DESCRIPTIVE NOTES

Newsletter of the SAA Description Section Summer 2020

REPARATIVE

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DESCRIPTION

The SAA Description Section provides a forum for the exchange of information and ideas about all aspects of archival description among those responsible for, involved in, or interested in description projects, standards, and systems.

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FROM THE CHAIR

Cyndi Shein

The spring of 2020 brought loss of lives, economic insecurities, and a host of uncertainties about our futures. In March, when the coronavirus arrived on our doorsteps, I marveled at the better side of human nature as I witnessed the generosity of my friends and colleagues. They donated to aid programs, sewed face masks for health workers, made hundreds of meals for seniors who were sheltering in place, and went above and beyond in many ways. In May, I was sickened by the worst side of human nature as we collectively witnessed the murder of George Floyd. Our attention shifted from the pandemic to the many Black lives that have been taken by police brutality and the systemic racism that undergirds our nation.

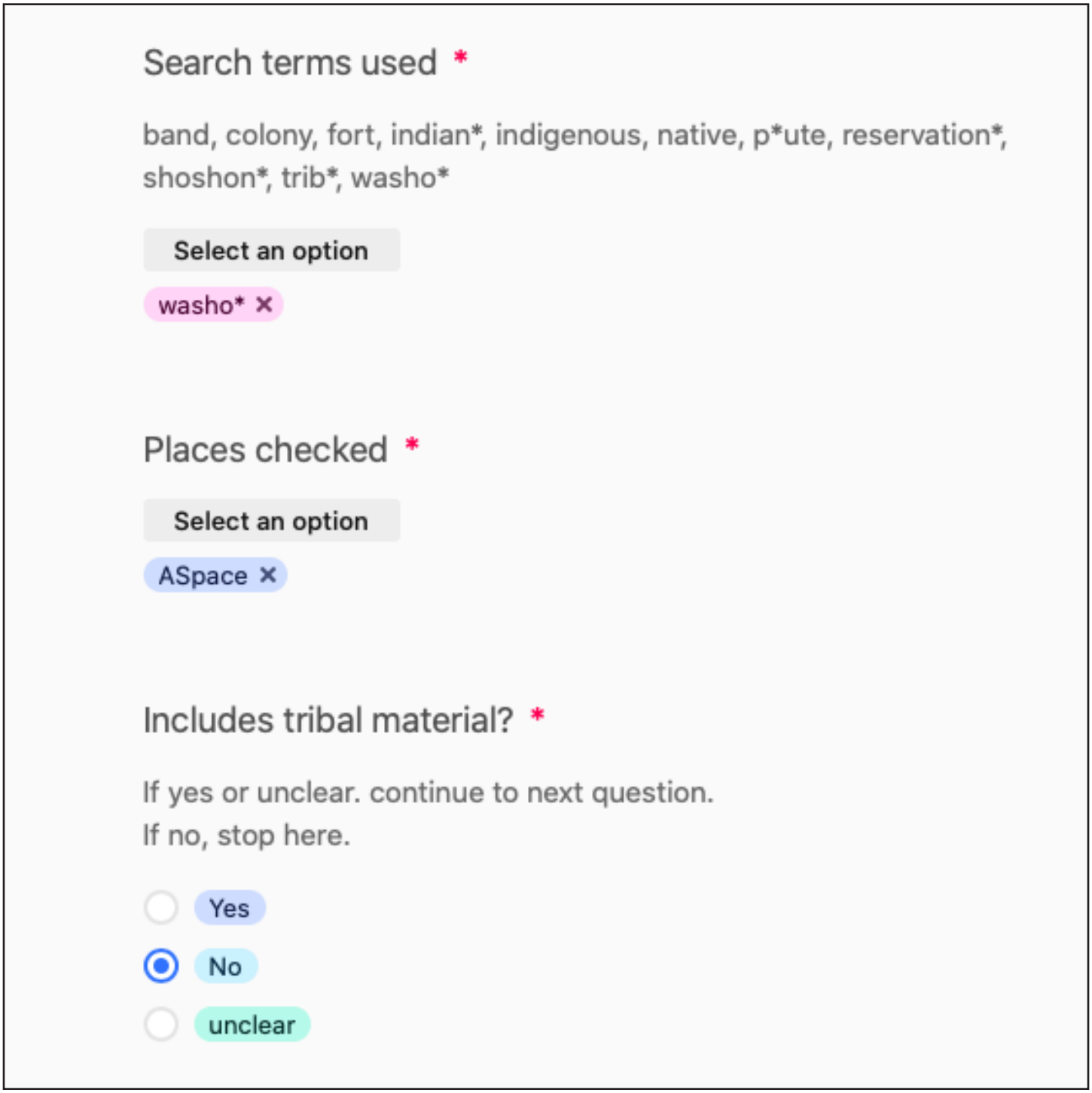
It is late July as I write this message. The pandemic is still claiming a staggering number of lives each day. Racism is still pervasive. The path to healing and systemic change feels long and overwhelming. Even so, I draw hope from the protests that have swept the nation and from individuals who are enacting change within their own spheres of influence. With hopeful hearts, the section leadership focuses this issue of *Descriptive Notes* on some grassroots efforts that affirm the value of Black and Indigenous lives. As archivists and librarians, we are each at different points on our personal and institutional journeys toward dismantling harmful structures and implementing anti-racist practices. We have far to go on the journey to unlearn things that we have been conditioned to accept as normal.

In this issue, our colleagues share some steps of their own journeys toward restorative practices. A librarian from a public library in the South describes an ongoing project begun in 2010 that aims to surface the names of African Americans who were enslaved, so their descendants might better discover their family histories. Archivists from a university in the West discuss initial steps in their implementation of the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials, as they work toward more respectful stewardship of Indigenous materials. Special Collections librarians and archivists from the East Coast share an outline of their long-term plan toward reparative efforts that redress harmful collection descriptions and amplify marginalized voices. All three of these articles share works in progress and acknowledge that some of the terms and authorized subject headings (LCSH) found in their archival descriptions still reflect our shared oppressive systems and are in need of remediation.

In closing, I would like to recognize a few of the Description Section Committee's significant accomplishments this year. We strengthened our record-keeping system to support continuity from year to year, began reviewing and updating our Standing Rules, and further developd the Description Section Documentation Portal, increasing its content and expanding its scope to include resources for more equitable and inclusive description of archival materials. These achievements can be attributed to the efforts of the current

committee members, Katie Duvall, Scott Kirycki, Sarah Jones, Lori Dedeyan, Helice Koffler, and Katy Rawdon. Thank you for your leadership, commitment, and generosity. I would also like to recognize the ex-officio members, Sue Luftschein, Dan Michelson, and Elizabeth Wilkinson, who contributed to conversations that advanced the work of the committee. Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to all the committee members—thank you for your flexibility, camaraderie, and thoughtful decision-making as we navigated the many unexpected changes that came our way.

Cyndi



Custom form used while surveying SCUA collections for Indigenous materials. See "Protocols" on next page.

PROTOCOLS FOR NATIVE AMERICAN ARCHIVAL MATERIAL STEP ONE: A COLLECTIONS SURVEY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, RENO

Jessica Maddox & Kimberly Andersen

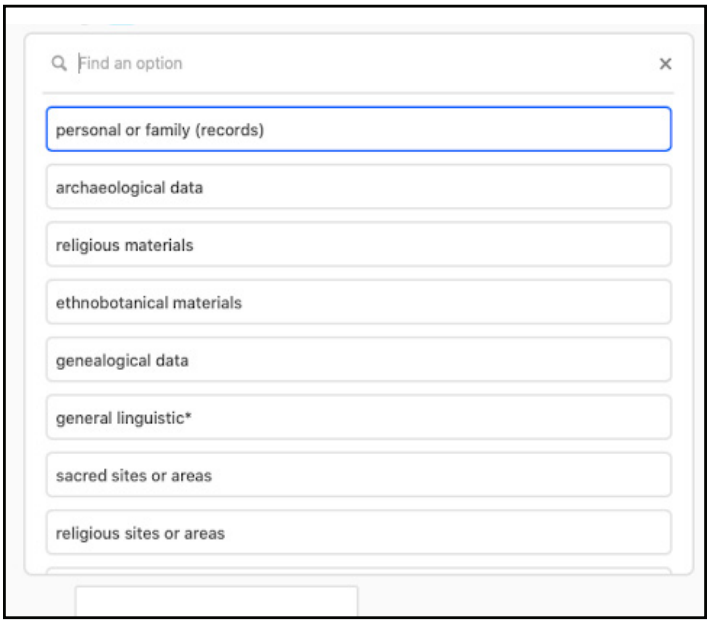
In February 2019, the Special Collections and University Archives Department (SCUA) at the University of Nevada, Reno began a multi-year project to bring our collections into alignment with the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials (PNAAM), endorsed by the Society of American Archivists in August 2018. PNAAM is a set of best practices intended to be used by non-tribal organizations for culturally responsible care of American Indian archival material (Northern Arizona University). For us, this means working with tribal cultural offices in order to better steward culturally sensitive materials held by SCUA. This project, which will take place over at least the next five years, consists of a collection survey, working with tribal cultural offices. It will hopefully culminate in grant partnerships with regional tribes to work on identifying sensitive material and future stewardship needs.

The history of SCUA's collecting of Indigenous-related materials began in the 1970s. These materials consisted of not only books on Indigenous subjects, but also manuscript collections primarily from anthropologists involved in the study of Nevada's tribes, including the Northern Paiute, Western Shoshone, and Wašiw (Washo). Some of these anthropological collections are among our highest used collections, but also contain potentially culturally sensitive information. Material types represented in these collections are primary language-based materials, ethnobotanical information, and oral history recordings and transcripts.

The first step was to undertake a survey of manuscript and archive collections in SCUA. The survey group, consisting of two non-tribal affiliated archivists and one with tribal connections, completed the survey in August 2019. To conduct the survey, we used a tool that allowed us to record various types of information while also working synchronously. We selected Airtable, a customizable web-based platform, which we currently use to track projects, workflows, and as a master inventory for all non-book materials in SCUA. Our familiarity with the platform allowed us to quickly populate a new project, creating a relational database known as a "base" in Airtable. The base included multiple tables (similar to sheets in Excel) with prepopulated data, including collection numbers and titles, tribal entities, and PNAAM derived material categories. We also created a form to facilitate more efficient and consistent surveying of the collections.

When building the form, we utilized Airtable's ability to link between tables in a base (enabling what is essentially a controlled vocabulary within the survey) as well as other options like free text fields, checkboxes, and multi-select dropdowns. The survey group met to identify the terms we would use to flag collections that contained any material related to Indigenous

Peoples. Because none of the survey group are experts in what is considered sensitive material, we chose to flag any material related to Indigenous Peoples. This allowed us to create a comprehensive list to generate reports of holdings for individual tribes. To complete the survey, we primarily relied on descriptive data in our public instance of ArchivesSpace, which is our system of record in SCUA. Although ArchivesSpace contains nearly all our finding aids, there is also legacy data for unprocessed collections in Word guides that have not yet been transferred into ArchivesSpace. These are generally box and folder inventories created to facilitate processing at a future date. We used both these online (public) and offline (internal) finding aids to search for the designated terms.



Using Airtable to survey materials.

As we completed the search of the over 3,400 collections, we found that we had to massage our search parameters in order to avoid false positives. We found that over time, the Washiw people had been described under several different spellings, including Washoe. Washoe is also the name of the county in which Reno is located and is a very common term within our material. This overlap in name usage forced us to be creative in how we flagged the collections for Indigenous materials. We did not want to lose data indicating that we had found the term Washoe in the collection, so we elected to mark that the term was found but also state that the collection does not include tribal material.

With the data that we collected during the survey we plan to reach out to the over 70 tribal entities we identified to notify them that we have archival materials related to their communities. This is just one of the many future steps in this project. Additionally, we identified some collections where, even without cultural expertise, we can update the wording used in the descriptive notes (biographical, scope and content) to use less biased language.

An upcoming article will discuss this project and results in greater detail.

Jessica Maddox and Kimberly Anderson are the Collection Management Archivist and Director of Special Collections, respectively, at the University of Nevada, Reno.

Images from UNR Digital Special Collections

MORE THAN METADATA: REPARATIVE WORK AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA'S SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Whitney Buccicone, Gayle Cooper & Elizabeth Wilknson

Introduction

At the University of Virginia (UVA), the Albert H. and Shirley Small Special Collections boasts a collection that contains more than 16 million manuscripts and archival records, books, audiovisual materials, photographs, and more. While we pride ourselves on our collections, we recognize that they reflect only a portion of the world in which we live. Bearing this in mind, the Technical Services staff at Small formulated a plan centering reparative work and the amplification of all marginalized voices. We plan to create and enhance all collections metadata to raise hidden voices and reflect the true diversity of this material—this is core to the work that we do. Detailed below are the steps we plan to take.

Defining reparative work

Here at UVA, inspiration came to us when we read Lae'l Hughes-Watkins' article, "Moving toward a reparative archive" (2018). In it, Hughes-Watkins writes:

> Archives that are rooted in biases and oppression that maintain the subjugation of vulnerable communities cannot be transformed, they can never morph into justice oriented social assets, but can mainstream archives repair their praxis of suppression? Is it conceivable that traditional archives might find a way to help mend the social wounds that have been created by the absence of records documenting lynchings, transgender narratives, the differently abled, police brutality, or black student activism and that have created an ill-formed representation of history?... the building of a reparative archive via acquisition, advocacy, and utilization can assist in decolonizing traditional archives and bringing historically oppressed voices in from the margins (Hughes-Watkins, p. 3).

With this article, Hughes-Watkins issued a challenge that we felt at every level in Technical Services, as well as Special Collections as a whole.

History

We recognize that this work is not new. At the University of Virginia, our staff have undertaken this work in different forms throughout our history. Collection guides and exhibits highlighting diverse voices have been consistently featured over the years. We also want to recognize the research and outreach work done by our Black colleagues, including Ervin Jordan, Regina Rush, Petrina Jackson and Krystal Appiah. All of this important work predated the use of the word "reparative" but aligned with what we hope to do: amplify and illuminate marginalized voices and communities in our collections.

Moving forward: next steps

Our very first step in this process was to brainstorm what needed to be done amongst Technical Services. What we knew was that reparative work should happen at every level of staffing and involve

the commitment of every member of our group. No individual can do this work alone; we must act as a team and we do so every day to ensure that we act consistently and holistically.

Below is a series of ideas that we brainstormed as a group and are in the process of implementing. Once we have done so, we will publish our more detailed plans through Small Special Collections' blog.

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- Reparative survey – not starting from zero

During the quarantine, we have created virtual projects for our student workers by having them fill out a survey that traces certain outdated subject headings as well as language used in finding aids. From their work, we will create a report that prioritizes the most outdated finding aids for immediate correction.

- Adding notes and access points

We will provide access to information about marginalized groups and individuals through the addition of content notes, free-text notes, access points, and so on. This is a multi-phase plan that will take years to complete, but creating a workflow will allow our corrections to move quickly.

- Creating a local reparative taxonomy

Our goal is to create a local taxonomy that uses improved subject headings, rather than the outdated Library of Congress subject headings that we normally use. This work requires cross-departmental collaboration to identify alternative terminology. The first step is to identify offensive language, which involves discussions with subject liaisons, curators, and other stakeholders.

After that, we will apply new terminology in current cataloging for new acquisitions and replace outdated subject headings in existing catalog records, using batch processes where possible. We will identify and replace demeaning language with new terms in descriptive notes in finding aids through keyword searches and the manual update of records.

- Creating warnings for offensive content found in catalog records and finding aids

We plan on including some descriptive language in both catalog records and finding aids that lets the user know that the material they will be requesting or viewing contains offensive and outdated terminology. This will also link to a blog post that discusses our larger collection development policies.

- Involving patrons through feedback surveys

A part of our work with central technical services will be the involvement of a larger audience that will tell us whether or not we are on the right track. The details of this have not been worked out yet but we hope to get feedback in the coming months.

- Statistics

Lastly, we will keep track of these changes, so that we can report progress quantitatively to all stakeholders. In tracking statistics of the changes we make in both finding aids and catalog records, we can demonstrate our commitment to this work through solid numbers.

Conclusion

We are at the beginning of what is a career— and lifelong commitment to this important work. As our plans progress, we will be adapting to new findings as well as feedback from the communities that we serve. Communication is key in this work and we look forward to learning how we can improve.

Bibliography and suggested reading

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Harrison-Small Research Center, University of Virginia. Image: Whitney Buccicone.

TRANSCRIBING PROBATE RECORDS TO SUPPORT AFRICAN AMERICAN GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH

Rulinda Price

The Greenville County Library System (GCLS) was the first public library in South Carolina to provide service to African American citizens. Founded in 1921 as a segregated system, it was integrated in 1960. As part of our library system's continued service to the African American community, indexes have been developed which include the names of enslaved persons in South Carolina probate records before the abolition of slavery. These finding aids assist researchers as they navigate the rich store of historical and genealogical records housed in our archives.

Records for persons of African American ancestry in former slave-holding states are extremely difficult to find. The United States did not include and name all Americans until the decennial census in 1870. Until 1850, only the heads of households were specifically named; all other household members were counted by tally mark. This changed in 1850 when all free persons in the US were listed by name. Slave Schedules were also introduced at that time in which enslaved persons were tallied by mark; the individuals' names were not generally recorded. Therefore, it wasn't until 1870, five years after slavery was abolished in the US, that formerly enslaved individuals began to be recorded *by name* in the US census.

Enslaved persons generated no tax or land records, and since they were generally barred from owning any form of property, they had no possessions to account for in probate courts. However, knowing how valuable these people were to the nineteenth century economy, it seemed logical that records documenting their existence and/or names had to exist in some form. Since they were treated as property, it oc-

Slave's Name	Description	Owner	New Owner	Year Bought	Value/Sale Price	Record Location
unnamed	Vilet's child	Blassingame, Elizabeth	Duncan, R.B.	1834	with Vilet	apt 1, file 57
Alfred	negro boy	Blassingame, Elizabeth		1834	$323.00	apt 1, file 57
Hannah	negro girl	Blassingame, Elizabeth	Sloan, J.M.	1834	$402.00	apt 1, file 57
Louiza	negro girl	Blassingame, Elizabeth		1834	$361.00	apt 1, file 57
Allen	negro boy	Blassingame, Elizabeth		1834	$405.00	apt 1, file 57
Charles	negro boy	Blassingame, Elizabeth		1834	$509.00	apt 1, file 57
Isaac	negro fellow	Blassingame, Gen. John	Sloan, Tho. M.	1824	$540.00	apt 1, file 27
Lucy	Isaac's wife	Blassingame, Gen. John	Sloan, Tho. M.	1824	with Isaac	apt 1, file 27
Matt	negro fellow	Blassingame, Gen. John	Sloan, Tho. M.	1824	$604.00	apt 1, file 27
Silva	girl	Blassingame, Gen. John	Sloan, Tho. M.	1824	$300.00	apt 1, file 27
Squire	negro man	Blassingame, Gen. John	Townes, Sam	1824	$300.00	apt 1, file 27
Kittey	negro wench	Blassingame, Gen. John	Gibson, Thos.	1824	$301.00	apt 1, file 27
Jacob	negro man	Blassingame, Gen. John	Crowder, A.W.	1824	$249.00	apt 1, file 27
Flora	negro girl	Blassingame, Gen. John	Blassingame, J. W.	1824	$400.00	apt 1, file 27
Sarah	negro girl	Blassingame, Gen. John	Blassingame, J. W.	1824	$200.00	apt 1, file 27
Mariah	negro girl	Blassingame, Gen. John	Roberson, Doc.	1824	$350.00	apt 1, file 27
Harry	negro boy	Blassingame, Gen. John	Blassingame, J. W.	1824	$400.00	apt 1, file 27
Will	negro boy	Blassingame, Gen. John	Blassingame, E. B.	1824	$300.00	apt 1, file 27
Prince	negro boy	Blassingame, Gen. John	Blassingame, J. W.	1824	$400.00	apt 1, file 27
Peter	negro fellow	Blassingame, Gen. John	Roberson, Doc.	1824	$500.00	apt 1, file 27
Silva	negro girl	Blassingame, Gen. John		1824	$200.00	apt 1, file 27

A page from the Greenville County index. Language currently reflects usage in historical records.

curred to the librarian that enslaved persons would probably be listed as "possessions" in nineteenth century probate records.

Land and enslaved persons were among their enslavers' most valuable "possessions"; therefore, enslaved persons were listed in the inventories and sale bills associated with probate records, usually by name and very often in family groups. Enslaved persons were often inherited and usually only sold when the deceased enslaver was in serious debt; if wills are found in the estate records, they constitute a third document of interest that can be used to find named individuals.

The GCLS transcribed information found in the library's holdings of microfilmed Upstate South Carolina county probate records filed after 1787 to create online indexes that support African American genealogical research. Although the practice of legal slavery was abolished in 1865, the administration of the estates of individuals who died before that date sometimes required legal accounting by the executors for losses incurred by the estate. Enslaved persons are sometimes mentioned by name in these accounts, so it is useful to look at the records for a few years after 1865, as in the case of Laurens County, where the dates covered are 1800 to 1868. The indexes are accessible in print in the GCLS South Carolina Room collection and as searchable PDF files in our library system's digital collection. The indexes are available online at https://cdm17168.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p17168coll67.

The filing systems for the counties' probate records varied considerably. To account for this, each index our library produced includes a "Record Location" column, which refers to the particular filing system used by each individual county and indicates where to look in the microfilm record for additional information. The value column is included because the price often gives clues to the age and skill level of the individuals being bought and sold. Unnamed individuals, usually children, are included only when they are listed in the inventories with a named individual.

The indexes have proven to be extremely useful to those of African American ancestry who have traced their ancestors on the United States Census to the upper counties of South Carolina. Enslaved individuals lacked surnames, which leads to another difficulty in researching their ancestries. It was common for Freedmen to adopt the surnames of their last "owners", but this was not by any means a consistent practice. For this reason, we included all named individuals who were recorded as purchasers in sale bills found in the estate records, as well as those who inherited them as indicated in will documents.

This indexing project is ongoing as we expand to probate records of other nearby counties. Volunteers have been invaluable to us in this effort, spending many hours searching records and documenting all mention of enslaved persons found in inventories, wills, and sale bills. Our efforts address a critical need since there are no other documents that provide such a wealth of information about enslaved individuals in American history.

Rulinda Price is a Reference Librarian at the Hughes Main Library, Greenville County Library System.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Coker Award Recipient Announced

As a member of the Coker Award Committee, it gives me great pleasure to share that the 2020 recipient of SAA's C.F.W. Coker Award is Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia (A4BLiP). A4BLiP describes the group as "a loose association of archivists, librarians, and allied professionals in the Philadelphia area responding to the issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement." One of its working groups, the Anti-Racist Description Working Group, published "Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia Anti-Racist Description Resources" in 2019. As described in the Introduction, the working group "compiled research and case studies created by archivists across the field into a set of best practice recommendations for an anti-oppressive approach to creating and remediating archival description." The award recognizes A4BLiP for its innovative and inspirational contributions to archival description. Their resources represent a model for archival description and have already had an impact on national descriptive practice. A4BLiP's method of developing the resources was also admirable. Rather than asking Black community members to donate their time to the project, A4BLiP raised funds to compensate Black colleagues who served as reviewers for the resources and recommendations. Congratulations to all who contributed to the efforts of A4BLiP! And thank you for advancing descriptive practice across the archival profession.

Cyndi Shein

Call for Inclusive Description Resources

The Description Section continues to welcome contributions to its Description Documentation Portal, located on the section's microsite. This portal hosts documentation related to archival description in a broad sense, ranging from traditional processing manuals to local style guides and guidelines specifically created for the description of distinct formats. In particular, the Section would like to invite submissions to the newly created Inclusive Description section of the Portal. This is an evolving list of resources for archivists seeking guidance on how to describe collections in a more inclusive way. It is the hope of the Description Section that providing a centralized list of these resources will assist archivists in remediating and avoiding language which harms BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), LGBTQIA+ people, people with disabilities, working class people, and other marginalized groups of people.

To submit documentation, please email the section's Web Liaison, Scott Kirycki, at skirycki@nd.edu. Please feel free to share this announcement with others. We look forward to seeing your contributions!

Send newsletter submissions to Lori Dedeyan at Ldedeyan@mikekelleyfoundation.org