

The Charles H. Wright Museum of African-American History

Michelle Susan Varteresian
Processing Archivist

Introduction

My experience at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African-American History was very productive, educational, and professionally fulfilling. Thanks to a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, I was able to accession, process and make ready for public use a variety of archival collections that document the experiences of African-Americans in Detroit and the United States.

“More Product, Less Process” (MPLP)

Following principles outlined by the Society of American Archivists, I processed collections according to the “More Product, Less Process” methodology. According to this methodology smaller, less complex collections did not require the creation of detailed finding aids. Instead, complete accession and resource records were created in the Archivists’ Toolkit database management system. It should be noted here that the Archivists’ Toolkit creates finding aids that are EAD-compliant for every collection, regardless of the level of complexity or size of the collection.

MPLP mandates minimal processing to

make collections accessible to researchers. Staples are not removed and preservation photocopying or other such tasks are not undertaken unless archival materials are in poor condition. The main goal was to create series and box listings with location information so that researchers may access our collections effectively and other staff may add to, reappraise, or deaccession if necessary. Other necessary components include scope and contents notes, abstracts as well as provenance, and any donor information. These are essential parts of creating accession records. The resource record gives other pertinent info like important name and subject links as well as links to other, related collections.

Goals and Methodology

Preliminary analyses for accessioning/processing include inventories and appraisals. This was accomplished by determining the number of collections, their contents, size and importance for research. Another criterion in assessing intrinsic and extrinsic values is the presence of prominent events or people in a collection. This aids in the development of processing priorities. For

example, preliminary archival assignments included processing collections ranging in size from 1.8 to 4.8 cubic feet. Upon discovery of other archival collections dealing with prominent African-American attorneys, activists and state/federal employees, the size of these collections increased by 1.6 to 30.2 cubic feet

The appraisal report and processing plans provide as detailed a blueprint or template for the creation of registers, or at the very least, accession and resource records and translates into efficient and effective processing. Our goals were to get the materials processed in as short a turnaround time as possible. This meant no item-level description was done; description was done only down to the folder level. In addition, more attention is given to series and sub-series level arrangement than biographical/ historical information.

Objects, ephemera and other realia were handled efficiently. These items were separated and transferred down to the Curatorial Department. In the Archivists' Toolkit, there is a special field where preservation considerations and recommendations can be listed along with alternate storage locations for items that have been separated from the rest of their collections.

Plan of Work

Larger collections that dealt with a variety of subjects, organizations, individuals and formats with greatest potential for research use were fully processed with the creation of separate registers from those generated by the Archivists' Toolkit. The necessity here was to impose intellectual organization and therefore make these collections more accessible and to facilitate easier use by researchers. In the creation of these registers, I researched and attempted to locate provenance information. In many cases, deeds of gift were stored in the Curatorial Department. In other cases, there were no deeds of gift. Where provenance was known,

this information was noted in the finding aid or register, and where provenance was unknown, that was entered as well.

As a Processing Archivist at the Wright Museum during the grant period, I was responsible for helping to eliminate the backlog of unprocessed collections consisting of manuscripts, photographs, visual materials and objects. I was responsible for all aspects of processing, including appraisal, arrangement and description of collections that arrived with no original order or inventories; I was also responsible for those collections that were received through deeds of gift with inventories. These included photographic collections, manuscripts, mixed media including audio, video cassettes and CDs, and objects. This meant not only original processing and the writing of finding aids or registers, but the integration of materials into existing collections. I created basic informational records in the context of collection arrangement and was responsible for amending existing electronic records with updated metadata and administrative information.

Some of the major collections I processed were the papers of William Westley Smith and the collections of Francis M. Dent, Willis and Irene Graves. I was also responsible for accessioning and processing the following smaller collections: the papers of Charles Mahoney, Harry and Lillian Duplessis, the Great Lakes Property Owners Association, the papers of Joyce Garrett, estate papers of Agnes Bristol, Laura Mae Benjamin and Snow Grigsby. The largest collection I completed an accession record and processing proposal for was approximately 35 cubic feet and documented the careers and lives of Dr. Haley and Mary Bell. Other collections I have accessioned/processed include the Michael Vagnetti Baseball Card Collection, the papers of Harold Johnson, Irene and Ambrose Cartledge, Romella Pye, Plaemon Green and Gerald Finn. I also accessioned

Lone Arranger News, June 2009

and processed the Living Legends 2001 Mural Project photographic collection, the Whitney Young Jr. Photographic Collection, a United Nations Photograph Collection, rare and original documents and letters from George Washington Carver, Booker T. Washington and A. Phillip Randolph. Also in this particular collection, were slave registers, land deeds and slave bills of sale. I also accessioned and processed museum and non-museum photographic collections. In total, I have processed 106.4 cubic feet of archival material.

I worked with the Supervising Archivist to create a standardized finding aid format which includes contents descriptions series, sub-series and container listings. In the creation of my appraisal report and processing plans, I made decisions for deaccessions of unneeded materials. I included in my reports a section on appraisal, including relational value and the strengths and weaknesses in every collection. In many cases, reappraisal will become necessary as new material is discovered and added to existing collections or two parts of a collection have other wise been separated. The William Westley Smith Collection originally was a smaller collection consisting of 0.6 cubic feet. Upon discovery of Mr. Smith's additional papers and personal effects, the collection expanded to 4.2 cubic feet. An example of a collection that had to be divided was the Francis Dent/Willis and Irene Graves Collection. Although Mr. Dent and Mr. and Mrs. Graves were social activists and the two gentlemen were civil rights attorneys who collaborated on some cases, there was enough distinctive material in each component of this to merit the creation of separate Dent and Graves collections.

Educational Goals

Another goal of the grant with which I indirectly helped was education. The archival collections that I have processed with their accompanying finding aids will be uploaded to the museum's website for public access and

research. Through my work as a Processing Archivist, I was helping to make people aware of the importance of archives, not only as a profession, but on a personal level as well. I had a most productive meeting with a donor of one of our more important collections. I re-established contact with this individual to aid in the appraisal and identification of photographs and manuscripts. During our meeting, I explained how his papers related to the mission of the archives and their enduring research value for future generations.

Other goals that fall under the purview of education include some of the more obvious functions of an archive, noted above, such as organizing existing holdings for documenting the African-American experience. As a final part of this program, the duplicate material that I pulled from the Romella Pye and Haley and Mary Bell Collections will be used in developing educational exercises aimed toward youngsters to not only teach them about their heritage, but the importance of archives to our youth.

Summary

Ours was a team environment at the Wright Museum and my job was to process large collections in an efficient and timely manner, which includes balancing multiple projects, shifting priorities, and meeting deadlines. I have helped eliminate the processing backlog through the description of manuscripts from the collection level, to the series level. My job is also to identify collections and series needing attention. I have done this through the re-appraisal of existing collections and set new priorities for the processing of these collections. I often worked simultaneously on accessioning, processing and appraisal of various collections. Upon the discovery of additional, larger archival collections, processing priorities changed again, and I have since processed additional collections with greater archival and historical value.

My experiences at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African-American History were

the best I could have possibly had. Under the excellent and most professional direction of Supervisory Archivist Alexis Braun-Marks, I had the pleasure of helping to fulfill the museum's ambitious and obtainable goals in re-establishing their archival program. Within the excellent work environment including fabulous co-workers, I felt

Lone Arranger News, June 2009
privileged to contribute my knowledge, skills and time to this vital project.

I am proud to have had an important part in this important endeavour and know that all of our work ensures the future and continuing success of the Charles H. Wright Museum's archival program.