



Giving Our History a Home: The African-American Women in Iowa Project

KATHRYN M. NEAL

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Today I had to make a speech—horrors, I got roped in on that. Anyway, I was to tell the group (a Ladies Aid Group who had suddenly discovered that race relations were a part of “Christian education”) about the Negro in the South today. The talk was composed of a few formal notes to keep me on a track of some kind, plus a few meanderings and mumblings of Talladega, etc. I hope those women really realized what race relations and minority problems are. I doubt it; it’s too remote from them. One of the ladies did, though, mention the fact that it had occurred to her that her grandparents had once, perhaps, been a minority here in America (she is Danish). She is beginning to have an inkling of what it means. But, unlike the Italians and the other Latin-Europeans, her ancestors were of Germanic stock which was not too strange to the Anglo-Saxons and so they probably never felt like too much of a minority group. I hope my little effort brought the women a knowledge of what Negroes (some, anyway) are thinking and to make them gradually realize that a man is a man no matter what his external problems. But, if the old folks (as I told them) [would] be quiet, the young people might work it out.¹

The young woman who penned these words is Martha Ann Nash—at that time, Martha Ann Furgerson—who had recently returned to Waterloo, Iowa, where she had grown up. Earlier that year, she had graduated with honors from Talladega College, an historically black institution in Talladega, Alabama. This entry

¹Diary of Martha Ann Furgerson, entry for November 5, 1947, Folder: Biographical, Writings and speeches, 1947-1973 and undated, Box 1, Martha Ann Furgerson Nash papers, Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa Libraries. Note: This collection was still in process at the time of publication.

offers a brief impression—through one African-American woman’s eyes—of the state of race relations in post-World War II Waterloo. Last fall, Martha Nash donated her journal along with many of her other personal papers to the Louise Noun-Mary Louise Smith Iowa Women’s Archives at the University of Iowa Libraries. Biographical sketches, newspaper clippings, photographs, and other materials that further illustrate her life compose her collection. In 1948, she married Warren Nash and later accompanied him to Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, where he attended medical school. When Warren Nash graduated in 1953, Martha Nash received a degree as well. Her papers include a “Ph.T.” degree, which stands for “Pushed Husband Through.” These mock degrees were distributed by Creighton’s Medical Students’ Wives Club. The collection also features records which document Martha Nash’s active involvement in educational, civic, religious, and public health organizations. For example, researchers may learn about the activities in which she was involved during her tenure as executive director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Educational and Vocational Training in Waterloo from 1981 to 1995. These items illustrate the types of materials that the Iowa Women’s Archives seeks to collect as part of its project to document the history of African-American women in Iowa.

To explain the value of her own Black Women in the Middle West documentation project, historian Darlene Clark Hine said: “There is an urgent need to discover and collect more primary source materials pertaining to the lives and experiences of ordinary middle western Black women in both rural and urban communities.”² Although Hine and her colleagues centered their efforts on African-American women in Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan—states which traditionally have had more sizable black populations than Iowa—the history of African-American women in this state is no less important.³ Indeed, Iowa’s African-American women share a collective history that is both precious and pow-

²Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Women in the Middle West: The Michigan Experience* (Ann Arbor, MI: Historical Society of Michigan, 1990), p. 5.

³See Darlene Clark Hine, *The Black Women in the Middle West Project: A Comprehensive Resource Guide, Illinois and Indiana: Historical Essays, Oral Histories, Biographical Profiles, and Document Collections* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1986).

erful but all too seldom explored. The Iowa Women's Archives at the University of Iowa Libraries will help save these women's stories by identifying and collecting their personal papers and organizational records. In August 1995, I joined the Iowa Women's Archives staff as an assistant archivist to lead this important endeavor.

An advisory board guides me in my collecting efforts. This board comprises five members: Bill Cribbs of Davenport, city affirmative action officer; Jacquie Easley of Des Moines, assistant vice president of personnel and education at American Republic Insurance; Betty Jean Furgerson of Waterloo, former Iowa state regent and current president of the Iowa Public Broadcasting Board; Virginia Harper of Fort Madison, current president of the Fort Madison NAACP; and Jewel Limar Prestage of Prairie View, Texas, a University of Iowa alumna who is currently dean of the Benjamin Banneker Honors College of Prairie View A&M University. Funding for this project has been provided by donations received from corporate and foundation sponsors—which include US WEST Communications, the State Historical Society, Inc., the Principal Financial Group, the *Des Moines Register*, Central Life Assurance, Procter and Gamble, Equitable of Iowa Companies, and members of the University of Iowa Black Alumni Association—and individual contributors. Nearly one year ago, on December 6, 1995, the Iowa Women's Archives and University of Iowa Libraries held a celebratory program to launch the project officially. Some of the advisory board members and sponsors were able to join us for the festivities.

Project advisory board member Betty Jean Furgerson's papers now grace the shelves of the Iowa Women's Archives. Furgerson is the younger sister of Martha Nash. Like Nash, she donated her papers last fall. Although these sisters grew up in the same household in Waterloo, the differences in their papers reflect the uniqueness typical of archival collections. In the late 1940s, at about the same time that Martha was capturing her experiences in the journal cited from earlier, Betty Jean and the Furgerson family struck up what became long-term friendships with members of the Duke Ellington Orchestra. Furgerson saved many of the letters and postcards from all over the world that band members sent to her over the next few decades and included them in her collection. She also donated an assortment of photographs of the musicians re-

laxing with the family during the 1950s and 1960s.

Like her sister Martha, Betty Jean Furgerson has long displayed a concern for civil rights. In 1974, she was appointed director of the Waterloo Human Rights Commission, a position she held for the next eighteen years. Her papers include records which document her experiences as commission director as well as her many professional and volunteer civic activities in the fields of education and social work. This summer, yet another Furgerson sister, Lileah Furgerson Harris, donated her papers to the Iowa Women's Archives. Materials in Harris's collection document her numerous arts, civic, and educational activities, including her terms as president of the Erskine Elementary School and Washington High School Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) in Cedar Rapids and as a member of the Cedar Rapids Human Rights Commission.

Photographs, newspaper clippings, biographical sketches, and correspondence help tell the story of archival donor Maude White. She grew up in Perry, Iowa, the daughter of a Methodist minister who founded the town's first black Methodist church. Even as a girl, White participated in charitable and community activities. As a young woman during the Depression, she not only worked to support herself and her daughter but also attended night school and continued to help others. After moving to California in the early 1940s, White eventually helped Japanese-American World War II veterans and other Californians of color locate jobs. When White returned to Iowa in the early 1960s, she settled in Des Moines and continued her career in state employment, helping disadvantaged Iowans find work.

In 1980, White retired from state government but not from her work with the community. That same year, she opened her home to neighborhood students who needed academic help and established the Des Moines Tutoring Center. Over the next five years, more than 100 children studied in White's home. Eventually, the number of students grew so large that White had to add staff and develop several more tutoring sites with assistance from area schools. The center became an affiliate of the Children and Families of Iowa organization in 1991. Most remarkable of all is that from 1980 to 1991, White never accepted any payment for use of her home or for her teaching services.

The collections mentioned so far represent but a few of those relating to African-American women that have joined the other

holdings of the Iowa Women's Archives. Located on the third floor of the Main Library, the Louise Noun-Mary Louise Smith Iowa Women's Archives was founded in 1992 to identify, collect, preserve, and make available to researchers primary-source material of Iowa women from all walks of life.⁴ "Iowa woman" very broadly refers to a woman connected to Iowa by birth, education, or residence. Part of the mission of the archives is to raise the consciousness of women about the importance of their lives and their papers. Much of women's lives remains completely hidden from history or is only partially known or told. As archives co-founder Mary Louise Smith has said, "If people know that there is an archive where women's records will be valued and preserved, they will make a deliberate effort to collect materials that might otherwise be discarded."⁵ The holdings of the Iowa Women's Archives provide rich resources for anyone seeking to explore the diversity of Iowa women's lives. While these materials were not created specifically *for* researchers, they can be used *by* researchers to show how an individual lived her life or how an organization functioned. By soliciting the documents of African-American women in Iowa, the archives staff hopes to build a core collection of materials that will make it possible for a more complete history of these women to be written.

In some cases, individuals might not have papers. They might have lost their belongings in a fire, for instance, or discarded their materials because they did not think that anyone else would ever consider them important. A way to make sure that the histories of these women are preserved as well is to capture their stories on audiotape through oral history interviews. A segment of this project might involve conducting such interviews with selected women.

Prior to my arrival, a small number of collections pertaining to African-American women in the state had already been donated. Among these were the papers of Ruth Bluford Anderson, profes-

⁴For additional information about the history of the Iowa Women's Archives, the author recommends the following article: Karen M. Mason, "History Through Women's Eyes: The Iowa Women's Archives," *Books at Iowa*, Number 59 (November 1993), pp. 15-22.

⁵Susan Kreimer, "Unique Perspective Preserved by Center," *The Daily Iowan*, 27 January 1992.

sor emeritus of social work at the University of Northern Iowa and author of *From Mother's Aid Child to University Professor: An Autobiography of an American Black Woman*, who bestowed correspondence, newspaper clippings, and a photograph to the archives. Marguerite Cothorn, who enjoyed a more than forty-year career in social work, donated reports, clippings, and photographs. The acquisition of Suzanne O'Dea Schenken's oral-history interview series "A Political Dialogue: Iowa's Women Legislators" yielded a transcript of an interview with A. June Franklin, one of the first African-American women to serve in the Iowa General Assembly.

These and most of the collections added since the project officially began document women who have played a public role in history. One such individual is Catherine Williams of Des Moines, who went from dancing in the movies with the likes of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Cab Calloway to a lengthy career in the Iowa Department of Social Services. She retired in 1981 as deputy commissioner of that department. Her collection includes photographs that document her dancing days, family life, and career in government; speeches; and records of Delta Sigma Theta, the traditionally African-American sorority to which she belongs. Another recent addition are the papers of Mary Elizabeth Wood, who recently returned to her native city Des Moines after several decades away. In 1957, when Wood was appointed to the position of executive director of the YWCA of Buffalo and Erie County in New York, she became the first African-American woman in the country to direct a metropolitan branch of that organization. The archives houses her photographs, correspondence, certificates, speeches, newspaper clippings, and other material.

While the Iowa Women's Archives welcomes the papers of these prominent women, we also want to celebrate women whose accomplishments may be known only within their own families. For example, the repository's holdings include a video that documents the experiences of Maxine Baker Griggs and Creole Baker Griggs, two sisters who reminisce about their lives in the small town of Clarinda, Iowa. While these women might not have played a public role in Iowa's history, their materials offer a glimpse into their experiences and provide valuable historical information for researchers. As is the aim of the Iowa Women's Archives generally, the mission of the African-American Women in Iowa project

is to collect the papers of women from all walks of life.

Despite its name and mission, the Iowa Women's Archives does accept men's papers. In fact, family papers are of special interest. For instance, the collection of the Harper family, whose roots in Iowa reach back several generations, is a growing one. The Special Collections Department, also located in the University of Iowa's Main Library, houses the papers of Dr. Harry Harper, Sr., while the Iowa Women's Archives holds the papers of two of his daughters: the aforementioned Virginia Harper, who serves on this project's advisory board, and Lois Eichacker, a civic leader who recently ended her term as president of the University of Iowa's Alumni Association Board. This year, the archives acquired the papers of Elizabeth "Bettye" Crawford Tate, who operated a boarding house for African-American male students in Iowa City from 1940 into the 1950s because they were not allowed to live in University of Iowa dormitories. Along with the photographs, correspondence, theater programs, and other material that documents her own life, Bettye Tate's collection also includes material that relates to her son, Dennis and his acting career.

The Iowa Women's Archives encourages the assistance of everyone in accomplishing the project's goals. To continue to develop this collection, we must identify individuals and black women's organizations—both past and existing—to approach for papers. Letters, speeches, photographs, scrapbooks, audiovisual materials, memorabilia, and organizational records are but a few examples of materials that we seek. Offers of donation or suggestions of possible sources of papers may be sent to: Kathryn Neal, Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa Libraries, 100 Main Library, Iowa City, IA 52242-1420; (319) 335-5068 or kathryn-neal@uiowa.edu. Darlene Clark Hine contends that "[a]s we garner the inspiration contained in past and present Black women's lives, we acquire the power to take history further and the will to use the power of history to construct a better future."⁶ The Iowa Women's Archives hopes to take the history of African-American women in Iowa further by documenting their lives and experiences. Countless stories remain to be told.

⁶Darlene Clark Hine, Elsa Barkley Brown, and Rosalyn Terborg Penn (eds.), "Editor's Preface" in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia, Volume 1 A-L* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. xix.