

AFRICAN AMERICAN ARCHIVES AXILIARY

An Historical Perspective

The African American Archives Auxiliary has been an integral part of the African American Archives since 1971. In January of that year invitations went out to a number of Cleveland-area residents to serve on an Advisory committee to assure community involvement in what was then known as the Black History Archives Project. The invitees were educators or administrators who were associated with the principal black organizations in the community or had demonstrated an interest in preserving black history.

The response to this invitation was nearly unanimous. Twenty-three people agreed to serve: Russell T. Adrine, Dr. Tillman Bauknight, Mrs. Myrtle J. Bell, Thomas F. Campbell, Ernest C. Cooper, Russell H. Davis, Laurence L. Evert, Ralph W. Findley, Rev. Donald G. Jacobs, Ronald M. Johnson, Butler A. Jones, Dr. Middleton H. Lambright, Robert P. Madison, August Meier, Mrs. A. Grace Mims, George A. Moore, Wilbert Nichols, Ralph L. Pruitt, Robert L. Southgate, Booker T. Tall, John B. Turner, William O. Walker, and Harvey M. Williamson.

The initial objective of the committee was to provide assistance to the archives staff in identifying individual and institutional resources appropriate and available for the archives to collect, preserve and make available for research. Committee members were asked to introduce the staff to potential donors, promote the mission of the archives to their friends and associates, and to increase participation of the black community in the Historical Society. The committee was also kept apprised of the progress of the archives.

In the first few years, the committee was very informal, and no regular meetings were held. The staff worked with individual members eliciting their advice and cooperation, especially in collection development. Hundreds of individuals were contacted and many collections of personal and family papers, runs of newspapers, photographs, books, and pamphlets were accessioned. Students from nearby colleges and universities made increasing use of the archives. Scholars and archivists throughout the country knew of the archives for the wealth of material it had collected and made available to students and researchers. Nevertheless, staff and Advisory committee members believed that the Black History Archives were the best-kept secret in Cleveland.

The need to bring public attention to the archives, necessary for it to realize its maximum potential, became a priority. As this sentiment was taking hold at the Historical Society, the Smithsonian Institution mounted a spectacular exhibition. The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution, 1770-1800. The Historical Society signed up for the

travelling version of the show. Finally, the committee had a project to rally around as a group. As the staff worked to supplement the Smithsonian exhibit with original black history materials dating between 1776 and 1876 from the archives, the committee worked to raise funds and plan a gala preview and reception. The 650 people who attended the October 1975 opening constituted the largest crowd to attend a Historical Society function up to that time.

By this time, the committee was more formally organized. A succession of notable area educators headed the committee during the decade: Russell H. Davis, Robert L. Southgate, Harvey M. Williamson, and Booker T. Tall. Towards the end of the 1970s, more attention was given to holding special events and working cooperatively with other agencies. In 1978 the Advisory Committee and the association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History sponsored a program honoring Harry E. Davis (1882-1955) and Russell H. Davis (1898-1976). More than three hundred people enjoyed the special exhibition, but particularly the memorable keynote address of Booker T. Tall.

The year of 1980 was a high watermark in the history of the Advisory Committee. In January, Booker T. Tall spoke on Garrett A. Morgan in the Historical Society's Napoleon Room during Cleveland's Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration, the first of what was planned to be an annual event by the Greater Cleveland Interchurch council. The next month, A. Grace Lee Mims, an advisory committee member, gave a recital of Negro spirituals to a capacity crowd attending the Historical Society's first Black History Month Celebration. In October, the committee sponsored a reception for the opening of the first public exhibition of the "Photographs of Allen E. Cole" and the publication of *Somebody, Somewhere, Wants your Photograph*.

For the next five years, the committee supported archivist Olivia J. Martin in presenting special programs for both the Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration in January and Black History Month in February. With the resignation of Mrs. Martin in 1986, the archives and the committee became moribund. A champion for black history was sorely needed. It emerged in the person of Booker T. Tall, who took up the reins of the committee with a renewed vigor in 1989. He attracted a coterie of community leaders and activists and energized them and Historical Society staff. In 1990 the archives was renamed the African American Archives and the Advisory Committee was reorganized as the African American Archives Auxiliary with a new status, that of an official auxiliary recognized by the Historical Society's Board of Trustees.

The auxiliary set lofty goals: raise funds to reestablish, as soon as possible, the position of archivist and to create an endowment fund to assure the continuation of the archives. The first goal was realized in 1992 when the Cleveland Foundation made a three-year grant of

\$150,000 to support the position with the title of Associate Curator for African American History. The second goal is within sight with more than \$200,000 in the endowment fund.

The true beneficiaries of the dedication, committee, and generosity of all those who have served and are serving as members of the auxiliary will be the generations to follow who will find themselves and their history preserved in the collections of the Historical Society, an institution now clearly and enthusiastically dedicated to preserving and presenting the heritage of all peoples of Greater Cleveland

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