

NURTURING COMMUNITY INCLUSION

NORTH CAROLINA

SOUTH CAROLINA

Project RIGHT Now—Carolinas! Preserves African American History

Steven D. Booth, National Archives and Records Administration



Interior and exterior shots of the Russell School, one of 4,977 schools constructed across fifteen Southern states with contributions from the local black community and matching funds from Chicago philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, then president of Sears, Roebuck and Company. Project RIGHT Now—Carolinas! interviewed individuals associated with the schools to complete an oral history. *Courtesy of Project RIGHT Now—Carolinas.*

The challenges faced in obtaining records of African Americans and other historically underrepresented groups was the focus of discussion by archivists gathered at the spring 2011 joint meeting of the South Carolina Archival Association and the Society of North Carolina Archivists. Through these discussions, the archivists discovered that minority communities are reluctant to donate their materials to large research institutions and that acquiring diverse collections is not always a feasible solution. The better option: giving these

communities access to the necessary knowledge, resources, and skills to properly archive their own stories.

Launching Project RIGHT Now

With this thought in mind, Gabrielle Dudley and Dr. L. Teresa Church, along with eleven other archivists who had attended the meeting, established Project RIGHT (Research, Identify, and Gather Historical Treasures) Now—Carolinas! (PRNC). This volunteer consulting group consists of professionally trained archivists, public historians, and

librarians from underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds. They work in partnership with individuals, organizations, businesses, and cultural institutions from North Carolina and South Carolina to study and preserve local African American history through educational outreach, workshops, and programs. These activities afford communities the ability to “identify, retain, preserve, and develop primary-source collections held both publicly and privately.”

PRNC members meet monthly to discuss the status of ongoing projects and

pro-
spective
projects and
to introduce new
recruits. Currently
there is no formal
process to join PRNC, so
both members and projects are
solicited through word of mouth.

Members, who are employed or full-time students, typically dedicate their weekends to working on assignments. Although there is no real time commitment to complete a project, the group takes into consideration the client's expectations while negotiating feasibility and members' availability to assist. So far, the group has completed a number of outreach opportunities showcasing their expertise in the areas of instruction, oral history, and appraisal.

St. Paul African Episcopal Methodist Church

In October 2011, PRNC held a workshop to commemorate the 147th anniversary of St. Paul African Episcopal Methodist Church. Founded in 1864, a year after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, St. Paul stands as one of the oldest black churches in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and remains a

“beacon of hope, progress, spiritual revival, and religious freedom” within the community through traditional ministries and outreach programs like the church-sponsored bowling league.

Following the tradition of the black church, the workshop began with prayer and opening remarks. Velma Perry, a ninety-two-year-old church historian, then gave a presentation to more than forty parishioners from St. Paul and guests from surrounding churches, teaching them best practices to care for church records and artifacts. Attendees also were interested in preserving common household records, such as birth certificates, diplomas, letters, marriage licenses, obituaries, property deeds, family reunion programs, and newspaper clippings, as well as photographs, paintings, and music recordings.

“Some thought they'd been doing it wrong, which was not the case,” said Project Coordinator Holly Smith. “We just encouraged them not to laminate papers or glue photographs to scrapbooks and photo albums.”

To culminate the event, an exhibition was unveiled in the fellowship hall, curated by members of St. Paul, featuring documents and photographs tracing the origin,

improvements, and accomplishments of the church throughout the years.

“This was truly a great opportunity to learn more about St. Paul, and we hope to work with them again,” Smith added. PRNC is currently pursuing other opportunities to give similar presentations at several churches in the area.

Russell School Oral History Project

PRNC also completed the Russell School Oral History Project. Built in 1926, the Russell School was one of 4,977 schools constructed across fifteen Southern states with contributions from the local black community and matching funds from Chicago philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, then president of Sears, Roebuck and Company. The Rosenwald Fund helped to build schools for rural black children, educate teachers, and establish libraries. Led and founded by influential black educator Booker T. Washington, the program was administered at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute until 1919. Between 1918 and 1932, North Carolina was home to more Rosenwald schools than any other Southern state.

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of an institution—the most obvious and desirable outcomes of the entire experience. But indirectly, internships provide an opportunity for archivists to shape the future of the archival profession by investing in their interns as not only students but also as future colleagues. As a result, this indirect benefit produces more purpose-driven archivists who possess the leadership capabilities to usher our profession forward.

Archivists are, by nature, deeply invested in preserving legacy. Through the records we collect, the services we provide, and the patrons we serve, we perform a vital role by ensuring that future generations inheriting our society have an understanding of who

we are and how we came to be. Now is the time to focus on another legacy, the one developing within our own profession. It's *that* legacy—the current students and interns—who will soon be chiefly responsible for the preservation of our societal legacy, and the litmus test for their success tomorrow depends on the training current archivists provide them with today. ■

Notes

Alexis Braun Marks, CA, is university archivist at Eastern Michigan University. She has hosted numerous graduate students from Eastern Michigan University, the University of Michigan, and Wayne State University.

Jarrett M. Drake completed his graduate degree from the School of Information at the University of Michigan in 2013. He was recently hired as the digital archivist at Princeton University.

Patrick Galligan completed his MSI degree from the School of Information at the University of Michigan in 2013. He has begun work as a digital archivist at the Rockefeller Archive Center.

Erin Platte completed her MSI degree from the School of Information at the University of Michigan in 2013. She currently works at the Stephen S. Clark Library at the University of Michigan.

This article is a concise version of a panel titled “**Making Your Student Job Work for You: or Getting the Most Out of Your Internship,**” which was presented at the annual meeting of the Michigan Archival Association in June 2013.

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Today, the Russell School is one of two that remain in Durham County and the adjacent counties of Orange, Chatham, and Person. After the school closed around 1945, the church on the adjacent property, Cain's Chapel Baptist Church, purchased the building. The Friends of Russell Rosenwald School, made up of former students, family members, and community members, was formed to maintain the property. On August 5, 2009, it received landmark recognition and joined the National Register of Historic Places.



Courtesy of Project RIGHT Now—Carolinas.

“The purpose of the Russell School project was to document the history of the school through oral histories of those who attended the school, several of whom still live in the neighborhood,” said PRNC Chair Shauna Collier.

Using video and audio digital recorders, PRNC members interviewed eight former students in their eighties and nineties who shared not only school memories, but also memories of growing up in the Jim Crow South from the 1920s through the 1950s. Members also conducted interviews with a relative of Julius Rosenwald and members of the Friends of Russell Rosenwald School.

Since completing the project, Collier has partnered with a professor and three students from the School of Journalism at the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill to produce the documentary *The Russell School: The History and Restoration of a Rosenwald School*. A rough cut of this production is available on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3QF-jKNOAU>). Through an agreement with the Friends of Russell Rosenwald School, the interviews will be deposited, preserved, and made accessible at the Durham County Public Library.

Continuing Outreach

Most recently, PRNC joined forces with Angaza Laughinghouse, founder of Black Workers for Justice, to provide guidance for maintaining his personal papers and the organization's records, which document the black labor movement in North Carolina.

To help spread the word about their efforts, PRNC members have presented at local, regional, and national library and archival conferences, including the *Cultural*

Heritage Archives: Networks, Innovation and Collaboration symposium hosted by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress this past September.

Members are also working to build an online presence and expand their reach beyond the Carolina region. Several original members have since relocated and have expressed an interest in starting a chapter in their current city. “I believe that Atlanta has so many opportunities for a similar group to be put in place,” said original PRNC member Gabrielle Dudley. “For so long, society has either silenced or pushed communities of color into the margins of history. Teaching these communities about how the archives can be a place of social justice is empowering and important.”

PRNC effectively promotes diversity in the archives, but also promotes the profession as a whole. There continues to be a misconception and lack of knowledge about the archival field. PRNC affords clients the opportunity to witness who archivists are, what they do, and how they do it. These archivists showcase the spectrum of diversity within the field, representing various academic backgrounds, institutions, and specializations.

Together, PRNC members have developed an archival outreach program that will have extraordinary impact on communities in North Carolina and South Carolina for years to come. ■