavery and Politics," "Civil Rights and Politics," "Musicians and Singers," "Athletes" and "Authors." While this is quite useful, there is no indication that these are from the **Camille Stivers Shade** Collection housed at Southern.

The archives Website of **Trenholm State Technical College Library** (www.trenholm.cc.al.us/library) in Montgomery, AL draws on its rich collection of Civil Rights materials. The archives site opens to a colorful folk rendering of the historic march across the **Edmund Pettus Bridge** by artist **Bernice Sims**. The On-Line Collections link opens to a collection of historic photographs and documents under the theme, "*Foot Soldiers of the Civil/Voting Rights Movement*." This digital collection makes effective use of photography with captions linked to bi-

ographies, summaries and scope notes and highlights key central Alabama residents in the Civil Rights movement.

It is important to note that **Trenholm State's** digital project is the product of a collaborative effort which included the public library system and the Montgomery Friends of the Historic Voting Rights Trail.

The **University of the District of Columbia** features the **Felix E. Grant Jazz Archives**. Digital access to this audio archive is also the result of a collaborative effort between academic institutions in the Washington D.C. area. The Grant Archives is affiliated with the **Washington Research Library Consortium (WRLC)**. **WRLC** "is a regional resource-sharing organization established by several universities in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area to expand and enhance the information resources available to their students and faculty." Registered users, including students and faculty and registered scholars from around the world can listen to historic radio interviews with jazz greats past or present. **Felix Grant** was a jazz authority and radio personality in the D.C. area until his death in 1993. Though his tapes and other documents are housed at the D.C., the **WRLC** registers users and manages the access of these digital collections.

The Website of **Howard University's** Moorland Spingarn Research Center (<http://www.founders.howard.edu/moorland-spingarn/>) employs a simple text and photography format that is appears to be a standard for most libraries using text and photography together. The **Bluefield State College Archives** Web page (<http://www.bluefield.wvnet.edu/archives/history.htm>) and **Dillard University Special Collections** (http://books.dillard.edu/archives/digital_coll.htm) also utilize a Web design that reflects the printed page with its detailed information and carefully placed photographs with captions.

The majority of libraries surveyed own scanning equipment and have invested in staff development to create a cadre of digital experts to do the work and assist in the decision making processes related to digital initiatives. **Bobby Wynn**, Library Director of the Charles W. Chesnutt Library at **Fayetteville State University** in North Carolina, reports that a grant from the History of Higher Education in North Carolina Digitization Project provided the initial funding to digitize a collection of correspondence related to **Charles W. Chesnutt**. **Chesnutt**, known nationally as a writer, has local appeal due to his tenure as principal of early **Fayetteville State Normal School** for Negroes. The normal school later became **Fayette State University** and the library that bears his name has partnered with the state to produce an attractive site which has "increased the popularity of **Charles Chesnutt**," **Wynn** said.

NC ECHO (North Carolina Exploring Cultural Heritage Online), the North Carolina digital project provided seed money for **FSU's** program which included staff training and the purchase of equipment to carry out the project. **Wynn** praises his staff for their role in creating new access points for the archives and

continued on page 24

Accessing Historic Africana ... from page 22

added that "the willingness of staff to learn new ways to promote the collections is crucial to successful digital programs."

Like most libraries these days, HBCU libraries are facing leaner budgets and many seek out grant opportunities to initiate or continue digital projects. Some HBCU libraries report that they are working with vendors such as ProQuest, University Press of America, and the National Park Service to pursue new initiatives such as "hyper-linking special collections to online catalogs and interfacing with software from around the world."

Implications for Future Development of Digital Africana Collections

Ninety per cent of HBCU libraries digitized their own collections using trained library staff and library equipment. Collaborative initiatives with like institutions appear to be common practice for digital projects and the role of the archivist or special collections librarian figure prominently in the planning, development and use of digital technologies to promote holdings to a world-wide audience.

There are many known and unknown collections that are prime candidates for digitization. The library Websites refer only to those that are processed, described or presented on the Internet. A two-day conference called by the Special Collections Task Force of ARL focused attention on archival backlogs that exist in every institution. "Exposing Hidden Collections," a conference of archivists and special librarians (www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/) was held in September 2003 at the Library of Congress. Nearly 200 librarians and archivists came together to discuss the challenges of providing access to uncataloged and unprocessed materials and to discover ways to increase access to these unprocessed gems. The ARL meeting represents a first step toward the development of a national effort to define access to non-digitized holdings of special collections throughout the country.¹

It is important to note that limited staff, backlogs of unprocessed collections, unpredictable budget allocations and a decrease in federal funding for HBCU institutions have placed many archival digital plans on hold. Partnerships such as the North Carolina ECHO Digital Project, the Washington Research Library Consortium, the Montgomery Friends of the Selma-to-Montgomery Historic Voting Rights Trails, and the Howard University/WorldCom initiative have been successful in the creation of unique digital access that has increased usage of special Africana materials nationwide while protecting the integrity of the original collections.

Across the country, archives routinely provide researchers with copies of copyrighted images for a minimal charge and ask only for credit and a copy of the finished work. The revenue generated from this service is typically not enough to be concerned about. However, the employment of innovative digital access via the Web or through the creation of theme based

collections of related images in a digital format could be a source of steady income for HBCU libraries if carefully planned and marketed.

A consortium of HBCU archives and special collections could pursue such collaborative arrangements and may be surprised at the possibilities. Revenue generated from the sale of packaged image collections could provide funding for preservation of original collections.

There are many archives with collections that possess commercial appeal. Some examples include the Trenholm State Technical College collection related to home-based "citizenship schools" used during the Civil Rights Movement to help Blacks pass literacy tests and become registered voters. Trenholm State also owns a group of KKK recruitment materials complete with membership certificates bearing the original signature of the Imperial Wizard. The oral history collection on Mississippi Sharecroppers housed at the Helen R. Walton Learning Resources Center at Mary Holmes College in West Point, Mississippi, (www.maryholmes.edu/LRC.htm) also represents an interesting, yet seldom studied aspect of African American life that can attract students, faculty and users from all over the world once it

is digitally promoted via the Internet. Since Mary Holmes College lost its accreditation and closed its doors in June 2003, it is uncertain what will happen to this valuable collection.

The richness of special Africana collections at HBCU libraries has only begun to become known outside of the library field. As HBCU library directors, archivists and special collections librarians pursue grant opportunities to give new life to these historical collections, the marketability and commercial value of these collections will become more apparent. Ideally, revenue generated from the use of these collections could be re-invested in the care, preservation and promotion of the original collections at their home institutions.

Endnotes

1. Association of Research Libraries. "Exposing Hidden Collections." Washington DC, 8-9 September, 2003 [Website] (Summary of the national meeting to address the challenges of providing access to uncataloged and unprocessed materials in special collections across the country, accessed on 8 October 2003); available from http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/ehc/EHC_conference; Internet.

APPENDIX A

A SURVEY OF DIGITAL INITIATIVES

THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT AND RESULTS

Accessing Historic "Africana Collections" at HBCU Libraries: A Digital Rebirth

Total population surveyed: 96

Total Respondents: 13

Return Rate: 12.48%

A. What unique "Negro" or Black collections belonging to your Library or Institution are currently available on the INTERNET or World Wide Web?

None - 10

Papers of significant local person: politician

Photographs of civil rights period

Mary McLeod Bethune Papers

B. Are there plans to make any unique Black collections from your Library available via the INTERNET?

NO - 9

YES - 1 African Art collection

YES - 3 Historical photograph collections with wide appeal

C. What criteria are used to select the collection(s) for digital reformatting and Web access?

Uniqueness

Appeal to outside world

Condition of items

D. What staff is included in the decision to digitize special collections? How was the final decision made?

Library Administration

Head of Public Services and Archives

Special Collections Librarians

Archivists

History Department Faculty

Faculty

E. Does your Library own scanning equipment for digitizing collections or was the work out-sourced?

3 - Outsourced

1- some collections were completed with library scanning equipment

continued on page 26

F. If out-sourced, what vendors were consulted? Which vendor was selected and why?

- 2- Local firms were consulted. Time and quality were major considerations
- 1- UPA

G. What was the cost range per collection? What determined the cost of collection digitalization?

- Average cost of outsourced collections - \$15,000
- Type of item to be digitized determines cost

H. What has been your Library's experience? What are some insights and lessons learned from your digitalizing projects?

- "We went into the project untrained but now we better understand the 'time-per piece' element."
- "These projects take longer than expected"
- "Digital projects require detailed pre-planning"

I. What unique "Negro" or Black collection (s) belonging to your Library are possible candidates for digitalization?

- African Art Collection
- Civil Rights Era Photographs
- Presidential Papers

J. Which, if any, of these have commercial appeal and could possibly become revenue generators for the institution or the library?

- Mary McLeod Bethune Papers
- Papers of significant persons with national or international recognition

K. What are the outstanding features of your Library's Special Collections Web page?

- "Electronic Exhibits"
- "None at the moment"
- "No access to special collections at this time"

L. What are the outstanding features of your Library's Home page?

- Access to 140 databases
- Access to local catalog

M. Your comments:

APPENDIX B

A SURVEY OF DIGITAL INITIATIVES WEBSITE REVIEW GUIDELINES

- Prominent access points to Special Collections
- Arrangement and general information architecture
- Clarity of information
- Usability - Ease of use
- Use of unique historical photography and imagery
- Extent of holdings
- Overall aesthetic presentation
- Possesses collection with wide appeal

The Websites of 18 member libraries were selected as appropriate examples of Websites utilizing the best practices in library Web design, for ease of access and use, or as possessors of unique collections ideal for future digitalization.

(Alphabetical Listing)

1. Alcorn State University, Lorman, MS
2. Bluefield State College, Bluefield, WV
3. Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, Cheyney, PA
4. Dillard University, New Orleans, LA
5. Delaware State University, Dover, DE
6. Fayetteville State University, Fayetteville, NC
7. Lincoln University, Pennsylvania Lincoln University, PA
8. Mary Holmes College, West Point, MS
9. Norfolk State University, Norfolk, VA
10. North Carolina Central University, Durham, NC
11. Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX
12. Southern University and A&M College, Baton Rouge, LA
13. Tennessee State University, Nashville, TN
14. Trenholm State Technical College, Montgomery, AL
15. Tuskegee University, Tuskegee, AL
16. University of Maryland Eastern Shore, Princess Anne, MD
17. University of the District of Columbia, Washington, DC
18. Winston-Salem State University, Winston-Salem, NC

Using Common Vendors, Joint Approval Plans, and Shared Acquisitions Databases to Enhance Cooperative Collection Development

The Africana Collections at the Libraries of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University

by **Luke Swindler** (Social Sciences Bibliographer, University of North Carolina) <swindler@email.unc.edu>
and **Terry B. Hill** (Graduate Student, School of Information Science, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill)
<tbhill@email.unc.edu>

ABSTRACT: *The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke libraries recently pioneered the use of common vendors, joint approval plans, and shared acquisitions databases to expand their cooperative collection development programs for African Studies. These efforts have enhanced the possibilities for systematic and ad hoc cooperation, increased precision in coordinated acquisitions, provided greater assurance that each library is meeting its cooperative obli-*

gations, and improved the complementarities of their combined collections. By maximizing the number of specialized monographs collectively available and minimizing the chances of needed books not being held locally, the libraries provide better service to patrons and enhance institutional excellence.

The literature on cooperative collection development focuses on libraries and the publishing universe, with only passing mention of the

role vendors can play. This omission is particularly striking in the case of area studies, where the problematic nature of publishing and the book trade in developing countries makes foreign vendors the critical nexus in the selection/acquisition processes. Major domestic vendors also are potentially key players in cooperation, because of their global coverage of English-language academic monographs published or distributed in the U.S and U.K. and technological

continued on page 28