



Article: The Preservation of Photographic Collections in Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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THE PRESERVATION OF PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS IN HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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In 2007 the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to the Art Conservation Department at the University of Delaware and Lyrasis to facilitate a three-year project aimed at improving the preservation of photographic collections at Historically Black Colleges and Universities throughout the Southeastern United States. Implementation of the project goals also involved partnerships with the Historically Black Colleges and Universities Library Alliance, the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts, and the Image Permanence Institute. This ambitious endeavor is ongoing and the goals of this paper are to introduce this unique project, the institutions and individuals collaborating to make it successful.

Before the Civil War, higher education for African American students was virtually nonexistent. Some schools for elementary and secondary training existed however a college education was only available to a limited number of students. Through the support of the American Missionary Association (AMA) and the Freedmen's Bureau, some private colleges and universities for the education of African Americans were established. Between 1861 and 1870, the AMA founded seven black colleges and thirteen teaching schools. In addition to the work of AMA, educational opportunities for African Americans began to change in the years following the Civil War, with the 13th Amendment's abolition of slavery and the second Morrill Act.

The Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 gave federal lands to the states for the purpose of opening colleges and universities to educate farmers, scientists, and teachers. Although many institutions were created, few were open or inviting to the African American community, particularly in the South. Representative Justin Smith Morrill of Vermont suggested a solution to this challenge in the second Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1890. This Act specified that states using federal land-grant funds must either make their schools open to both blacks and whites or allocate money for segregated black colleges to serve as an alternative to white schools.

Today there are approximately 110 higher education institutions collectively referred to as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Though the student bodies at most of these schools remain predominantly black, HBCUs encourage students from different backgrounds and cultures to join their academic communities. These institutions have rich photographic collections that represent the history of the institutions, their students and faculty, an important aspect of higher education in the United States and the history of African Americans.

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has been an advocate for both Historically Black Colleges and Universities and the field of photograph conservation for many years. The Foundation's HBCU Program provides grants to private HBCUs that provide an undergraduate liberal arts education. Grants awarded in this program are aimed at supporting HBCUs in areas of their strategic plans, providing resources and professional development opportunities for HBCU librarians, and assisting HBCU faculty members as they revise their curriculum.

For the past 10 years the Mellon Foundation has supported numerous initiatives to advance the field of photograph conservation including educational programs, workshops and reference resources. The Preservation of Photographic Collections in Historically Black Colleges and Universities Project is a special project in which the Mellon Foundation has been able to support both HBCUs and the field of photograph conservation simultaneously.

In January of 2007 the HBCU Library Alliance, a consortium of HBCU library professionals dedicated to fostering the collaboration and strengthening of resources within the HBCU network, conducted a survey of its 41 HBCU members focused on the preservation needs of photographic collections. The survey revealed that only 22% of the institutions had completed conservation assessments of their photographic holdings and only 12% had funds allocated for preservation activities in their annual budget. The distressing results of this survey, along with a previous study conducted by the Mellon Foundation in 1999, led the Foundation to create a steering committee of administrators (see the Acknowledgements section) from the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts, the HBCU Library Alliance, Lyasis, the Image Permanence Institute, and the Art Conservation Department at the University of Delaware, to develop and conduct a \$1.3 million collaborative project aimed at improving the preservation of photographic collections in HBCUs.

The goals of the project are to provide practical training in photograph preservation, to assist with prioritization of needed projects, to stabilize at-risk collections, to encourage investment in preservation capacity buildings within these institutions, and to inspire future generations to care for photographic collections. Ten HBCUs (see the Acknowledgements section) were identified as the focus institutions for this three-year project. The final phase of this project entails opportunities for sharing resources and conservation knowledge within the broader HBCU network.

The criteria used to identify the focus institutions included consideration of the historical significance and photographic collection size, photographic holdings pre-1950 at risk, adequate staffing and an established administrative infrastructure, and the opportunity to share resources, knowledge and expertise. Additional criteria included selecting a group of institutions that represent a diverse geographic focus, a combination of private and public institutions, and successful involvement in past HBCU Library Alliance initiatives. The project was divided into four Phases.

Phase I of the project was a two-day preservation summit hosted at the University of Delaware (UD) in October 2007. Thirty participants from the ten HBCUs attended the summit. Ten photograph conservation professionals presented lectures and workshops designed to provide practical training in photograph preservation. Lecture topics included, historic and contemporary prints, glass plate and film-base negatives, the Climate Notebook, selecting safe storage enclosures for photographic collections, exhibition parameters, and treatment challenges. Workshop topics included environmental monitoring, the history and identification of photographic negatives and identification of 19th century print processes.

The summit was extremely successful at providing participants with practical training as well as initiating relationships between the HBCU and conservation professionals that would collaborate throughout this three-year project. In a thoughtful thank you note sent after the summit, Elizabeth Wilson, University Librarian at Lincoln University summarized her response to the summit and the fledging project as follows:

“It is so good to know that now we have help in conserving and preserving our legacy here at Lincoln University, called the "Harvard of the Midwest" from 1923-54 when our scholars were publishing journals, painting wonderful pictures, producing plays, making innovations in agriculture and collecting the treasures of the African American experience in books, photographs and other resources. I have been waiting for this for 23 years. It is such a gift to know the Lincoln University legacy will be preserved and conserved for another 140 years.”

The second phase of the project required six expert conservation consultants (see the Acknowledgements section) from the collaborating organizations to visit the ten HBCU sites and collaborate with staff to evaluate the photographic preservation needs and priorities at each collection. Each of the conservation consultants was accompanied by a conservation graduate student (see the Acknowledgements section) to assist with the on-site consultations. Students from New York University, Buffalo State, the University of Delaware, and the University of Texas participated in the consultation visits and also attended the preservation summit held at UD. During the on-site visits the consultants examined as much of the photographic collection materials as possible. After examining the collections the consultants met with staff to discuss collection needs and preservation priorities. Following the on-site visit the consultants prepared assessment reports that listed suggested preservation projects for the institutions’ collections. This information was then used by each institution to identify and implement preservation demonstration projects costing up to \$60,000. The cost of these projects was supported by the original grant awarded UD and Lyrisis.

Sara Norris of the University of Texas noted of her experience in the project:

“The great thing about the HBCU project was knowing that I could really make a difference. Thanks to the funding available to each participating institution, my

recommendations were more than just advice; they were real options that could prolong the lifespan of irreplaceable collections.”

Phase III of this project is currently in progress and began in June of 2008. This phase includes three parts: an environmental monitoring program supported by the Image Permanence Institute (IPI), a re-grant program, and the completion of demonstration projects. During this phase of the project the ten institutions are using the practical training and advice they’ve received to complete preservation projects that will improve the condition of their collections.

In some instances the conservators that initially conducted the conservation consultation visits have or will soon return to their partnering HBCUs to provide additional training and assistance with the demonstration projects. Each institution proposed unique preservation projects based on the individual needs of their collections. The third phase of this project has empowered the custodians of these valuable collections to make positive changes regarding the long-term care and preservation of their photographic materials.

The final phase of the project hopes to provide information and inspiration to additional HBCU institutions. One component of this phase was a daylong preservation summit for 70 HBCU library and museum professionals hosted in Charlotte North Carolina in conjunction with the HBCU Library Alliance’s annual meeting in October 2008. A second component is on-site consultations with IPI staff at each institution to review a year of environmental data and develop strategies for improvement.

The success of this project depended on the work of many individuals and the support of several institutions, most notably the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for providing the funding needed. The partnerships involved have led to collaborations and knowledge exchange that will carry beyond the three-year time period of this particular project and beyond the 10 focus institutions. The impact of this project will continue to benefit the individuals and the collections involved, inspire the next generation of conservators, archivists and curators that will care for these collections and others, and positively impact the preservation of our photographic heritage.

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The participating HBCUs and their collection staff: Fayetteville State University, Fisk University, Hampton University, Kentucky State University, Lincoln University, Prairie View A&M, Robert Woodruff Library, Tennessee State University, Tuskegee University, and Virginia State University.

The conservator consultants: Jae Gutierrez (University of Delaware), Jessica Leming (Lyrasis), Barbara Lemmen (Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts), Kara M. McClurken (Lyrasis), Laura Wahl (Hagley Museum and Library), and Rachel Wetzell (Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts).

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