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Promoting Historical Consciousness: The Early Archives Committee of the National Council of Negro Women

Linda J. Henry

Although black women's history has captured more attention in recent years, too little research has yet been done. Lack of documentary evidence has presented at least one obstacle. Archival repositories have too often neglected women's records while building collections about great white men; even institutions devoted to documenting black culture have often overlooked black women. Forty years ago the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) recognized that the history of black women was and would continue to be ignored—and took steps to address this problem. Their efforts to collect documents and to promote a historical awareness about black women eventually resulted in the establishment of their own repository—the National Archives for Black Women's History—with rich resources for scholars of Afro-American history, women's studies, and social history.

The NCNW, founded in 1935 by Mary McLeod Bethune and twenty-nine representatives from fourteen black women's organizations, mainly concentrated on social programs to combat racial oppression. However, only four years after the organization began, Bethune appointed an archives committee, placing an emphasis on black women's history that would influence NCNW activities throughout its history. Bethune was closely connected to two other related efforts. As president of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History from 1936 to 1950, she continued the work of its founder, Carter G. Woodson, who since 1915 had educated black Americans about the necessity of collect-

ing documents and the importance of recording their past so that it would be written correctly. Bethune was also associated with the World Center for Women's Archives (WCWA) and Mary Beard, who stressed collecting documents about women for very similar reasons: "Papers. Records. These we must have. Without documents; no history. Without history; no memory. Without memory; no greatness. Without greatness; no development among women."¹ Thus the extraordinary historical consciousness of the NCNW came both from the individual efforts of Bethune and the archives committee and from black women's awareness that their dual minority status would obscure their history unless they themselves made efforts to preserve documentation.

Dorothy Porter, chair of the original committee, brought to the NCNW ten years of experience at what is now the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University. Sue Bailey Thurman founded and served as the first editor of the *African American Woman's Journal*, published from 1940 to 1948. Other committee members included Mary Church Terrell, Elizabeth Carter Brooks, and Juanita Mitchell.² Their first project, in December 1939, was undertaken with Mary Beard and the World Center for Women's Archives, developing a display for the Washington, D.C., unit of the WCWA. Although Beard proposed the next project—gathering exhibit documents for the American Negro Exposition in Chicago in 1940—the NCNW committee secured the funds and developed the exhibit on its own. By the end of that year the WCWA was dissolved for lack of funds, but the NCNW's archives committee continued its work in seeking documentation on black women.

Porter's "Report of the Archives Committee of the National Council of Negro Women" in October 1941, reprinted here, reveals the committee's conception of its task and its policy of collecting different types of materials: published works, unpublished documents, and material artifacts.³ The document is noteworthy in that it identifies donors not only as elite black women but also as housewives and domestic workers. The committee's interest in the ordinary as well as the prominent reflects the NCNW's overall concern with issues affecting all black women. The document also reveals an interest in social history that archivists and historians did not generally address for another twenty-five years.

1. Mary Beard to Dorothy Porter, March 31, 1941, NCNW Records, Series 4, National Archives for Black Women's History, Washington, D.C. See also Anne Kimbell Relf, "The World Center for Women's Archives, 1935–1940," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4, no. 3 (Spring 1979): 597–603; and Ann J. Lane, ed., *Mary Ritter Beard: A Sourcebook* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), pp. 33–41, 210–14, for more of Beard's arguments and information about the World Center for Women's Archives.

2. Terrell, Brooks, and Bethune had all served as presidents of the National Association of Colored Women, the first national black women's organization. In 1916 the NACW began to restore the home of Frederick Douglass, displaying interest in the importance of historic preservation for blacks.

3. Reflecting the acquisitions scope, the committee had various titles during the next twenty years: Archives; Archives and Museum; and Library, Archives, and Museum.



FIG. 1.—Photograph labeled “Beginning of the Museum and Archives.” Left to right: unidentified, Mary McLeod Bethune, Jeanetta Welch Brown, Sue Bailey Thurman, and Arabella Denniston. (Source: National Archives for Black Women’s History, Washington, D.C.)

Sue Bailey Thurman campaigned tirelessly for the archives, which were for her the “single most inspiring idea of the NCNW. The dream that brought us all together was a sense of history.”⁴ Using her editorial prerogative, she made the *African American Woman's Journal* the vehicle for promoting historical awareness and seeking documentation. The first issue was dedicated to Harriet Tubman; the second issue carried the subtitle “Women’s Archives and Seminar Issue”; several articles described historical individuals or topics; and the Fall 1946 issue contained a full-page appeal to send historical materials to the archives (fig. 2). Clearly Thurman had remembered Carter Woodson’s words to her: “Write your own book. Get your material together. Have your own archives.”⁵

Other NCNW members, in addition to those on the archives committee, championed the work of documenting black history in general and black women’s history in particular. Vivian Carter Mason’s 1944 letter to Bethune illustrates that interest. Calling for black women to record their own history of the World War II period, she points out that others “have very deficient memories when it comes to us.” Her mention of “darker women in other lands” refers to NCNW programs of outreach to black women in other nations. For example, in 1940 the NCNW held a seminar with Afro-Cuban women in Cuba and was later the only black women’s organization to participate in the formation of the United Nations.

Other publications promoted the committee’s work as well. A radio script of 1946, later printed and circulated, recorded the history of Phyllis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman. It also urged that materials be retrieved from attic trunks and be sent to the NCNW’s National Archives for Negro Women’s History. In 1949, Thurman reported another typical endeavor: “I spent some time this P.M. with *Chicago Defender* and *Courier* reporters getting in a good story on the National Archives and Museum Department, encouraging readers to go into trunks in every Negro attic in the nation and find evidence of our past history.”⁶ Eight years later the NCNW solicited recipes of black historical figures, which Thurman then compiled to be published as a *Historical Cookbook of the American Negro*.

The NCNW’s historical consciousness also resulted in appeals for documents as well as plans for preserving them permanently. A 1948 report, for example, listed items that NCNW members gave to the ar-

4. Telephone interview with Thurman, October 17, 1979.

5. Ibid. See also Carter G. Woodson, *The Miseducation of the American Negro* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1933), for his arguments.

6. Thurman to Dorothy B. Ferebee, November? 1949, NCNW Records, Series 5, National Archives for Black Women’s History, Washington, D.C. In 1946 Thurman’s mother, Susie Ford Bailey, a retired Arkansas schoolteacher, gave the NCNW a thousand dollars to develop the archives and museum.

Our National Archives



EEP EVERY BIT of visual history bearing on the development of Negro men and women in America—of colored peoples all over the world—coming into our National Archives, where it can be effectively displayed or safely filed for reference.

Don't underestimate the value of that bit of history in your possession. Pictures, books, mementoes link the story of the past to the action of the present. Send them to the Archives, registered or insured for safety.



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All material will be gratefully acknowledged and properly catalogued.

FIG. 2.—Inside back cover, *African American Woman's Journal*, Fall 1946

chives at the annual convention in response to solicitation. Reports in 1953 and 1957 reiterate the appeal for historical material. The council's appreciation of the historical significance of the records they themselves generated is evident in a 1957 report stressing the importance of preservation. One recommendation was to renovate the carriage house at the Washington, D.C., national headquarters to house the museum and archives. Although the appeals produced very few documents and the plans for a permanent repository were not realized at the time, these early records merit attention as evidence of the committee's vision.

In the 1950s the committee acquired materials for exhibit. At Thurman's instigation—and initially at her own expense—the NCNW purchased historical dolls made by noted sculptor Meta Warrick Fuller for permanent exhibition at national headquarters. Thurman also urged the council to acquire a quilt depicting Harriet Tubman for circulation among local council sections throughout the United States.⁷ Upon receiving the quilt in 1955, Mary McLeod Bethune made one of her last speeches, challenging “the women of the Council to clothe themselves in the gallant spirit of Harriet Tubman as the program of the organization moves into its 3rd decade of operation.”⁸

Over the next twenty years, the NCNW was less active in promoting black women's history, due largely to its emphasis on other activities. Fund raising for a memorial to Bethune absorbed energy,⁹ and action in the civil rights movement accelerated, leading to increased involvement in social programs in the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as housing and hunger programs in the South and a Job Corps program for young women. At the same time, the NCNW retained its historical awareness, reactivating the archives and museum in 1978 as institutions committed to collecting, preserving, exhibiting, and interpreting black women's history. Both institutions owe an inestimable debt to the archival pioneers of the 1940s and 1950s.

Now located in the carriage house of the former national headquarters, the archives' major collection consists of NCNW records.¹⁰ They document a wide variety of subjects: civil rights, women's issues, education, employment, health, housing, consumer issues, and international relations. These records also provide information on other black women's organizations that were or are affiliated with the NCNW and documentation on local NCNW councils throughout the United

7. Harriet Tubman's name appears still again in council activity in 1944 when the NCNW raised money and launched a liberty ship named the *S.S. Harriet Tubman*.

8. News release, April 25, 1955, NCNW Records, Series 17, National Archives for Black Women's History, Washington, D.C.

9. The memorial, a statue of Bethune, is now located in Lincoln Park in Washington, D.C.

10. Processed through funding from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the NCNW Records have been open for research since November 1979.

States. Materials include correspondence with Bethune and numerous other black women, minutes, reports, financial and membership records, publications, and photographs.

The archives' scope, however, ranges beyond NCNW materials, and the repository seeks the papers of individual black women and the records of other black women's organizations. The appeals today reiterate those of the past: materials in basements and attics risk destruction and cannot be shared; the history of black women cannot be written without them. The archives also solicits contributions that reveal the experiences of unknown as well as prominent women. Finally, the archives views its function today as Bethune described it in 1946: a place where documents "suggestive of the struggles and accomplishments of Negro women can be assembled. We want, through such a collection, to tell in concrete form the story of the contribution of Negro Women to American life."¹¹

*American Psychiatric Association
Washington, D.C.*

* * *

October 17, 1941

Report of the Archives Committee of the National Council of Negro Women

The primary functions of the Archives Committee of the National Council of Negro Women have been the following:

1. To determine its specific functions in regard to the collection of documents pertaining to Negro women.
2. To decide what kinds of documents and materials concerned with Negro women should be located, collected and preserved.
3. To build up a list of possible individual sources which might furnish documents and materials.

The major purpose of the Archives Committee is to locate and collect materials and documents of importance which record the history and achievements of American Negro Women.

Among the types of documents and materials which should be preserved are printed publications, published and unpublished manuscripts (including musical compositions), citations for special services and various accomplishments, scrapbooks of clippings, certificates, diplomas, letters, diaries, photographs, works of art, etc.

Sources of these documents and materials are to be found among

11. Radio talk, June 17, 1946, NCNW Records, Series 5, National Archives for Black Women's History, Washington, D.C.

women of many different vocations and walks of life. They may be teachers, artists, musicians, business women, physicians, authors, housewives, lawyers or domestic employees. . . . Some of these women have been approached and they have sent letters expressing their interest in the idea and their desire to cooperate.

The Committee desires to make the following recommendations:

1. That a permanent center for receiving and preserving such documents and materials as shall be received be provided or designated.
2. That the Committee be empowered to further locate and collect desirable materials.
3. That some fund for clerical service be allocated.
4. That a small loan exhibit be prepared which could be circulated when requested to colleges and universities, institutions, expositions, etc.
5. That each member of the National Council of Negro Women be a committee of one to aid the Archives Committee in its task of locating and collecting materials.

Dorothy Porter

* * *

Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune
 Founder and National President
 National Council of Negro Women, Inc.
 1318 Vermont Avenue, N.W.
 Washington, D.C.

My dear President:

. . . There are some suggestions I have in mind that I wanted to pass on to you before they became cold. I hope that we can get to-gether and have a session of planning for the future of the Council. . . .

Many states are appointing or have already appointed commissions to write up the history of their state in this war. Unless there is an extraordinary change of thought very few if any of these commissions will appoint a Negro or at least a qualified Negro or historian to such commissions. In that case there is every likelihood that the contribution of the Negro will be ignored or at best only sketchily recorded. To protect ourselves we should ask that a qualified Negro be appointed to such commissions. Here in Virginia the governor has already appointed one and fortunately Dr. Luther Jackson a professor of History at Virginia State College has been appointed to it. This wasn't done the first time and as a result the history of Negroes in the last war so far as this state is concerned is almost non-existent in the currently used history books. Hopefully Mr. Jackson's contribution will alter that at least as far as this war is concerned. . . .

Do you think that there is any possibility of securing a fellowship so that a Negro woman can record for history the "Negro Woman in World War 2"? There is a wealth of material that lies buried in hundreds of communities about the contribution of Negro women and the accurate, detailed story should be told by us and not left to the beneficent memories of others many of whom have very deficient memories when it comes to us. I would like to see a grant sufficiently large so that a Negro woman could cover the major part of the U.S., have access to records of the government on a Federal, state and local level and write a comprehensive, objective and factual record of the Negro woman in this war. A person qualified and designated to do this with an assistant and a stenographer or access to one could do the research in perhaps six months and collate and write it up in another six months. Don't you think that this is an important undertaking and one that might well be pushed by the Council? Such a volume or volumes would be of infinite value to darker women in other lands aside from our own. . . . With all deepest affection, I am

As always,
Vivian C. Mason

909 Maypole Avenue
Norfolk 2, Va.
October 17, 1944