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A SURVEY OF ARCHIVAL HOLDINGS RELATING TO THE BLACK EXPERIENCE
IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Minnie H. Clayton

After the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, interest in the collection and preservation of records documenting the history of black Americans increased dramatically. Scholarly attention encouraged the publication of guides to locate and identify existing collections of black history source materials. Major collections in the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and various historical societies and college and university libraries were described in institutional and national guides. The Directory of Afro-American Resources, edited by Walter Schatz and published in 1970, has provided the most comprehensive listing of the locations of black history collections.¹ However, many of the records documenting the Civil Rights Movement have come into repositories only within the last decade, after the publication of Schatz's guide. This paper will provide a brief survey of the location of some major archival collections documenting the black experience in the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century.

Shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Mrs. King and other family members founded in Atlanta the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Social Change. The Center's purpose was to keep Dr. King's "dream" alive, and the first project toward that goal was a nationwide attempt to collect the documents of the movement that Dr. King led and to preserve them for research in a central location. Some 700 cubic feet of materials have been collected and should be open for research in 1980 when processing, now in progress through a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, will be completed.

The collection consists mainly of the files of correspondence and related papers from the major civil rights organizations of the period from 1954 through 1968. The largest group of organizational records in the collection is the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) headquarters files. These papers date from the founding of the organization in 1957 through 1972, and consist of

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administrative correspondence, organizational records, minutes, annual convention materials, speeches, mimeographed materials, fiscal records, SCLC chapter correspondence and reports, pamphlets, newspaper clippings, photographs, SCLC publications, tapes and memorabilia. These materials were generated by the SCLC's involvement in local movements in Alabama and Georgia; voter registration drives in Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida, Alabama and Louisiana; the march on Washington; civil rights campaigns in Chicago and Cicero; the Poor People's Campaign; the Memphis sanitation workers' strike; and Dr. King's assassination. The records also contain the correspondence of such SCLC leaders as Dr. King, Ralph Abernathy, Jesse Jackson, James Bevel, Fred Shuttlesworth, Wyatt T. Walker, T. Y. Rogers, Hosea Williams and Andrew Young. Also included are tape recordings of SCLC conference proceedings, rallies, workshops and speeches, as well as speeches, sermons and radio broadcasts by Dr. King.

Other organizational records in the King Center collection include the papers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), 1960-1968; the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), 1961-1968; Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCC) Chicago Movement, 1965-1968; the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity (ESCRU), 1959-1969; and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, 1963-1967. The SNCC files contain general office correspondence, minutes, staff field reports, and correspondence of leaders John Lewis, Julian Bond, Stokely Carmichael, James Foreman and others.

Dr. King's personal papers (1950-1968) form the largest individual collection at the Center. These include manuscripts, galleys, typescripts, correspondence and memorabilia. Of particular importance is the information relating to Dr. King's early life and education. Mrs. Coretta Scott King has deposited a portion of her papers at the Center, and these include correspondence, the manuscript for her book, My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr., newspaper clippings, her non-current administrative files as president of the Center, and memorabilia. Two other individual collections are the court cases of Alabama attorney Fred D. Gray, 1955-1968, and the papers of William Robert Miller, the biographer of Martin Luther King, Jr.²

The Trevor Arnett Library at Atlanta University is well known as a repository of much valuable black history material. Recently Trevor Arnett has acquired the papers of the Southern Regional Council (SRC), which date from 1944 through 1970. The SRC papers consist of over 400 cubic feet of administrative files, organizational records, project files, field administrative files for the eleven affiliate state councils, SRC publications, research division files, and the SRC's Voter Education Project files. These papers are now being processed under a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, for research use within the next two years.

Howard University's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, with its rich black literary heritage and the papers of outstanding black leaders of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has added the Black Press archives, dating from the founding in 1827 of the first black newspaper, Freedman's Journal, to the present. A second recent addition is the Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection (formerly the Civil Rights Documentation Project), consisting of approximately 700 tapes and transcripts of individuals involved in the civil rights activities of the 1960s. The processing and cataloguing has not yet been completed.

Boston University's Mugar Library Special Collections houses papers of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., an alumnus, dating from 1950 through 1963. Included are manuscripts, correspondence, academic study materials, telegrams, speeches and sermons.

The University of Massachusetts, noted for its important collection of anti-slavery documents, has added the W.E.B. DuBois papers. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin established its Contemporary Social Action Collection in 1964 and has acquired important papers relative to local movements of the 1960s in such southern states as Mississippi, Arkansas and Tennessee. These movements reflect principally the activities of SNCC and CORE.

At Dillard University's Amistad Research Center, recent acquisitions include the papers of Mary McLeod Bethune, educator and activist, and Bishop Stephen G. Spottswood of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, who was active in early twentieth-century civil rights work and served during the 1960s as chairman of the NAACP. These collections complement the already impressive files of the American Missionary Association, 1839-1879, which relate to the Underground Railroad, abolition, Reconstruction and the Ku Klux Klan, and other early black history collections.

Fisk University Library in Nashville, holding nineteenth- and early twentieth-century papers centering mainly on the Reconstruction and Depression eras, has expanded its collection by acquiring the papers of civil rights worker Slater Hunter King, 1959-1968, documenting the activities of the Albany, Georgia, movement of the 1960s. The archives of the Race Relations Information Center (RRIC) is a second major acquisition. Tuskegee Institute Library has valuable records covering the late nineteenth century, among them files detailing all known instances of lynching since 1882, and also houses the Southern Courier files, 1965-1968, containing information concerning civil rights activities.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)--an outgrowth of a protest organization, the Niagara Movement of 1909--is the oldest and largest civil rights organization, with 1800 chapters and seven regional offices throughout the U.S.

The Library of Congress is the national repository for NAACP files and holds its early and contemporary records.

The National Council of Negro Women, through its Mary McLeod Bethune Historic Development Project, is processing its own records (1935-1965), which document the civil rights movement, including action on such items as lynching and poll taxes. The NCNW has set as its ambitious goal the collecting and processing of all historically valuable materials produced by the coalition of twenty-seven national women's organizations.³ The Alabama Center for Higher Education (ACHE) began Project Preservation to encourage and assist community organizations in preserving historical records in their possession.⁴ Progressive and labor movement materials are available to researchers at the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research.⁵ Specific collections include documents relative to the Scottsboro Boys case, the Black Panther Party and taped speeches of Angela Davis, Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez and others. The California Historical Society houses a considerable body of records documenting Black history in the West and early civil rights activities in California.⁶ The Meiklejohn Civil Liberties Library (Berkeley) has the complete files of the People v. Angela Davis case,⁷ and the Religious Heritage of the Black World (Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta) has an extensive collection of tapes and transcripts documenting the religious and administrative experiences of "Black Church Fathers" of the twentieth century.⁸

Clearly, the civil rights movement of the 1960s has provided the impetus for the expansion of collections centering on black history, and the records and documents of that movement are some of the most important additions to existing collections. When many of these collections are opened to researchers during the next few years, they will provide new and rich documentation of this important era in recent American history.

NOTES

¹Most of the institutions have announcements, supplementary inventories or mimeographed listings of holdings upon request.

²The King Center Archives also holds records generated by the programs and activities of the Center.

³For more information, contact Council House; 1318 Vermont Avenue, NW; Washington, DC 20036; (202) 332-1233.

⁴For more information, contact Leon P. Spencer, Director; Collection and Evaluation of Materials About Black Americans (CEMBA); Talladega College; Talladega, Alabama 35160.

⁵For more information, contact Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research; 6120 S. Vermont Street; Los Angeles, California 90044; (213) 759-6036.

⁶For Diana Lachatanere's guide, Blacks in California: An Annotated Guide to the Manuscript Sources in the California Historical Society, contact 2090 Jackson St.; San Francisco, California 94109; (415) 567-1848.

⁷For more information, contact Meiklejohn Civil Liberties Library; 1715 Francisco Street; Berkeley, California 94703; (415) 848-0599.

⁸For more information, contact Religious Heritage of the Black World; Interdenominational Theological Center; 671 Beckwith Street, SW; Atlanta, Georgia 30314; (404) 525-5926