

Organizing and Preserving Family and Religious Records: A Step-by-Step Guide

Nooma Monika Rhue. Preserve Pro, 2010.

Preserving Your Records: An Online Training Workshop

Nooma Monika Rhue. www.preserveproinc.net/moodle (accessed March 19, 2011).

Nooma Monika Rhue of Preserve Pro creatively uses print and electronic media to develop a training course aimed at African Americans interested in preserving their family and church records. Designed for eight-week study, “Preserving Your Records: An Archival Training Workshop” is an online course presented in power point with .pdf downloads available. Rhue asks students to spend one week studying the following topics: the importance of records, the purpose of archives, appraisal, arrangement, description, and preservation. She devises interactive exercises to reinforce lessons, takes advantage of web 2.0 by establishing a blog for students and encourages direct contact with her via email. Available in pdf and printed formats, the companion book *Organizing and Preserving Family and Religious Records: A Step-by-Step Guide*, expands upon the content provided in the online course by including chapters on the donation of records and resources for further exploration.

Rhue hopes to convince African Americans to preserve their family and church records. She passionately argues that African Americans underestimate the value of records created by their ancestors and that the simple archival methods described in her course are the key to any preservation program. She further motivates her audience by highlighting important manuscripts collections. Rhue’s course superficially addresses problems intrinsic to African American collections. For example, she does not discuss how archivists should preserve oral histories, an important omission given the importance of oral traditions to African Americans.

For a primer aimed at the general public, brevity is a virtue as most find reading long texts a chore unless it obscures key concepts. Rhue describes the most basic archival concepts in a concise fashion but falls into the trap of neglecting some basic concepts. Provenance is so briefly described within a three-page chapter on the “five levels of arrangement” that a student could easily ignore it. She does not use the concept in other chapters such as the definition and use of historical records. She also does not describe the intellectual challenge of reviewing a set of records to determine its provenance as an important first step in arranging a collection. Her exercises on arrangement then do not prepare beginners for the difficult decisions routinely made by archivists.

This neglect of the concept of provenance is a symptom of a more serious problem. Appraisal and selection are given little notice in this work. At best, she prepares her students to receive a finite set of records to arrange and describe. Family archivists should expect to collect vital records, photographs, oral testimony and artifacts. Since their central task is the documentation of their family, their selection criteria will differ

markedly from the work of religious archivists who need to balance institutional obligations, such as the privacy of church members, with the creation of a historical record.

Rhue's course is an impassioned call for African Americans to protect their historical record. It may provide a comfortable entry point for many beginning archivists. Unfortunately, it glosses over so many fundamental concepts that its usefulness is limited.

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