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Virginia State University Preserves Black History with Digital Collections

by **Shaneshia R. F. Brooks-Tatum** (Project Coordinator/Writer, HBCU Library Alliance) <sbrooks-tatum@hbculibraries.org>

Founded on March 6, 1882, **Virginia State University (VSU)** is a land-grant university serving over 5,300 students. Its 236-acre, suburban campus was the first state-supported, four-year institution of higher learning for Blacks. The **James Hugo Johnston Memorial Library**, also known as the University Library, was constructed in 1960 and fully renovated in 2004. With state-of-the-art technology and insightful design, it offers a café, collaborative study rooms, smart boards, and interactive whiteboards.

In its history, **VSU** was a technical college and university for Black students, who in earlier times had no other avenue for higher education. The Special Collections and Archives Department has acquired a very rich collection of manuscripts, photographs, artifacts, and sculptures documenting this history.

In the recent past, researchers used materials from the library's special collections and archives when conducting research on segregation, Blacks in higher education, and other related areas of study. Staff had little training in digitization, which impeded easy access to these materials. However, through training and resources provided by the **HBCU Library Alliance's** (HBCULA) Digital Collection Project, an initiative to preserve the history of **HBCUs**, **Virginia State** was able to digitally preserve key documents of its founding and early history.

The **HBCU Library Alliance** Digital Collection Website had nearly 130,000 unique visits to the database in 2010. "Approximately 14% of visitors to the Alliance's Digital Collection Website visited **Virginia State's** Website. The **HBCU Library Alliance** made it possible for us to highlight and make accessible the rich collections at **VSU**," explained **Dr. Elsie Stephens Weatherington**, Dean of the University

Library. Now researchers and the wider University community can visit the archives and conduct research online.

Until three years ago, the Special Collections and Archives Department only had one staff member, **Lucious Edwards**, the University Archivist. The Library's very small staff needed specialized training to complete processing and digitization in-house. Through grant funding by the **Mellon Foundation**, students were trained to digitize materials. Student workers scanned and encoded archival description work.

The digital collections' finding aids were constructed with help from the Virtual Library of Virginia (VIVA), a consortium of the nonprofit academic libraries within the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Library also utilized the expertise of the lead cataloger. "Through this training program, we were able to impact students' career choices," shared **Edwards**. Four student workers went on to study history at the graduate level at **Howard University**, the **University of Pittsburgh**, and **Virginia Commonwealth University**.

The staff also used **Library of Congress** metadata to ensure that document terms were consistent. "This experience has provided national and international exposure to **Virginia State** while also creating a transformative experience for the staff," added **Weatherington**. With its increased online presence, **Virginia State** hopes to increase the number of in-house and online visitors to the library's Special Collections and Archives Department.

The training provided by the **HBCULA** has significantly improved the technological skills of staff, which include the full range of processes involved in creating digital images with full metadata. Moreover, recently acquired collections



The Class of 1886 was the first graduating class of VSU. Photo courtesy of Virginia State University.

can now be processed and made available to the public more quickly. The **Lyrasis** and **Mellon Foundation** funded the Photographic Preservation Project, which provided staff with additional experience in the preservation and conservation of photographs. Because of this training, approximately 3,000 negatives and 2,000 photographs were scanned for further identification and re-housed in new containers.

The Special Collections and Archives Department has always been a valuable resource for history in the region. Adding online access to traditional services transformed the Archives from a repository of the University's history to an easily accessible resource and valuable research tool for the history of Blacks in Virginia.

This accessibility has led to the inclusion of **VSU** archival materials in publications, such as **Robert M. Mills'** self-published book *History of Promise Land Elementary School* (2007) and **Julius Gaines, Jr.'s** *Old Uniontown – Glances Backwards* (Staunton, VA: African-American Heritage Festival Foundation, 2007).

"We are acquiring collections that have major research importance," **Weatherington** added. The University Archivist is a well-known and respected oral historian who persistently relays the value of historical records to local history. The archivist was instrumental in bringing the Research Papers of **Oliver W. Hill, Sr.**, a civil rights leader and attorney who worked with **Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall**, to the University. The staff believes that exposure received through digitization has helped keep the public aware of their collections.

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The stately James Hugo Johnston Memorial Library at Virginia State University.

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Cooking



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Other collections include the papers of **Billy Taylor**, an international jazz artist, and **Yale Lewis**, a local DJ who interviewed renowned musicians. The Library owns the Prince Edward County Virginia Desegregation Case Materials and the Virginia Teachers Association Papers.

The Library uses Twitter, a Special Collections and Archives blog, and a Facebook page to market its collections. "Utilizing social media outlets is very important in letting the world know about the valuable materials we have at VSU," **Weatherington** stated. Through rigorous and innovative digitization efforts, **Virginia State University** ensures the preservation of not only its institutional history, but also the achievements of African Americans in education, the arts, public policy, and other arenas.

For more information about the VSU Special Collections and Archives Department, visit http://library.vsu.edu/special_collections.html. 🌱



A student studies in the library. Photo courtesy of Virginia State University.

Rumors from page 24

Someone was asking me the dates of the **2012 Charleston Conference** — November 7-10, 2012. However, if you forget, the dates of conferences through 2017 are posted at the bottom of the conference Website. Should we move them up to the top of the page?

<http://www.katina.info/conference>

I was **reminiscing with my husband**

recently about going down King Street to a branch of the Bank of America (something else is in the building now, I think a shoe place, but shops come and go so quickly), anyway, like I was saying, I was reminiscing about walking to the Bank of America on my lunch hour and setting up a bank account for **ATG**! That was 25 years ago! And now **ATG** has a **NewsChannel**! I have to say! I hope you are accessing it! If you have a print subscription to **ATG** you get the online version totally free! People want IP access but we have yet to figure that out. ☺

Still, the **ATG NewsChannel** is linked from the **Charleston Conference** Website and vice versa. Are you keeping up with all the news? For example, did you see the news of the **Phablet** — a phone with a screen big enough to be used as a tablet. **Samsung** is coming out with this **Android**-powered smartphone with other extra features. Will this be the next big device? <http://features.techworld.com/mobile-wireless/3338767/era-of-phablet-doing-everything-with-one-mobile-device/>

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