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AFRICANA ARCHIVAL AND MANUSCRIPT MATERIALS AT PREDOMINATELY BLACK INSTITUTIONS IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

Leon P. Spencer

There is little question these days that links between Africans and black Americans have been extensive and that the influences of the one upon the other have been widespread. These interactions transcend the period of the slave trade and slavery to include the American freedmen of the nineteenth century, the twentieth-century African under colonialism, and of course the independent African and the black American of the civil rights and post-civil rights eras. These ties find significant expression through the historic black educational institutions of the American South: in the official interests and activities of the institutions, in the African students enrolled there, in the activities of alumni, and in the unsolicited initiatives of Africans who have sought for various reasons to establish contact with these learning centers. It is natural, therefore, for Africanists to expect to find archival and manuscript materials housed at these traditionally black colleges and universities. It is especially important for Africanists, as well as archivists, in the South to express interest in the issues that confront these custodial institutions — questions of acquisition, preservation, and access.

There are more than one hundred predominantly black institutions of higher education in the United States. Although no thorough effort has been made to secure information about their Africana manuscript and archival materials, we have a taste of what may exist in many of these institutions through knowledge of what does exist at a few. This knowledge comes from a variety of sources. Peter Duignan's *Handbook*¹ includes references to seven black institutions, including Atlanta University, Fisk, Hampton, and Howard, though the information they supplied was dominated by published works. In 1970 the *Directory of Afro-American Resources*² polled 120 predominantly black educational institutions and other black

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organizations. Thirty-four reported no archives or manuscripts;³ fifty-two indicated that they possessed archives and manuscripts but did not mention any African content; and eight made specific reference to original sources of Africana. That same year, Kenneth King reported the existence of Africana documents found while working on his thesis describing links between African and black American education. King's list included seven institutions.⁴ Aloha South's effort to compile a new guide to American archival and manuscript sources relating to Africa polled fifty-eight black institutions. Only four answered positively; ten schools reported no holdings.⁵ On their own initiative several black colleges and universities have publicized their manuscript holdings, including a number of African-related documents.⁶ Yet only six have submitted information to the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC)*; four refer to Africa.⁷

Despite the small sampling, one cannot help but be intrigued at the research potential they display. The records reported contain vital data documenting the reactions of African students to the United States, and of black missionaries in Africa. Some materials reveal insights into pan-Africanism in its economic, political, and philanthropic aspects.⁸ Physically, the record items run the gamut from slave manumission reports and slave ship manifests at Xavier University in New Orleans, to the reports of the Liberian interests of the Pennsylvania Colonization Society at Lincoln University; from the papers of Thomas Clarkson, the British abolitionist, at Atlanta University, to those of J.E.K. Aggrey on file at Livingstone College. Other outstanding collections include materials concerning black American missionaries housed at the Stewart Missionary Foundation for Africa, the Gammon Theological College, and the Interdenominational Theological College in Atlanta; the Campbell and Hoffman papers on African agriculture at Tuskegee Institute; the private papers of American Board missionaries in southern Africa at Talladega College; the James H. Robinson papers at the Amistad at Dillard University; the Holtby papers concerning the "rights for black South Africans" at Fisk University; and the Cartwright papers regarding the formation of the University of Nigeria at the Amistad Research Center. Howard University, Morehouse College, and Hampton Institute, in particular, note holdings documenting the experiences of African students in the United States.⁹

These materials represent only a fraction of what may be undescribed in black college libraries. Of course some schools would have been more interested and involved in African affairs than others, but the unexpected

discovery of a letter from Harry Thuku, the Kenya protest leader, to Secretary of the Tuskegee Institute¹⁰ and a holograph from Julius Nyerere, now president of Tanzania, to Arthur Gray of Talladega College¹¹ leaves one with at the least a reasonable hope that valuable historical records are extant but largely unknown at many black institutions. There is, moreover, clear evidence of real potential for the acquisition of important Africana manuscripts in private hands by black colleges and universities. Experience has demonstrated genuine interest among black Americans in depositing their records with black institutions. It may be valid to assume that black potential donors have pretended to support a professionally-run manuscript program in a black institution over one in a white university or state agency, especially in the South. Experience also suggests that few Americans prominent in African affairs, black or otherwise, have been approached with regard to their records. Even the large organizations such as the major mission societies, whom one would expect to be sensitive and concerned for the preservation of the private papers of their personnel, have seldom been approached. Given the absence of organized collection competition and donor receptivity to appeals from black institutions, there is indeed real potential for substantial acquisition.

What is required, of course, are sufficient staff and equipment to meet these opportunities. Here the problems of black institutions are hardly unique. Administrators of all financially-pressed colleges and universities often consider archival programs as luxuries. Where archivists are appointed, they are frequently librarians without archival training who are asked to sandwich archival duties in among full-time library responsibilities. Others serving as *de facto* archivists are largely untrained, and may fail to grasp either the conceptual or practical manifestations of their tasks. Grant support, such as that to eight predominantly black institutions through a consortium, the Alabama Center for Higher Education (ACHE), may initiate archival programs of real accomplishment, but even then the previously-mentioned personnel difficulties persist, along with the more serious question of what happens to these programs when grant funding ceases.

Fifty-two institutions may well have reported to the *Directory of Afro-American Resources* that they maintained archives, but this should not be taken to mean that there were active archival and manuscript programs or even that there were archivists or systematic records management efforts. In fact many institutions do not know what they have. Furthermore, those records that have been preserved may not be properly housed. Files on

African students of a half-century ago can languish unattended — with their value to Africanists unrecognized — in a corner of the registrar's office. If such circumstances continue, Africana materials at black institutions will remain unknown, and opportunities for Africana manuscript acquisitions will pass untaken.

While it is vital that Africanists and archivists make a joint commitment to improve this critical situation, what is to be done is not at all clear. Archivists cannot be placed at many institutions without significant financial support from outside sources. Grant support appears to offer a partial answer, but it is short-term and must limit its focus to existing records that can be arranged, processed, and made available to researchers within the duration of the grant. In any case, a host institution must provide for the new repository and agree to assure support for the program as grant funds recede. An effort at archival consciousness-raising is certainly long-overdue. The more active archival programs at black colleges and universities, or cooperative structures modeled after that of the Institute for Services to Education, might sponsor education programs for administrators, librarians, historians, and other faculty to stimulate a concern for preservation of records and a search for solutions to practical dilemmas hindering preservation. One would anticipate the active participation of the Archives-Library Committee of the African Studies Association and of Africanists associated with the Society of American Archivists in such an effort. Regional and statewide organizations of Africanists and of archivists would prove useful channels for constructive efforts at the local level. Working in close cooperation with black institutions, these professionals could assist with thorough personal surveys of Africana, and provide consulting services for institutions which cannot now maintain full-time archival and manuscript programs. Doubtless there are other possibilities.

This paper, then, is not meant to be an exercise in negativism but in realism. It stems from a basic excitement generated by the realization of the immense possibilities open to black institutions and by a recognition of the natural prerogatives of these institutions to seek to contribute, through the preservation of records, to our understanding of Africa and of African-black American interrelationships. We have only to recognize the obstacles, and to accept them as challenges.

¹ Peter Duignan, *Handbook of American Resources for African Studies*, Hoover Institution Bibliographic Series, XXIX (Stanford: Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, 1966).

² Walter Schatz, ed., *Directory of Afro-American Resources* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1970).

³ This is probably a deceptive figure. Archival materials probably exist but are not being preserved systematically, nor has staff been designated for that purpose. It is likely that there is considerable overlap between those stating that they had no archives and the fifty-two which indicated the existence of archival materials.

⁴ They included Tuskegee, Hampton, Morehouse, Howard, Livingstone, the Stewart Missionary Foundation for Africa and the Gammon Theological College, and the Interdenominational Theological College. Kenneth J. King, "Africa-related Material in Black American Colleges and the Phelps-Stokes Fund of New York," *African Historical Studies*, III, 2 (1970), 419-26.

⁵ Those replying positively included Dillard, Livingstone, Talladega, and Tougaloo; she visited Atlanta University. Personal communication from Ms. South, 28 July 1977.

⁶ See, e.g., *Guide to Manuscripts and Archives in the Negro Collection of Trevor Arnett Library, Atlanta University* (Atlanta, 1971); "Manuscript Collections in the Amistad Research Center," (New Orleans: Dillard University, Jan. 1974), mimeo.; "Original Resources in Black Studies" (Talladega: Talladega College, 1972); and "A Guide to the Special Collections and Archives" (Tuskegee Institute, 1974).

⁷ Amistad Research Center, 76-1796 and 76-1801; Fisk, 76-1447; Howard, 62-4286 and 62-4291; and Talladega, 72-1284.

⁸ King, p. 419.

⁹ For details about the manumission reports, see Schatz, p. 133; about the slave ship manifests at Xavier, the Pennsylvania Colonization Society, and the papers of Thomas Clarkson, the British abolitionist, see Duignan, pp. 132, 52 and 5 respectively; about J.E.K. Aggrey and black American missionary efforts from the Atlanta theological programs, see King, p. 424; for African agricultural materials in the Thomas Monroe Campbell and John Wesley Hoffman papers, see "A Guide to the Special Collections and Archives" (Tuskegee Institute); for American Board missionaries in southern Africa, the James H. Robinson papers, and the Winifred Holtby papers, see the *NUCMC*, 72-1284, 76-1801, and 76-1447; for the Marguerite Dorsey Cartwright papers, see "Manuscript Collections in the Amistad Research Center." For information about the African student records at Howard, see Duignan, p. 33; at Morehouse and Hampton, see King, pp. 423-4. It is worth noting that the Amistad Research Center provided microfilm copies of the records concerning the formation of the University of Nigeria for Nigerian archives; this was of particular importance after the destruction of many of those records during the Biafran war.

10 Thuku to secy., Tuskegee Institute, Sept. 8, 1921, rpt. in Kenneth J. King, "The American Background of the Phelps-Stokes Commissions and Their Influences in Education in East Africa, Especially in Kenya," (Diss, Edinburgh Univ., 1968) pp. 405-8.

11 Nyerere to Arthur Gray, Jan. 4, 1957, TC/Adm. 4/14/2/31/2, Archives of Talladega College, Talladega College Historical Collections, Talladega, Alabama.

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