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Collecting Chicago's forgotten black history

After finding treasure troves of 20th century documents in Chicago and beyond, a new project is organizing and publishing the discoveries online

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When Jacqueline Goldsby was preparing to write a book on the literary scene in black Chicago, she knew archives likely existed somewhere in the city. Tracking down sources, she discovered collections sitting in institutional storage rooms, still unpacked, and others gathering dust in family basements and attics.

She began knocking on doors around the city, asking various institutions if they needed help preserving archives. One, the Chicago Defender, steered Goldsby to an un-air-conditioned warehouse on Ogden Avenue, where she was stunned by what she found: correspondence between Defender editor John Sengstacke and President Harry S. Truman about desegregating the Army; photographs of Booker T. Washington with his family; about 100 home movies of the Sengstackes that depicted an elite black family during the 1940s.

"I'm getting goose bumps all over again when I think about it," said Goldsby, a faculty member at the University of Chicago.

Goldsby's project five years ago grew into the Uncovering New Chicago Archives Project, or UNCAP, a broader effort by the University of Chicago, the Chicago Public Library, Chicago Defender, the DuSable Museum of African American History and the South Side Community Art Center to find and organize African-American historical collections.

Last week, UNCAP launched a searchable Web site that allows the public to view listings of contents. Previously, only a handful of people would have had access to the items, such as a percussion cymbal found in Box 126 of the Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra.

It's no bigger than a dinner plate and decorated with five circles, each one filled in with astrological markings: diamonds and crosses, hearts and numbers. It's a cymbal of symbols.

Though the jazz musician was not native to this city, during his Chicago years he founded El Saturn Records on the South Side and recorded his first pivotal albums here. The cymbal — along with 145 more boxes of photographs, recordings and papers related to the jazz musician — is housed in the University of Chicago's Library's Department of Special Collections. People all over the world will be able to locate it and other important artifacts of Chicago's African-American history.

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"You can search all these collections at one time from home. Anybody can do it. It's not going to be restricted to people who have Ph.D.s or are Emmy-award-making filmmakers," said Michael Flug, retired senior archivist for the Chicago Public Library's Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection of Afro-American History and Literature. "It's open to the eighth-grade student doing a history project too."

Timuel D. Black Jr., author of "Bridges of Memory," the two-volume oral history documenting the impact of the Great Migration on Chicago history, said archives documenting the African-American experience have existed for years in various institutions throughout the city.

"The material is there; it's a matter of getting it," he said. "Black Chicago is one of the most important places not just in African-American history but American history. The president of the United States came from Chicago."

Goldsby's find in that Ogden warehouse — nearly 100 boxes containing the papers of Defender founding editor Robert Abbott and his nephew Sengstacke, who took over the newspaper after Abbot's death — was overwhelming. Recognizing that the preservation work far exceeded her initial goal of doing research for her book, she created Mapping the Stacks, a program that enlisted graduate students in relevant fields to fan out to local cultural institutions to sort and organize their collections.

Marcia Walker, a University of Chicago doctoral candidate in history, said she could not have written her dissertation without Mapping the Stacks.

Earlier in her studies, Walker had written a short paper about the Rev. Addie Wyatt, one of the highest-ranking African-American women in the labor movement. But she was not able to find enough information to go much further. While working on the archiving program at the Harsh Research Collection, she mentioned Wyatt's name to Flug.

"He took a step back, like I was an alien," Walker said. "There were boxes and boxes of her papers in the basement."

Walker spent a year and a half organizing Wyatt's personal papers.

Word spread about Goldsby's project. Eventually, Lorin Nails-Smoote called: Would Goldsby be interested in some of her stepfather's cartoon drawings? It turned out that 50 years' worth of original cartoons by Chester Commodore, the Pulitzer Prize-nominated political cartoonist for the Chicago Defender, were stashed in a storage locker in Colorado Springs, Colo.

The discoveries were exciting, but the logistics of cataloging all of the collections across various institutions required a new framework, said Alice Schreyer, director of the University of Chicago Department of Special Collections. The university won a three-year, \$617,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to help create a new approach to processing the collections.

"It's really a national challenge. The 20th century brought into every research library vast amounts of paper-based collections at a much faster pace than any of us had resources to process," said Schreyer. "We recognized that we would have to apply different levels of descriptions based on the ways researchers use collections. No one size fits all."

The other major concern that arose was compensation. About the time that Robert Sengstacke, John Sengstacke's son, was deciding what to do with his family's papers, Sotheby's announced that it would auction the private papers of Martin Luther King Jr., Goldsby said. Robert Sengstacke already had been approached by the Smithsonian Institution and the New York Public Library, but Goldsby worked to convince him that the papers should be donated to a Chicago institution.

"I said, 'Don't send them to D.C. Don't send them to New York,'" Goldsby said. "Keep them in the place where the paper did its work, where schoolchildren and journalists and the black community can access them."

The Abbott-Sengstacke Family Papers are now housed on the South Side, in the Harsh Research Collection at the Woodson Regional branch of the Chicago Public Library. But for researchers around the world, it's just a click away.

To search the collections available through UNCAP, visit uncap.lib.uchicago.edu.

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