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ON THE HILL: Moorland-Spingarn Research Center: A Past Revisited, A Present Reclaimed

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Moorland-Spingarn Research Center:

A Past Revisited, A Present Reclaimed

By Michael R. Winston

More than two thousand years ago, Cicero wrote that history is the “witness of the times, the torch of truth, the life of memory, the teacher of life, (and) the messenger of antiquity.” The past lives only in memory; without records or historians to interpret them for future generations, the past ceases to have life.

A people without a remembered heritage, bereft of any sense of a past, cannot achieve a sound understanding of the present. Collective forgetfulness mocks the human urge to achieve permanence and stability in a world of inexorable change.

The Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, which is a part of the rich heritage and tradition of Howard University, is recognized as being one of the world’s largest and most comprehensive repository of the history and culture of Black people in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and the United States.

19th Century Foundations

As early as 1873, General Oliver Otis Howard was able to report to the Board of Trustees that the University’s first librarian, Danforth B. Nichols (1867-1873), had succeeded in assembling a significant collection of material documenting the abolitionist movement and the Civil War. Donors anxious to nurture this pioneering effort included such major supporters of the University as Senator Samuel C. Pomeroy of Kansas and Charles Sumner of Massachusetts.

The most valuable gift of the 19th Century—more than 1,600 books, clippings, pamphlets, periodicals and manuscripts on slavery—was made in 1873 by the New York abolitionist Lewis Tappan (1788-1873), who had organized the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, and, as treasurer of the American Missionary Association, supported the development of Black higher education. After Reconstruction, growth of the collection was intermittent, but the founding of organizations like the Bethel Literary and Historical Association (1881), the Amer-

ican Negro Historical Society (1897), the Negro Society for Historical Research (1912), and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (1915), stimulated growing interest in collecting sources for Black history.

The Moorland Foundation

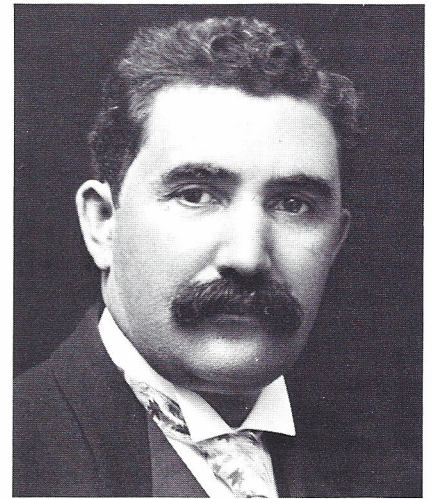
At Howard, the leading proponent for the establishment of a separate Afro-American research collection was Kelly Miller (1863-1939), professor of mathematics and sociology, 1890-1934 and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, 1907-1919. Dean Miller succeeded in persuading the Reverend Jesse E. Moorland, (1863-1940) an alumnus and trustee who was a secretary of the YMCA that he should donate to Howard his sizable private library on Black people in Africa and in America, so that the University might develop a “Negro-Americana Museum and Library” that could be a center for research and instruction.

In his letter of December 19, 1914 announcing the gift, Dr. Moorland said that Howard University was “the one place in America where the largest and best library on this subject should be constructively established.” In recognition of the size and significance of Dr. Moorland’s gift, the University established “The Moorland Foundation, A Library of Negro Life,” housed in the Trustee Board Room of the University’s new library building donated by Andrew Carnegie in 1910. For a period of 15 years, development was slow because the small University Library staff was unable to devote full attention to the Moorland Foundation. Among the librarians who developed the preliminary organization of the collection were Lula E. Connor, Lula V. Allan and Rosa C. Hershaw.

Expansion by Dorothy Porter

The appointment in 1930 of Dorothy B. Porter as curator of the Moorland Foundation was the beginning of a new era. A graduate of Howard and Columbia Universities, Mrs. Porter devoted 43 years to

(PHOTO BY ADDISON N. SCURLOCK, CA. 1910)



Dr. Jesse E. Moorland

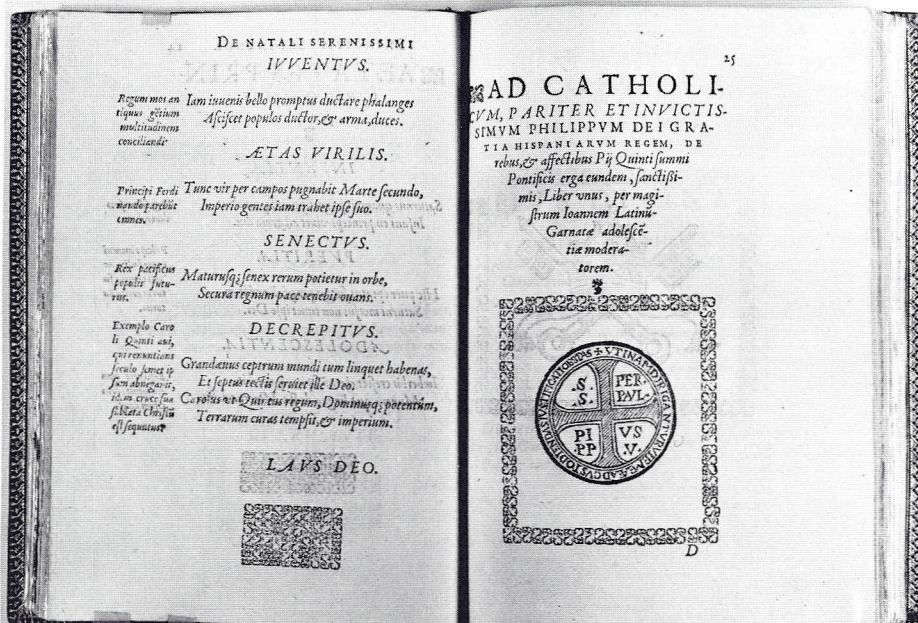


Arthur B. Spingarn



Dorothy B. Porter

Juan Latino's *Ad Catholicum*, one of the rarest books in the collection.

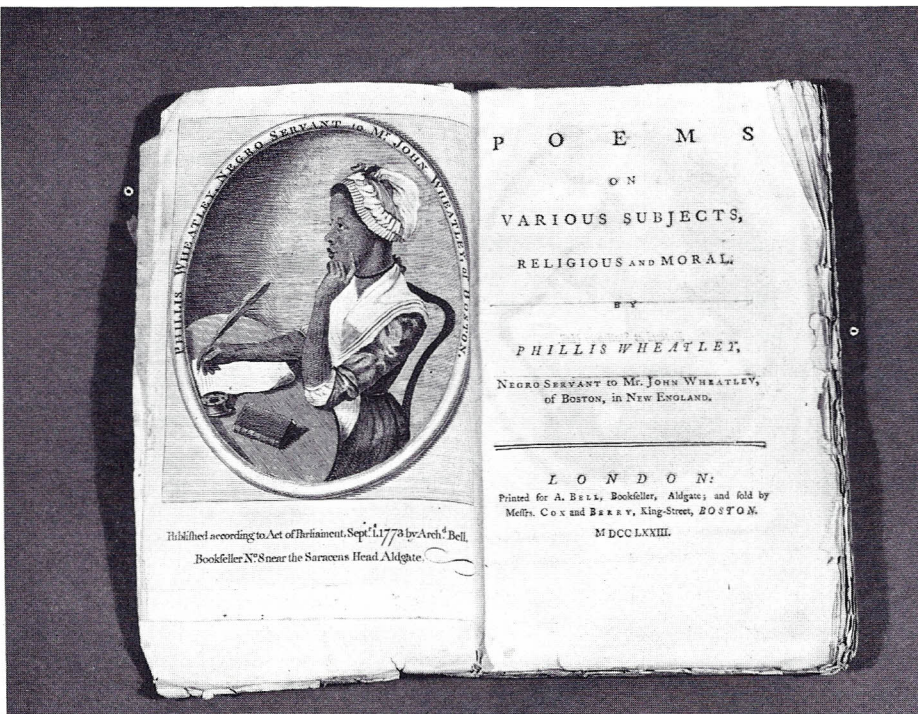


the development of the collection. In addition to creating a new classification system suitable for a special collection, she developed a wide variety of research tools based on her encyclopedic knowledge in the field, including authoritative bibliographies that have been invaluable to scholars. Substantial expansion of the collection was made possible by the opening of the Founders Library in 1939, the provision of special acquisition funds, and support for staff through the Works Progress Administration. Mrs. Porter was assisted in those critical years by Mrs. Ethel L. Williams, later librarian of the School of Religion. 21

A turning point in the history of the Moorland Foundation was the purchase in 1946 of the unique collection of Arthur B. Spingarn (1878-1971), a learned bibliophile, civil rights attorney, vice president 1911-1940, and president of the NAACP, 1940-1965.

The product of a global search for more than 35 years, the Spingarn Collection comprised works by Black authors in more than 20 languages, including Arabic, Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, Portuguese, German, Finish, Russian, Hausa, Swahili, Vai, Xhosa, Yoruba, and Zulu.

Probably the most famous rare volume in the Spingarn Collection is the book, *Ad Catholicum Pariter et Invictissimum Philippum Dei Gratia Hispaniarum Regem* (1573) by Juan Latino, a Black slave of Granada who was one of Renaissance Spain's outstanding Humanists. A particular strength of the Spingarn Collection is its extensive coverage of Afro-Cuban, Afro-Brazilian and Haitian authors. Early Afro-Americana is richly represented by the works of Jupiter Hammon, Phillis Wheatley, Benjamin Banneker, Paul Cuffee, and Richard Allen, as well as numerous reports and publications of Black organizations founded in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries. At the formal installation of the Spingarn Collection, President Mordecai W. Johnson said:



The 1773 edition of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, by Phillis Wheatley. <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol1/iss4/>

Terra-cotta funerary figure from Ghana donated to the University by William Spivack in 1971.



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"Dr. Arthur B. Spingarn has greatly honored Howard University in allowing us to acquire his distinguished collection of books by Negro authors. This collection is without doubt, the most comprehensive and interesting group of books by Negroes ever collected in the world. Howard University rejoices to place at the disposal of students, scholars and writers the richness and diversity of these cultural materials."

From 1946 to 1973, Mrs. Porter expanded the size and scope of the Moorland-Spingarn Collection to meet the growing needs of the University's instructional and research programs, particularly in the rapidly developing fields related to African studies.

Upon her retirement in 1973, the Dorothy B. Porter Room in Founders Library was dedicated.

In September, 1973, upon the recommendation of President James E. Cheek, the University Board of Trustees authorized the reorganization of the Moorland-Spingarn Collection as the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center—to broaden its scope and scholarly impact.

Expanded Programs

The Center has now intensified the effort to gather the documentary evidence, recorded memories and visual representations which provide the basis for the preservation of the historical experience of Black people throughout the world. As a part of a University with a tradition of scholarship that dates back more than a century, the Center provides a unique opportunity as a source of knowledge and understanding for all who seek to experience the contributions made by Black people to global history.

The expanded programs of the Center represent a great effort by the University to deepen and enhance the intellectual liberation of a people buffeted by the historical forces which have made the modern world. At the heart of the new programs is an emphasis on preservation

and restoration. Special features of the preservation program are the new units added to the Moorland and Spingarn book collections, the Howard University Museum and the Howard University Archives. The new Museum will be primarily a *teaching* Museum, with an emphasis on visual documentation of African and Afro-American history and culture. It will be a resource for formal curricular instruction as well as a facility available to the public schools and the larger community.

The scope of the Museum's exhibitions will encompass African, Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian artifacts which are presently a part of the University's collections, given by a broad spectrum of visionary donors who have believed in the value of a central depository of the Black experience. In addition to artifacts, there are a large number of historically significant engravings, photographs, rare books, pamphlets, broadsides and manuscripts, including family and professional papers.

The Museum will include a permanent exhibit illustrating the history of Howard University, beginning with the rich collection of artifacts related to General Howard, donated to the University in recent years by his descendants. Other special exhibits will be related to Africa, the United States and the Caribbean. A special feature of the Museum will be an exhibit of the Dorothy and James Porter Collection, representing the sculpture, paintings, textiles, pottery and other materials collected by the Porters for a period of more than 40 years. New gifts and acquisitions will also be a point of special interest for Museum visitors.

The University Archives will be a secure repository for the records of the University, including the files of schools, colleges and departments, as well as records illustrating the contributions of Howard alumni to the American society. One important preservation project of the University Archives is the collection of photographs, class banners, badges, programs, fraternity and sorority artifacts and other memorabilia from alumni, so that various,

aspects of the University's life may be saved for future generations.

Since September, 1973 two major additions to the Center have been the Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection (formerly the Civil Rights Documentation Project) and the Black Press Archives established by the National Newspaper Publishers Association which represents more than 100 Black newspapers. The Oral History Collection staff is undertaking a comprehensive interviewing program, making tape recordings of individuals associated with schools, churches, community organizations, businesses as well as alumni and faculty. The tape recordings are transcribed, indexed and made available for research. The Black Press Archives will be a major research resource that will include complete microfilm files of Black newspapers, as well as the records of Black editors, publishers and journalists.

Expanded Facilities

As a part of the University's development program, a complete renovation of the physical facilities housing the Center was initiated in the fall of 1973. The renovation is now under way.

Several major units of the Center will be housed on the ground floor of Founders Library. There will be a photoduplication section comprised of microfilming duplication units, a professional photographic laboratory, Manuscript Division, University Archives, a vault for rare artifacts and other materials, a special room for the Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, and a specially designed suite for the Black Press Archives, including an exhibition gallery for its Hall of Fame.

Other aspects of the renovation provide for improved lighting, better security systems, and substantially increased space for the growing collections. On the first floor, the principal renovation work includes the construction of the Howard University Museum in the Dorothy Porter Room. Two levels of book stacks will also be renovated to improve the facilities housing the Center's book collections. The

Jesse Moorland Reading Room will be refurbished consistent with the 18th Century character of the building.

The Preservation Program

In September, 1973 a complete inventory of the Moorland-Spingarn Collection was begun, and a search for specialists to assess the physical condition of the older books, pamphlets, broadsides, engravings, photographs, and artifacts got underway. Miss Shelley Fletcher of the Conservation Laboratory of the Library of Congress—one of the leading paper conservators in the United States—was engaged as a consultant to the Center to survey its holdings and develop a program to preserve its valuable materials.

By May of 1974, all of the Arthur B. Spingarn and Jesse E. Moorland book collections had been thoroughly cleaned and reshelfed; thousands of older books and periodicals have been rebound.

Undergirding all of the new programs of the Center is an expanded professional staff. In the Library section, a variety of Departments was created, including Reader Services, Technical Services and Reference. A new Manuscript Division was created with its own Curator, Thomas C. Battle. This Division also includes a Prints and Photograph Department, a Black Music Department, and the Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection.

Microfilming, Photographic Services

The Center is conducting a major microfilming project under the supervision of Alex Rapheal. All Afro-American, African and Caribbean newspapers received by the Center are being microfilmed for permanent preservation.

The Center's newspaper collection is one of the more valuable research features eagerly sought by many visiting scholars and graduate students. It has 2,847 microfilm reels of newspapers, and receives hundreds of newspapers, including 42 from Nigeria alone. During 1973-74, newspapers from the entire continent of Africa were microfilmed, and a number of

James P. Johnson of the Reference Department assisting George Reid, a Ph.D. candidate in history.



Ethel M. Ellis, a staff member, at work in the cataloging section of the Technical Services Departments.

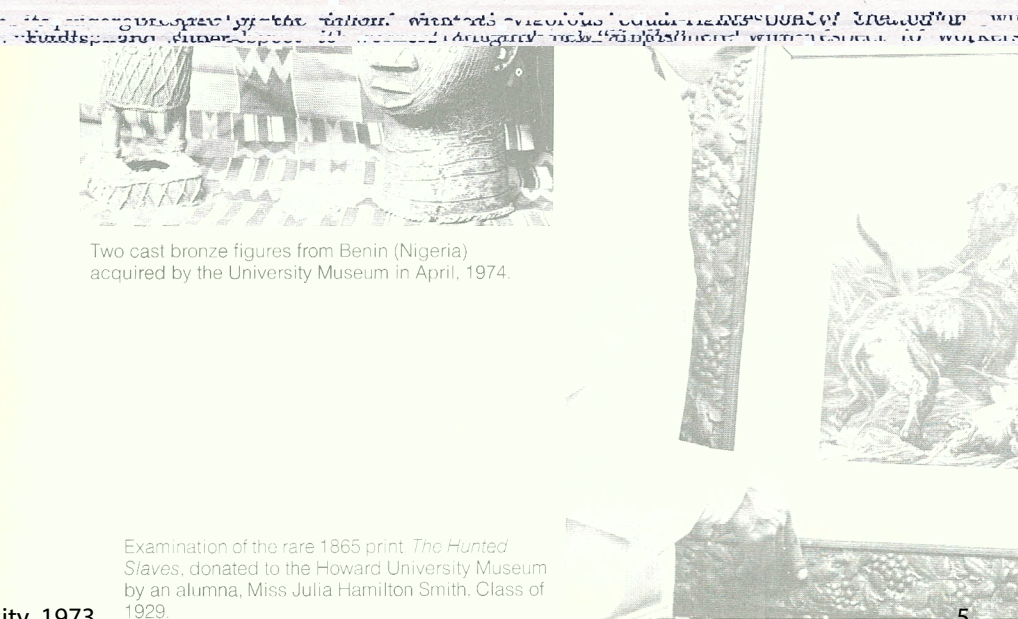
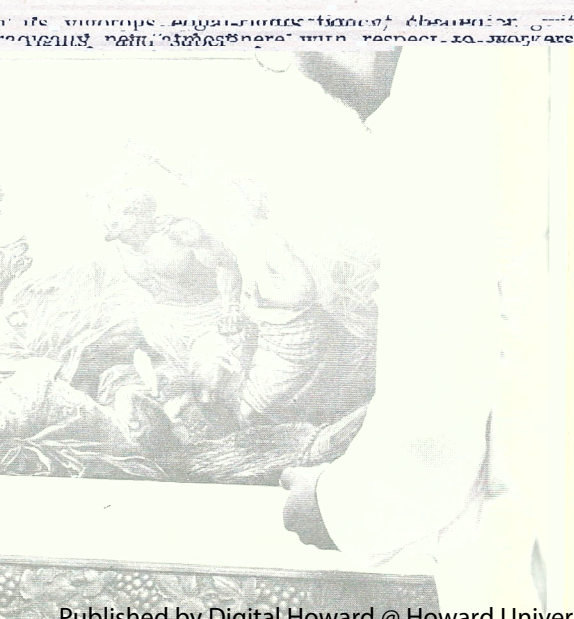
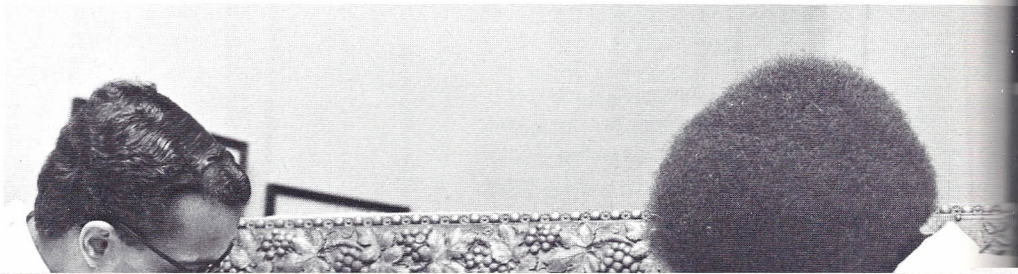
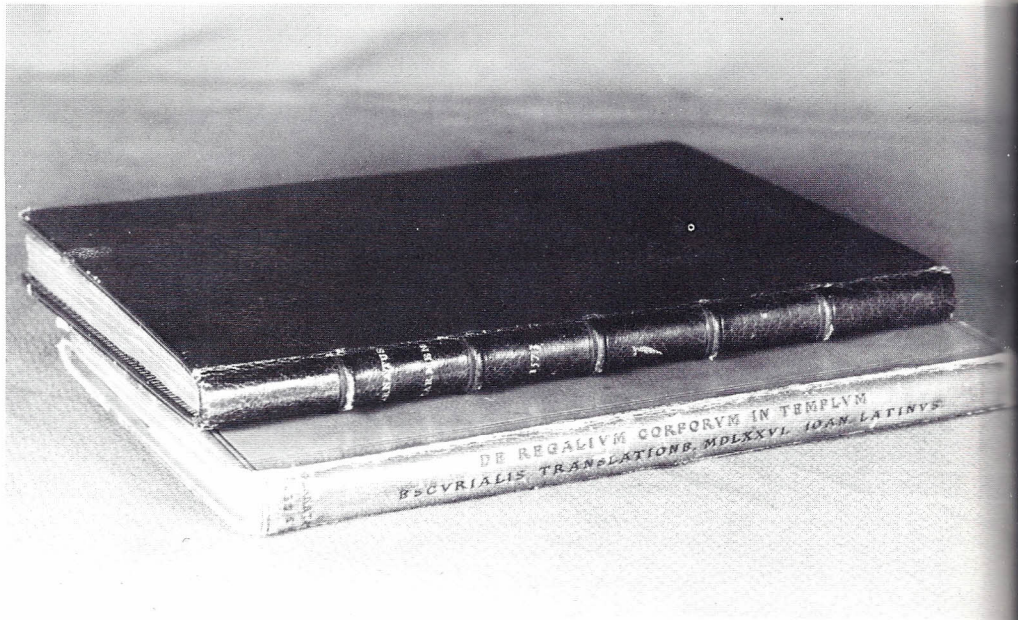
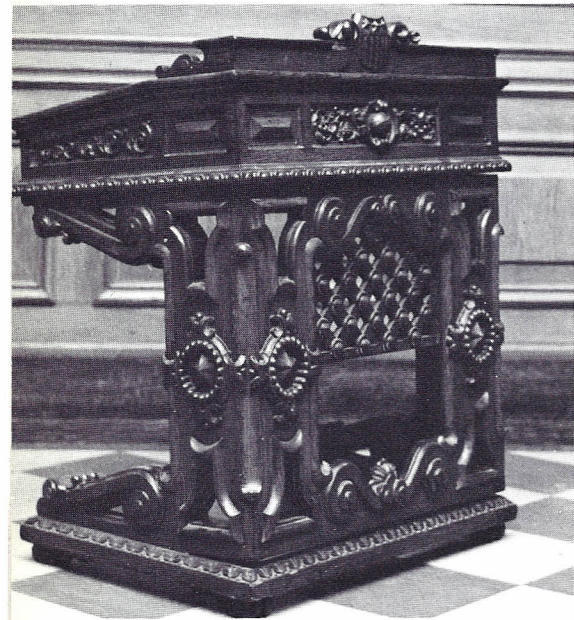
Winston: ON THE HILL: Moorland-Spingarn Research Center: A Past Preserved

Spectacles and smoking cap of Frederick Douglass on a shawl he purchased in England for his wife, Anna Murray Douglass—donated to the University by Mrs. Anne Teabeau, a great-granddaughter.



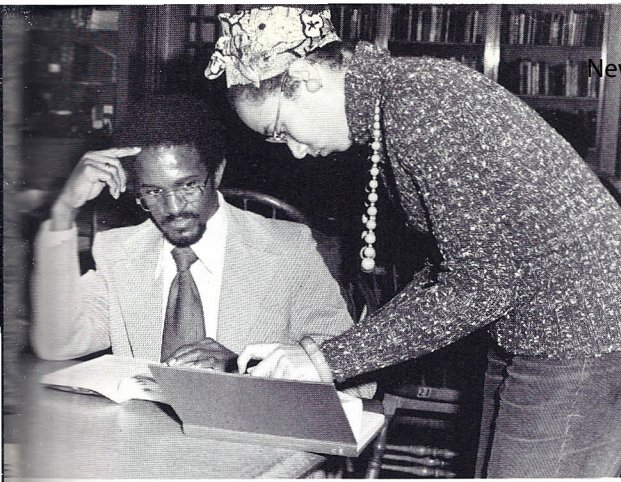
One of the University Museum's prized pieces is the desk of Joseph H. Rainey of South Carolina, the first Black Representative in the United States Congress (1870-1879). It was donated to the University in 1960 by his 84-year-old daughter, Olive A. Rainey.

Two works of Juan Latino—1573, 1574

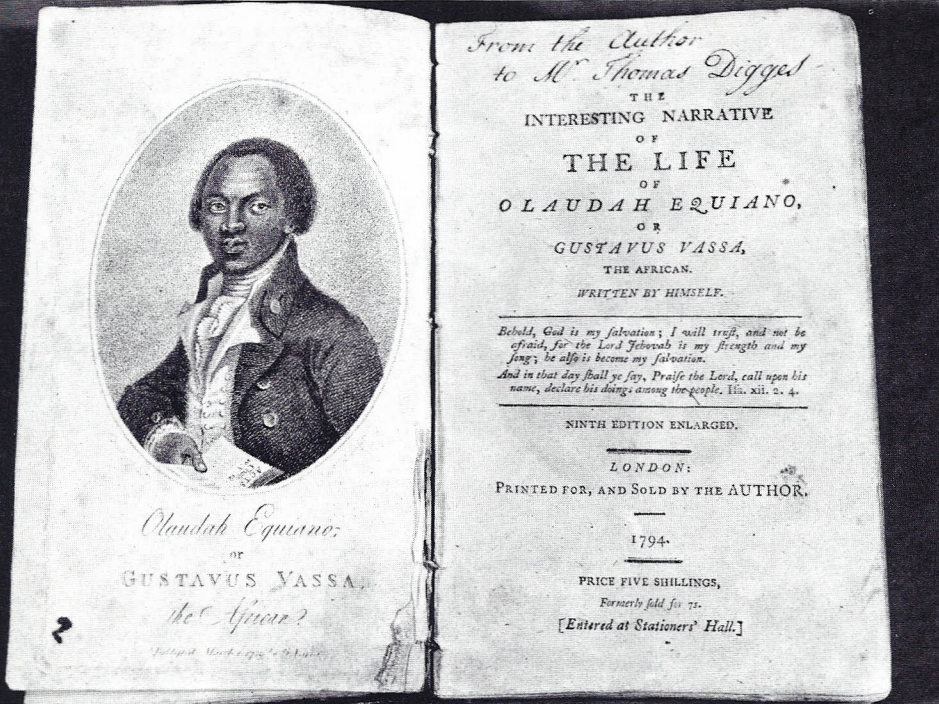


Two cast bronze figures from Benin (Nigeria) acquired by the University Museum in April, 1974.

Examination of the rare 1865 print *The Hunted Slaves*, donated to the Howard University Museum by an alumna, Miss Julia Hamilton Smith, Class of 1929.



The only known autographed copy in the world of the autobiography of **Gustavus Vassa**. This book contributed to the abolition of the British Slave Trade.



Caribbean papers like the *Advocate-News* of Barbados and *The Daily Gleaner* of Jamaica. Many of the African newspapers are in indigenous languages, including Xhosa (*Imvo Zabantsundi* of Johannesburg) and Kiswahili (*Mwafrika* of Dar-es-Salaam).

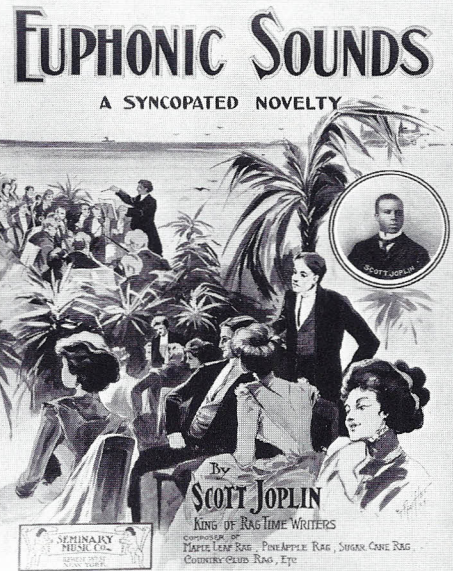
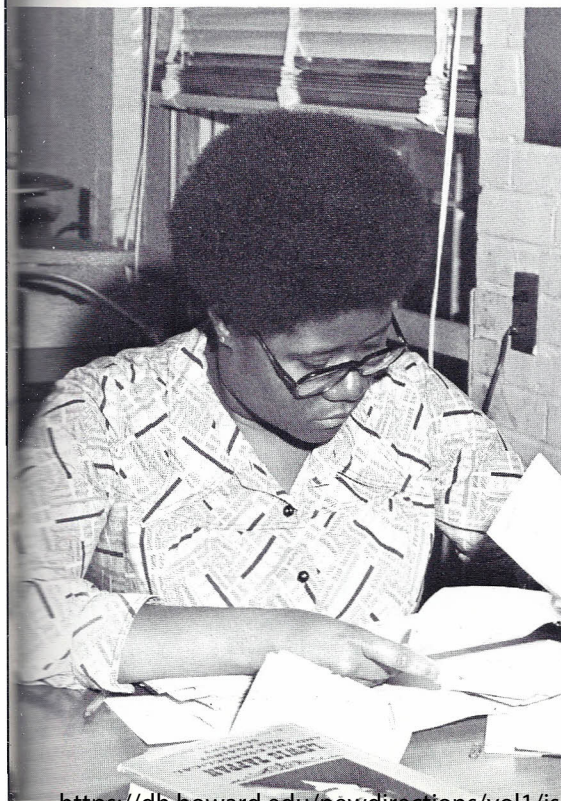
Many older periodicals like the *Voice of Missions* (1908-1939) are being systematically microfilmed so that they may be readily available for researchers. Masters theses and doctoral dissertations are also being microfilmed and are available for purchase.

In the spring of 1974, William J. Scott, formerly of Scurlock Studios of Washington, was hired to develop a photocopy unit which will make it easy for researchers to procure photographs. Mr. Scott has also undertaken a documentation project of activities in Washington so that the Center may develop a comprehensive collection of photographs of recent and current events. Copies of rare engravings, daguerreotypes and other photographs are also being made and cataloged.

Global Acquisitions Program

With the addition of a special acquisitions staff in 1973, it has been possible for the Center to undertake a global acquisitions program. This is involved in the establishment of accounts with book dealers who are able to secure scarce copies of works by Black authors in areas outside the United States. This has been especially important for Afro-Brazilian and other Black Latin-American authors and for African novelists working in vernacular languages. In addition, the Center is beginning to collect on an expanded scale, phonograph recordings of the works of Black composers and artists, film strips, video tapes, and documentary films on the Black experience.

During the 1973-74 academic year, the Center served 3,488 patrons including 548 visiting scholars representing more than 100 colleges and universities from 30 states. Representatives from 55 government agencies and community organizations also pursued research in the various collections—requiring Reading Room services of 20,486 books, periodicals, and pamphlets. Nearly 50,000 copies of documents and other materials were made for patrons. As the new programs develop, it is hoped that an increasing number of alumni and friends will support the growth of the collections by depositing materials that will enhance the Center's capacity to meet the needs of scholars, students and the community. □



Original sheet music of **Scott Joplin**, from the Black Music Collection.

Claudette Brown, research associate, reading a document.

Michael R. Winston, Ph.D., is director of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.