

Developing Methods to Address Systemic Collection Bias

DAKOTA COTTON
Athens State University

LAKEN SMITH
University of Alabama

Background

This research and advocacy process began with Laken Smith conducting her University of Alabama MLIS internship at the Athens State University Archives with archivist Dakota Cotton. Both Smith and Cotton found that, although from substantially different institutional and experiential backgrounds, they were encountering similar evidence of the impact of systemic white supremacy in their respective archival and historic communities. This realization led to a more intensive investigation into the nature of this issue in their communities and ultimately how these issues of bias have been addressed within the field of archives and historical record keeping. Informed by existing research in the field conducted by a range of professionals including Caswell, Dunbar, Punzalan, and others- Smith and Cotton have worked to apply qualitative, community-driven research on the issue of regional white supremacy in order to instigate inclusive local practices.

Users and archivists alike are adversely affected by collection biases. In the South, where the environment purposefully reflects a legacy of white supremacy, it is imperative to rectify these biases. Smith, as an African American, female, Southern individual, attesting to the social importance of equitable and unbiased archival practices is of personal, professional, and social benefit. The Archival Education and Research Institute has given Smith an opportunity to study collection bias within the chief repository in her home town of Pulaski, Tennessee. Since the acceptance of her project proposal in September, she has focused mainly on identifying the manifestations of collection bias within her institution through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

Methodology

Institution: Athens State University

In the institutional archives at Athens State University, the first effort to look at this problem was to conduct an initial environmental scan to try and identify and better understand the potential scope of collection gaps and the implications of those missing materials. The archivist put in place procedures to address uncovered collection issues including restructuring policies at the archives department level and attempting to inform upon, if not enforce, state-mandated permanent record retention schedules at the institutional level. Daily activities and collections policies in the archive have facilitated efforts to actively pursue marginalized histories and accompany this work with long term archival mission and policy adjustments.

At the overarching institutional level, the archives is attempting to leverage existing strategic planning goals that emphasize the importance of a diverse campus and student body. Efforts have been made to draw together the connection between histories of exclusion and segregation to current underrepresentation of people of color in the student body. Procedures have been implemented with the goal of instigating the institution to take diversity overtures to the next level and demonstrate institutional



investment in local communities of color. These steps include conducting research into under-explored areas and making our history available for public consumption. A key effort was the implementation of an advisory council to the archives, a committee called the Archives Equity Initiative. The goal of which is to provide local people and campus members the opportunity not just to learn what the archive is about – but to redefine the archive as a space that is open to them, that listens and learns from their experiences, and prioritizes their concerns.

Efforts have been made to address physical public spaces that exhibit the same biases that inhabit our historic collections and impact the users of our archives. More than often in our region there are no markings or acknowledgement that structures were built by enslaved people or that landowners and other powerful figures instigated, allowed, or benefited from racist violence and terrorism.

The methods employed to address these instances have been to: add contextual history that tells a more comprehensive story and to open up a significant, transparent, and inclusive dialogue about representation within historical records. Other methods include conducting local outreach, participating in community programs, and making the campus and other public spaces reflective of varied historical perspectives.

These structural policy changes, research, and outreach efforts are intended to be clearly documented and made publicly available online. This helps with making our goals as transparent and available as possible, while also hopefully drawing more people into the fold and inviting the conversation necessary to make lasting impacts.

Institution: Giles County Historical Society

Goals:

1. To understand the impact of the lack of African-American representation in access and use of Giles County Historical Society's local history collections.
2. To determine appropriate ways to create and reflect equitability in collection policies and practices, outreach efforts, and other efforts

Actions:

1. Gather preliminary information from the Historical Society regarding collection practices and methods
2. Administer surveys to collection users and record their personal accounts of record use
3. Interview key users to learn their thoughts about the lack of representation, as well as how this affects their ability to use the archives
4. Access and calculate the number of African American records that the Giles County Historical Society holds.

Findings

Institution: Athens State University

This is an ongoing and long term process of making structural changes at the daily, departmental, and institutional level to address systemic and regionally specific bias. While we have just begun to start implementing changes, there has been noted progress. Gaps and silences in the historic collections were successfully identified, including, but not limited to administrative collections, records of people of color, legal documents and other materials related to time periods of historical significance in the institution's history. The advisory committee to the Athens State Archives, the Archives Equity Initiative, received

positive feedback and participation from campus faculty, staff, and community members. This has been a success in terms of reestablishing relationships and building trust between the community and the institutional archive. Participants and contributors to the Archives Equity Initiative expressed support for restructuring archival policies, addressing systemic issues, and encouraging collaborative community outreach initiatives that expand beyond the archives’ confines. These collaborative efforts have included the development of articles and publications to begin increasing representation of marginalized histories, the planning of displays to improve and expand the information available in public spaces, and the planning of campus wide educational events including a call to artists and a film screening.

These encouraging successes have allowed the institutional archives to move forward despite some push back. Some of these efforts received negative responses for the use of “white supremacy” and its specificity in addressing regional issues. While use of the term “white supremacy” was considered factual and encouraged by some stakeholders, others found it inflammatory. These types of socio-political and regionally embedded discussions are necessary, but do represent an ongoing low-level, but active, level of resistance.

Institution: Giles County Historical Society

Each of these actions provided insight into the historical society as a local social and democratic organization.

Most of my findings stem from gathering preliminary information from the historical society and accessing and calculating of African-American records that the Giles County Historical Society holds.

	Findings	Issues
Gathering of preliminary information from the historical society.	Church Record Collection, Oral History, Obituaries, Reference book, Local History Books, Microfilm, Photographs, Administrative Forms (i.e. constitution and bylaws), Informal conversations with other historical society members	
Administer surveys to users and recording their personal accounts of use.		Low use of resources, little African American presence/use.
Interview key users to learn opinion on the lack of representation & the impact on their ability to use the archives		IRB consent needed.
Access and calculate African American holdings at the Giles County Historical Society	The microfilm collection is largely composed of local newspapers, deeds, and vital records. None of these, save 7 rolls of microfilm , can be considered significant to black history in Giles County.	

	Community compiled “Family Files” maintained by the historical society for public access. Within my research parameters, this collection is amalgamated.	
	8 out of 234 books are considered significant to black history according to my research parameters. This is roughly 1.8% of the Giles County manuscript collection.	

Next Steps

Institution: Athens State University

This report and the two presentations which resulted at the national and regional level have built momentum which must be maintained through constant and concerted efforts. The archives and its allies must continue to push for multi-faceted, collaborative, and inclusive approaches to expanding the scope of our historic record and incrementally addressing the pervasiveness of white supremacy. Cotton, as a white professional archivist from outside of the region is attempting to do more work to make herself increasingly available to listen and learn from the communities her institution has failed to represent in the past. Anna Robinson Sweet in the Spring/Summer 2018 *American Archivist* states: “The discourse within our field tells us that, for as long as they have existed, archives have been operating in the service of power. But by embracing our role as activists, we have the opportunity to turn this very evidence against the structures of power, which has in the United States been rooted in white supremacy (36).” In Cotton’s brief experience in the field of archives, the truth of this statement has been demonstrated time and time again in daily work as well as manifested in the broader professional community. The most functional daily actions she can take is to leverage and mobilize her privilege to push towards incremental, but hopefully meaningful, change in my department and institution. In this case, as a lone archivist, it is necessary to lead by example to the extent she is capable and encourage disruption of the regional status quo in terms of historic representation.

Institution: Giles County Historical Society

The data gathering process of this project is not complete. Furthermore, due to the findings and issues listed above, Smith’s research plans have been altered. Nevertheless, her former goals will remain a priority as she goes on to her next steps. These include:

- CITI Training and IRB approval
- Exploring alternative solutions for the collection and preservation of African-American records
- Identifying members or organizations within the African-American community who hold/preserve family or local history records
- Exploring options related to the development of a community archives

Social progress, by definition, is not an individual undertaking. Although there has been some resistance and frustration from historical society members, this work has encouraged other members to help fill in the gaps. At present, one member has begun digitizing all of the Historical Society Bulletins from 1978 to present date. Articles significant to black history have been denoted. Another member reassessed the

Historical Society's space, moving an antique confederate flag away from the museum entrance and into a more contextually appropriate area.

As this project moves forward, the goal is to illuminate systemic problems and possibly explore establishing a community archive. In the article, "To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise; community archives and the Importance of representation", Michelle Caswell, et al, present community archives as a way to support recording and preserving underrepresented narratives. They write that "archives contain records which in addition to having informational value, also demonstrate evidence of actions taken (9)." Over time, individual, societal, and institutional attitudes may shift, allowing stronger more aggressive action and reconciliation between mainstream and community archives. Conducting this research will hopefully convey the message that systemic racism and years of oppression and segregation has stymied equitable, conciliatory resources, institutions, and attitudes within archives.

Resources:

1. Caswell, Michelle. "Not Just Between Us: A Riposte to Mark Greene." *UCLA*. (2016).
<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5jj436mh>
2. Caswell, Michelle and Ricardo Punzalan. "Critical Directions for Archival Approaches to Social Justice." *The Library Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (2016).
3. Caswell, Michelle, et al. "'To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise': community archives and the importance of representation." *Archives and Records* 38, no. 1 (2017): 5-26.

4. De la Peña, Carolyn. "The History of Technology, the Resistance of Archives, and the Whiteness of Race." *Technology and Culture* 51, no. 4 (2010): 919–937. www.jstor.org/stable/40928032.
5. Dunbar, Anthony W. "Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse: Getting the Conversation Started." *Archival Science* 6, (2006): 109-129.
6. Perkins, Douglas D. "Speaking Truth to Power: Empowerment Ideology as Social Intervention and Policy." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 23, no. 5 (1995): 765- 794.
7. Poole, Alex H. "The Strange Career of Jim Crow Archive: Race, Space, and History in the Mid-Twentieth-Century American South." *The American Archivist* 77, no. 1 (2014): 23-63.
8. Ramirez, Mario. "Being Assumed Not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative." *The American Archivist* 78, no. 2 (2015): 339-356.
9. Robinson-Sweet, Anna. "Truth and Reconciliation: Archivists as Reparations Activists." *The American Archivist* 81, no. 1 (2018): 23-37.
10. Solnit, Rebecca. "Silence and powerlessness go hand in hand – women’s voices must be heard." *The Guardian*. March, 8th, 2017.
11. Taylor, Chris. "Getting Our House in Order: Moving from Diversity to Inclusion." *The American Archivist*. Vol. 80, No. 1, 201 .p 19-29.
12. Thomas, David. *The Silence of the Archive*. Principles and Practice in Records Management and Archives. London: Facet Publishing, 2017.