

“The soul of the National Archives”: Sara Dunlap Jackson, 1919-1991

Alex H. Poole

Society of American Archivists Research Forum

July 23, 2025



DREXEL UNIVERSITY

College of

Computing & Informatics

Chronology

- Born 1919 (Columbia, SC); died 1991 (Washington, D.C.)
 - Mixed race; adopted by AME minister C.W. Dunlap
- Growing up Jim Crow
- B.T. Washington High School:
 - Friendliest; most congenial; best complexion; best dancer
 - "you have been to me like a rare pearl the like of which no one has ever found but me. You have such pleasing personalities and a disposition that will win for you many more real friends" (School-Day Memories of Sara Dunlap, 1938)
- Johnson C. Smith University
 - Liberal education
 - Sociology, Psychology, and History (1943)
- Teaching stint (1942)
- World War II and Washington, D.C.
 - National Archives (1944)
 - "I was walking down the street and passed the Archives and I said, 'Hm. Let me try in here.' I had been there to visit and knew a little about it, not much. They were very glad because they said people didn't walk in off the street and ask for jobs in those days, and because I had been a clerk with the Office of Chief of Finance they thought I knew something about military history, so they were willing to take me" (Jackson, 1982)
 - Government employment and Black professional class
 - Assistant Clerk: "Clerical, combing and securing information from records, answering and making phone calls, mail and control desk"
 - No supervisory responsibilities (1944)
- Smattering of graduate school (Catholic and American Universities)
- Military Records Division; Veterans Branch; NHPRC
- Joins Society of American Archivists (1952)
 - Second Black woman
- Honorary doctorate, University of Toledo, 1976
- Retired 1990



Moorland-Spingarn Research
Center

The Long Black Freedom Struggle

- Long Freedom Struggle
 - Direct action/ “classic” phase (ca. 1954-1965)
 - Long Freedom Struggle from Emancipation (1863) (Tuck, 2011)
 - Expand chronology
 - Activism beyond direct action strategies (marches, sit-ins, and civil disobedience)
 - Black professional class’s role in long Freedom Struggle
 - *Intellectual* Freedom Struggle!
- Respectability
 - Social/cultural conservatism
 - Victorian Protestant norms
 - Nuclear family, patriarchal authority, education, work ethic, manners, temperance, refinement, cleanliness, politeness, modesty, restraint, frugality, piety, sexual continence, bourgeois morality, self-help, commitment to achievement and self-improvement
- Uplift
 - “When and where I enter, the whole race enters with me” (Cooper)
- Liberalism (Behnken, 2017)
 - Inclusion and integration politically, economically, socially, and culturally
 - Racism, discrimination, and segregation bely American ideals/ traditions
 - Activism:
 - Constitutionally-guaranteed democratic rights and responsibilities
 - Reform through federal and local government to effect reform
 - Equal opportunity access to quality education, jobs, and housing
 - Appreciate historical and contemporary accomplishments and rebut stereotypes
 - Improve race relations through communication, cooperation, and elimination of racism



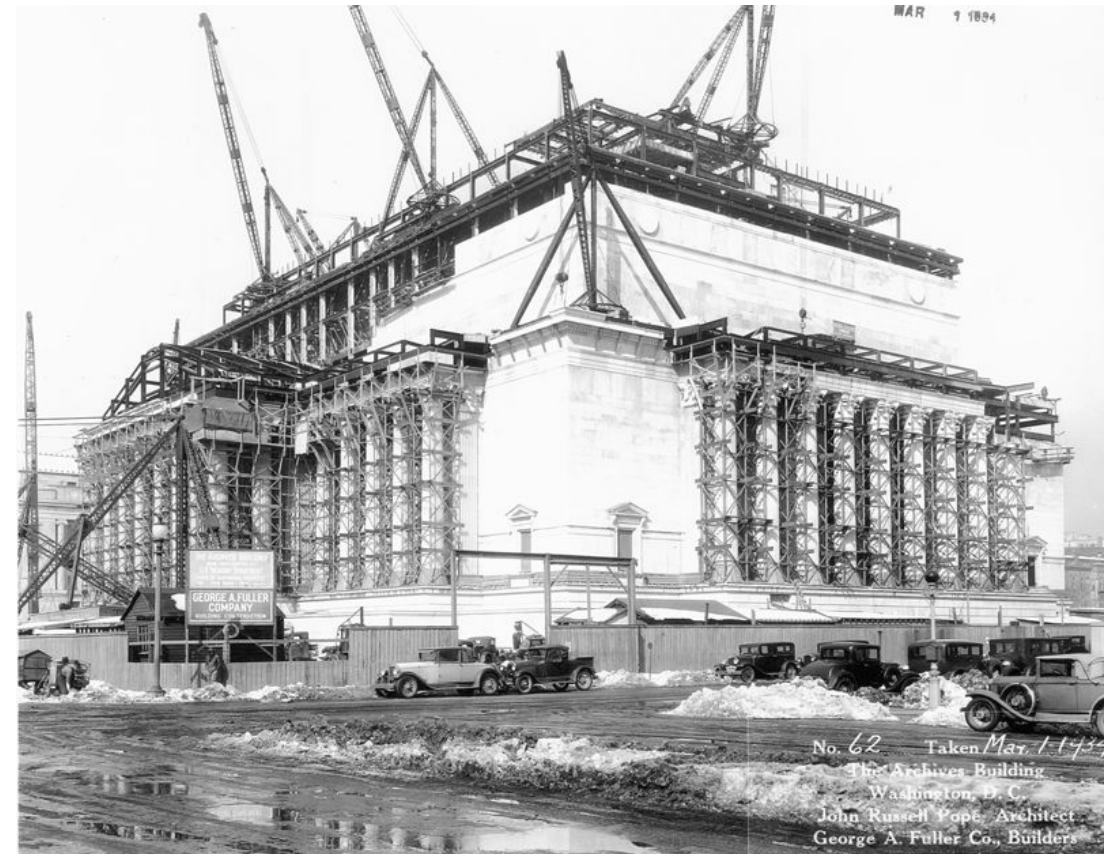
Moorland-Spingarn Research
Center

Black intellectual history

- Many gaps in Black intellectual history (Blain et al., 2018)
- No single Black intellectual tradition prevails
- But common commitments
 - Humanity
 - Equality
 - Inclusivity and integration (Alridge et al., 2021; Banner-Haley, 2010; Blain et al., 2018; Marable, 2000)
- Expand conventional definitions of intellectual history and of who qualifies as an “intellectual”
 - Knowledge production (e.g., beyond the scholarly monograph)
 - Sites of production (e.g., outside of the academy) (Bay et al., 2015; Blain et al., 2018; Byrd et al., 2022; Cooper, 2017)

(In)visible labor and research infrastructure

- The human factor in archival work
 - “Finding aids can never take the place of a professional staff, however, for it is only the trained archivist, with his specialized knowledge, who can provide that **cross-sectional view, that synthesis of information** that is essential for rendering the kind of reference service the National Archives is increasingly called upon to give” (Buck, 1946, p. 5)
- Job responsibilities
 - “a good working knowledge of the **organization and functions** of the record creating agencies and of the content of the records in the custody of the section; a working knowledge of American **history**; a working knowledge of established archival **policies and procedures**; and an ability to be **diplomatic** and effective on bringing to the aid of professional personnel of the section her superior **practical** knowledge of the records acquired in much longer **experience** with them” (job description, 1954).
 - “Her contacts are **varied**, ranging typically from a scholar doing advanced research to a private citizen seeking an answer to a question about some well-known event of American history such as the Custer Massacre” (job description, 1954).
 - “Only as one is fully familiar with the **administrative history and practices** of the agencies that produced the records can he or she serve them properly, drawing attention to interrelated series, groups, and subject areas, helping to eliminate repetitive matter, and **keep researchers from going astray in the labyrinth of document containers, wasting time, and missing essential information**” (position description, ca. 1963).



National Archives

Writing history

- Documents
 - Evidence underpinning historical analysis and narrative (Berkhofer, 2008)
 - Late 19th century professionalization of the historical discipline
 - “Scientific” history (Jimerson, 2009; Novick, 1988; O’Toole & Cox, 2006; Townsend, 2013)
 - Documentary control tantamount to controlling historical truth (Blouin & Rosenberg, 2011).
 - “For want of documents the history of immense periods in the past of humanity is destined to remain for ever unknown. For there is no substitute for documents: **no documents, no history**” (Langlois & Seignobos, 1904, p. 20).
- “The historian, when he steps into the great building which houses the National Archives, in such vast profusion, is in a situation so intriguing and so perplexing that his plight immediately suggests that of **Alice in her famous Wonderland**” (Nichols, 1940, p. 149).
- “My interest in Southern history and, as they call it now, Black history came there with me. Coming from South Carolina it seems to me it’s only natural that these would be special interests for me” (Jackson, 1982)
 - “I know as many people in Western history as I do in Southern history. I hate to admit it. More than I know in Afro-American history” (Jackson, 1982).



Intellectual production

- Publications

- Preliminary checklist of the Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1872
 - “effecting systematic control over all extant records of the agency” (McConnell, 1947, p. 206).
 - “a valuable research tool” (McConnell, 1947, p. 206).
- “Letters of Phillis Wheatley and Susanna Wheatley” (*Journal of Negro History*, 1972)
- Reviews (*American Archivist*)
 - Research infrastructure
 - Annual Report, Historical Commission of South Carolina
 - Administrative Report of the Central Records Office, Pakistan
 - Annual Report of the Archives Office, Mauritius
 - Union List of Microfilms, Philadelphia Bibliographical Center and Union Library Catalogue
 - Your State’s Records: Historical Commission of South Carolina
 - Annual Report of the Archive’s Department, Mauritius
 - Administrative Report of the Government Archivists, Ceylon
 - Annual Report of the Archivists of the Hall of Records, State of Maryland

- Reviews (cont.)

- Books (*American Archivist*)
 - *The First Half-Century: North Carolina Department of Archives and History Record of Achievement 1903-1953* (1955)
 - Brewer, *Confederate Negro: Virginia’s Craftsmen and Military Laborers, 1816-1865* (1970)
 - *Correspondence of W.E.B. DuBois, v. 1, Selections 1877-1934* (1974)
 - Bruns, *Am I Not a Man and a Brother: The Antislavery Crusade of Revolutionary America, 1688-1788* (1978)

- Introductions

- Wilson, *The Black Phalanx* (1968)
- Botume, *First Among the Contrabands* (1968)
- *Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of South Carolina, v. 1* (1968)
- Clark, *Black Brigade of Cincinnati* (1969)
- Flipper, *Colored Cadet at West Point* (1969)
- Cashin, *Under Fire with the Tenth Cavalry* (1969)

Professional successes

- “She made herself indispensable. Ferreting out pertinent but obscure documents became her specialty” (El Bashir, 1997, p. 4).
- “I wish to commend most highly the services of Mrs. Sara D. Jackson who assembled, in most admirable fashion, the materials which I sought—and who unearthed numerous materials which we did not know existed. It was a fine job and one that was completely and graciously done.” (Monaghan, 1955)



Moorland-Spingarn Research
Center

Race and the National Archives

- Few fellow professionals (Pinkett)
- Racism
 - “I feel, yes. Proving it is another story. When I went there, they said that I was qualified to be an archivist as far as **education** was concerned, but I had not had **experience**; and by the time I got the experience, then I did not have enough education” (Jackson, 1982).
 - “it must have been a little **embarrassing** to the Archives to have me there, an archives technician, being recognized the way that I was in people’s books, dissertations, you know, and still nothing was done. And then after the University of Toledo gave me that honorary degree, that’s when something was really done. I think part of it was somebody having enough nerve or strength to say ‘she should have it and let’s do it’” (Jackson, 1982).
 - “These are things it’s very hard to explain or describe to somebody, and if I said it was **prejudice**, then they would point out to me people around me who had come in as archivists, **people of my race, and who had done well**. Too, I don’t think I had anybody really pushing me on the inside. They said they liked me, but **pushing**, or being in somebody’s **clique**, is two different things, and that’s what you really needed around there” (Jackson, 1982).

Legacy

- “You are a **mother** to all young NARS archivists; for that and for just being yourself, we love you” (Alsobrook, 1979).
- “a dramatic example of the **unsung heroine** who has meant so much to so many scholars—the young as well as the old, the distinguished as well as the ordinary” (Franklin, 1976).
- “I wish to congratulate you on the very great honor that you have received with Ira Berlin’s dedication to you of his recently published documentary history, *Freedom, Series II, the Black Military Experience*. To my knowledge, you are the **only** NARS staff member, who has received such an honor. It is a very fitting tribute to your many years of valuable assistance to archival researchers” (Pinkett, 1983).
- “a **giant** among us” (Berlin, 1997)



Moorland-Spingarn Research
Center